

Neon lights and party nights
await on the world-famous
Strip in Las Vegas

VIVA LAS PARTY!

OK! CELEBRATES IN THE WORLD'S MOST SINFUL CITY...

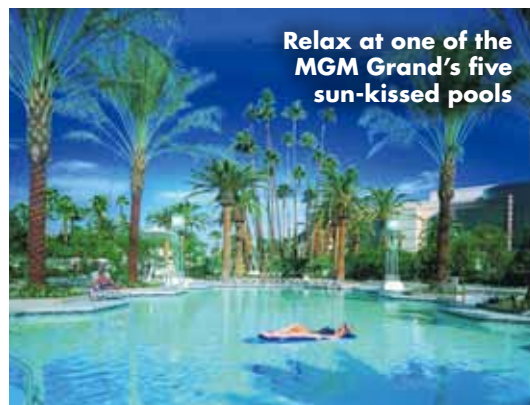
Whether it's New Year's Eve or just an ordinary Saturday night, no city knows how to party quite like Las Vegas. While casinos have long been the big draw, these days, Sin City has been given a stylish makeover. Visitors can now expect upscale restaurants and sleek bars alongside the blackjack tables, slot machines and some of the world's most extravagant hotels.

OK!'s Zoë Hill spent a hedonistic long weekend in the Nevada desert city, trying out some of its top culinary hotspots and ultra-cool drinking dens – and, here, she breaks the cardinal rule of what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas...

A FULL-ON FIRST DAY

After a ten-hour flight, the arrival into Las Vegas is as spectacular as my trip pans out to be. Out the plane window, I see the sprawling city lit up in all its technicolour glory and can identify some of the most famous sights along The Strip – from the Statue Of Liberty at the New York-New York Hotel & Casino to the Stratosphere Tower.

Just a ten-minute cab ride from the airport later and I'm face-to-face with the enormous golden lion



Relax at one of the
MGM Grand's five
sun-kissed pools

statue that stands guard in the domed lobby of the MGM Grand, the world's second largest hotel with nearly 7,000 rooms, five pools and more than 20 restaurants. My room is on the 19th floor, giving me wonderful panoramic views over the city.

After a quick refresh, I head for dinner at Sage at the Aria hotel. I start with oysters and a tequila-infused Sangrita, before devouring the saddle of lamb and a root beer panna cotta. It seems far too early to go to bed in this party-loving city, so I hop on the CityCenter tram inside Crystals – an upscale shopping mall home to Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Prada, making a mental note to come back if I win big at the casino. I get off at the Bellagio, famous for its incredible dancing fountains, and make my way to the Petrossian Bar. I order the 'perfect gin and tonic', served with the bar's signature diamond-shaped ice cubes – before it hits me that I've been awake for 27 hours, and it's time for bed!

SIGHTS – AND A COCKTAIL CRAWL

Brunch this morning is at the Wicked Spoon Buffet at the Cosmopolitan, where the groaning tables offer everything from pasta and sushi to ice cream. Afterwards I meander slowly back along The Strip for some people-watching and souvenir shopping, stopping off at the four-storey M&M's World to pick up some sugary treats for the office.

Tonight's dinner is at Hakkasan, a modern Asian eatery at the MGM Grand, where I tuck into dim sum, salt and pepper squid and crispy silver cod. Dessert is the delicious peanut butter parfait with banana and passion fruit sorbet.

Cocktail bars are omnipresent in Vegas, so I have plenty of places to try. First, I plump for the Vesper Bar at the Cosmopolitan, where I sink into a comfy chair and gaze up at the striking ceiling design inspired by Alice In Wonderland's petticoat and order a Lanced Winter, a festive creation with spiced pear and a splash of orange, cinnamon



Enjoy cocktails with
more than a hint of
bling at The Chandelier

and clove maple syrup. Still at the hotel, I move on to The Chandelier, a stunning three-storey bar where seats are encased in millions of Swarovski crystals, so you're actually sitting inside a giant chandelier. The mixologist encourages me to try a Verbena, the bar's best-selling drink. Before taking a sip, I'm advised to take a bite of the Sichuan flower bud served as the garnish – it enhances your tastebuds, giving your tongue a powerful tingling sensation. It's obviously done the trick, because the Verbena tastes delicious!

MY JUNK FOOD BRUNCH

This morning, I head over to the Simon at the Palms Place hotel for brunch. Overlooking the pool, I start with good intentions, tucking into a plate of fresh fruit, before deciding the junk food platter – with its cupcakes, brownies, cookies and candy floss – is far more appealing. I take it easy for the rest of the day, as I have some more cocktail research planned for later!

MY NIGHT IS ON FIRE!

Early evening, I make a pitstop at Social at the Palms Place, where a Touch Of Honey quickly becomes my



The Killers headlined the Life Is Beautiful festival

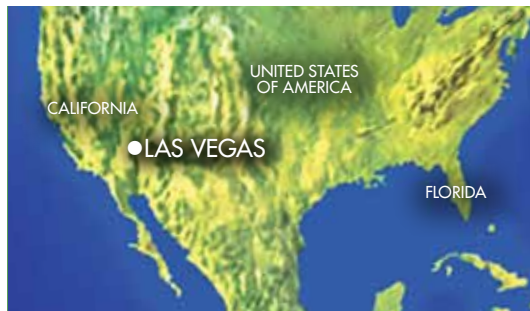
new favourite drink. It's so full of strawberry goodness that it's practically a smoothie – well, if it wasn't for the Jack Daniel's! Next I head up to Ghostbar on the 55th floor of the hotel's Ivory Tower, where I find loud music, costumed performers (the woman on stilts is particularly impressive) and some incredible city views. From there I move on to La Cave Wine & Food Hideaway at The Wynn, where I enjoy tiger shrimp, ahi tuna, salt-roasted beetroot with goats cheese and, my favourite, mushroom grits with pecorino cheese.

Later, I hop into a stretch limo and head downtown for the opening night of the inaugural Life Is Beautiful Festival, showcasing the city's best music, food and art. After refuelling in the Alchemy Garden, the highlight is seeing the Kings Of Leon perform, where I join thousands of festival-goers in singing myself hoarse to *Sex On Fire*!

A BEAUTIFUL LAST NIGHT

After a carb-tastic brunch at Central at Caesars Palace, the perfect answer to my over-indulgent night, I waddle back to the MGM Grand for an afternoon by the pool and a float along the lazy river – bliss!

Tonight's dinner is at the Public House gastropub at the Venetian, where each course is paired with a different beer. I wolf down some short ribs and a yummy croissant bread pudding and love the Wells Banana Bread Beer. Make sure you leave time for a gondola ride along the hotel's canal – you're in for a treat when your gondolier starts serenading you!



I can't resist heading back downtown to Life Is Beautiful to catch Las Vegas natives The Killers closing the festival. The home crowd gives them an incredible reception and the atmosphere is electric.

Back at the MGM Grand, I stop off at the casino on my way to bed and it turns out it's my lucky day. Sadly my win on the slot machines isn't enough to fund a shopping spree at Crystals, but it should keep me in M&Ms for a couple of weeks!

HEADING FOR HOME

My last day starts with a visit to the Mandarin Oriental, where I squeeze in a sushi-making class that takes place on the hotel's 23rd floor, from where I enjoy yet more stunning views. Then it's off to Aria for lunch at the Five50 Pizza Bar. I wash down my forager pizza with a taster menu of five specialist beers – all of which leaves me ready for a snooze on my flight home. It's been an amazing trip, but I think a post-Vegas detox is the order of the day now I'm back in Blighty!



Enjoy the junk food platter overlooking the pool at Simon

HOW DO I GET THERE?

British Airways (www.britishairways.com) flies daily from Heathrow and three times a week from Gatwick to Las Vegas. Flights start from £665, including all tax.

Room rates at the five-star MGM Grand (www.mgmgrand.com) costs from £50 per night. Price excludes nightly resort fee and tax. **OK!**

FOR TOURIST INFORMATION, SEE WWW.VISITLASVEGAS.CO.UK. FOR MORE ON CULINARY EVENTS AND PERFORMERS AT NEXT YEAR'S LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL FESTIVAL, VISIT WWW.LIFEISBEAUTIFULFESTIVAL.COM.

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TRAVELLER'S TALES

MATTHEW WOLFENDEN

THE 'EMMERDALE' HUNK ON EXPLORING INDIA AND LOVING NYC...

What's your favourite holiday destination?

I love all sorts of different holidays. Beaches or cities, it depends. I went to New York for a Christmas present a few years ago, it was my first time and it was absolutely fantastic. I loved the musicals and the theatre, there was loads of culture and amazing food. But I do like to be able to go somewhere and just chill out. I've been to the same hotel in Palma, Majorca, a couple of times – it's a beautiful little spot and it's so quiet as there are only eight rooms.

What are your holiday essentials?

I'm a really light packer, – especially on beach holidays. I only take hand luggage and pack the bare essentials, then you're just on and off at either end – no waiting in baggage reclaim! It's obviously more difficult having Buster [Matthew's three-year-old son] now, as you have to take everything but the kitchen sink with you when you take a kid on holiday.

Is there anywhere you'd like to go that you've not yet been to?

I've always wanted to go to India. My mum and dad have friends over there so they go over quite a lot and it sounds amazing. I've not had the chance to go yet as I wanted to wait until Buster was a bit older. I'd like to do a bit of exploring and get off the beaten track and that's not really a good idea with a baby. In the next few years, I definitely want to get over there. It'll be totally different to anywhere I've ever been before, so I'll go with an open mind.

CATCH MATTHEW ON 'EMMERDALE', ITV1, WEEKNIGHTS AT 7PM.



5 OF THE BEST

PARTY DESTINATION ESSENTIALS



1



2



4



3



5

- 1 DAISY STREET JULE AZTEC MULTI SEQUIN TUBE DRESS, £19.99**, www.daisystreet.co.uk. Bring the glitz and glamour of Vegas with you in this total bargain of a dazzling dress from Daisy Street.
- 2 MIGHTY PURSE, £79.95**, www.cuckooland.com. The perfect gadget for the girl on the go, this cute little clutch not only looks stylish, it also has a built-in phone charger so you'll never miss a call (or photo op) again.
- 3 EYLURE COOL SMOKEY EYE GET THE LOOK KIT, £19.50**, www.eylure.com. Look the part with this party-perfect beauty box, containing lashes, eyeshadow, mascara and liquid eyeliner.
- 4 TOUCH OF GINGER HANGOVER KIT, £7.99**, www.touchofginger.com. When you're in a world of pain the morning after the night before, this handy little travel kit – complete with eye mask and dextrose slab – will have you feeling human in no time.
- 5 UPPER STREET BY NICOLE SMALLWOOD CAIRNS HIGH HEEL, £220**, www.upperstreet.com. These head-turners are from Upper Street's first ready-to-wear collection. Or design your own – from heel height, width and colour to straps and embellishments. We love!