

VIVA LOS WAGES - LAS VEGAS



As a town, it strives to be cooler than New York City with its own version of Manhattan as a casino, hipper than Los Angeles just a few hours West by convertible, more debauched than New Orleans, and as continental as Paris, again with its own version wrapped in a casino. But truth be told, it has a greater criminal past than Chicago with a museum to honour the local Godfathers.

As the Number One destination city in America, it attracts more than just the party crowd and zanies who saw all three iterations of the buddy movie *The Hangover*. Bucks and hens congregate along with blinged-out rappers and basketball or sports stars (who get seven foot long beds). Most everyone dresses up, shows off and are marinated in cologne with cocktail glass in hand at night, Starbucks cups in the morning. Yet the first shock Australians receive is finding out that the drinking age is 21, like the rest of America now.

Though portrayed as the elephant's burial ground for lounge acts and cabaret stars, Las Vegas has a vibrant music scene with superstar acts playing in plush showrooms or mini-arenas attached to gambling houses. For example, looking ahead six weeks from the time of writing this finds Santana, Celine Dion, Elton John, Shania Twain, Robin Thicke, The Eagles, Merle Haggard, Rod Stewart, George Strait, Bruno Mars, Fleetwood Mac, Britney Spears, Cher and Dolly Parton playing the big rooms.

There is no shortage of magicians,

comedians, musicals, tributes, burlesque, dinner shows and mind readers as well as musical oddities like Blue Man Group. Seats are easy to map out and buy from the online ticket sellers, venues and discount sites as well as on the street from kiosks. Just look for the queues.

High production concept shows are the ones to catch. My best experience in the past 20 years was the Elvis show created by **Cirque de Soleil** combining thrilling acrobatics, breathtaking choreography and terrific music from a hot band. Likewise, the other Cirque tributes to Michael Jackson *One, Love* for The Beatles and their five standards are must-see events.

Even Australian artists get top billing in LV and it's not just male stripper shows like Manpower which launched Jamie Durie or Thunder Down Under which plays to packed houses. Human Nature has done a smash revue of Motown hits for the past five years while The Australian Bee Gees Show has also had long legs on the Strip.

Homegrown artists don't find the town a nurturing ground but there are stars and there is a local scene. The Killers come to mind first followed by Panic at the Disco and Imagine Dragons. On the country and alt country stage are The Clydesdale and The Yeller Bellies. Other than Ne Yo on the hip hop side, it's slim pickings for locally developed acts. Los Angeles is just too close and absorbs them.

There are few outdoor festivals due to the intense heat and dryness. The new kid on the block in its first year is **Life Is Beautiful** (lifeisbeautifulfestival.com), a two-day event in cooler late-October that is all ages and has a culinary edge to boot. Killers, Kings of Leon, Beck, Empire of the Sun, Alabama Shakes, Dawes and 30 other bands played this year alongside 64 top chefs' booths and special shows by Cirque de Soleil troupes.

Neon Reverb (neonreverb.com) started in 2008 as a way to bring indie touring bands to Vegas every March and September over six nights in various venues. Timed just after South by Southwest in Austin, it emulates aspects of it with theatre, film, comedy and poetry events as well as seventy or more bands.

As a bizarre contrast, the only other gathering is **Punk Rock Bowling and Music Festival** (punkrockbowling.com) that attracted Bad Religion, Black Flag, Devo, The Damned, Lagwagon, Bouncing Souls and 20 more. Held over four nights for the past 15 years, it's outdoors on a main stage with four late-night club shows in the downtown Fremont Street. And yes there is a ten pin tournament with over 230 teams competing.

There are two competing street press magazines, **Las Vegas City Life** (lasvegascitylife.com) and **Las Vegas Weekly** (lasvegaweekly.com), the former being



Studio at the Palms



The Pearl Concert Suite



Paris in Vegas on Las Vegas Blvd

more live music centric and the latter revolving around EDM. For a top reckoner of who's playing in the future, go to **pollstar.com** and choose your dates and Las Vegas as the destination.

The big rooms or arenas for live music are attached to casinos, naturally, and some of them are stadium-sized. The Hard Rock Café has the centrepiece **The Joint** (thejointlasvegas.com) with a 4000-capacity in standing room floor, VIP table seating and luxury boxes with their own plasma TVs and wet bars. Acts in past few years have included The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Coldplay, Dylan and Motley Crue.

Planet Hollywood (planethollywood-resort.com/shows.html) has the 7000-seat **Theatre For The Performing Arts**, which can be scaled down with curtains to a 2500 space for more intimate shows.

The House of Blues (houseofblues.com/venues/clubvenues/lasvegas) inside the Mandalay Bay Casino is smaller at 1900 standing room with a stadium seating balcony, but the time to hit it is Sunday morning for the Gospel Brunch with Kirk Franklin. There is also a cavernous 12000-capacity hall that can as easily be used for rock shows as for Pavarotti, but is more of a sports hall with bad acoustics.

Far superior is the 2500-capacity **Smith Center**, which is built like a European Opera House for more cultured music with perfect acoustics. There's also a 250-seater for intimate shows.

The Colosseum (thecolosseum.com) is the venue inside Caesar's Palace where the resident acts are Celine, Elton, Shania and Rod. It's a huge split arena with four levels but one of the best show venues in the city.

My favourite is within the hotel off-Strip where I hole up when I'm paying for myself rather than being hosted. The Palms Casino not only has the superb **Pearl Concert Theater** (palms.com/music-venues/pearl-theater) where no seat is farther than 40 metres from the stage with sparkling acoustics, it's also got its own world-class recording studio.

One of only six in the world within luxe hotels, **Studio At The Palms** (palms.com/music-venues/recording-studio) hosts artists who want to be away from the distractions LA or NYC offer without their entourages, working and living within the same building with 24-hour restaurants and a variety of entertainment. It has two studios within its 8000 square foot facility, a huge band room and a premier mixing room with SSL board and it's hardwired into the Pearl for recording live shows.

My last trip to Vegas was in August for the **SXSW V2V** event when the temperatures crept up to 45 degrees and there was no reason to hit the Strip in the sunshine. First timers shouldn't miss it though because the heat does bring out the weirdos in costumes and spruiking constantly. But the police presence is everywhere so there is little danger.

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While there, I stayed at **The Cosmopolitan** (cosmopolitanlasvegas.com), which is the hotel I prefer when someone else is paying. I'm not a fan of EDM but it is home to the **Marquee Nightclub and Dayclub** with 15 metre ceilings and a 60,000 square foot complex of dance floors and pool areas complete with cabanas. It's also introduced a new concert hall, **The Chelsea**, which kicks off with a residency of Bruno Mars plus Tegan and Sara.

For those seeking the best deals on hotels, go to **wotif.com** or **priceline.com** where I've routinely scored \$35-a-night rooms in casinos hoping to lure the rubes. But beware of the 'resort fees' charged to cover basics such as parking, internet, daily paper and a bottle of water.

Though I always give great places to eat in towns, killer food is so ubiquitous in LV with hotels and standalone restaurants of the world's top chefs catering to every taste. You'll also find every chain and brand of food there as well as style. So be adventurous, do your homework and good luck!

Renting a car is not necessary but if you do, I recommend an **Alamo Silver Inclusive deal** which includes all taxes, fees and insurance through their Australian agent APTMS (aptms.com.au). Surrounding the city are stunning national parks such as **Zion, Bryce Canyons** and the big Mama, **The Grand Canyon**, each a day trip. **Lake Mead** is the watersport rec area created by the Hoover Dam. And if driving is not your sport, there are always helicopter tours that can take you there on the way to the Grand Canyon.

Death Valley is only 150 kilometers away and **Joshua Tree** is halfway to Los Angeles if you're deciding to make the four-hour drive. Best way of doing it is in a convertible, Hunter S. Thompson style, hopefully with a Samoan attorney.

Though several sites claim to be the official one, www.lasvegas.com is the only one to visit. Also, for a hip view of what's happening in town with hotel pointers and event information, check out vegashatter.com 📍