

Outdoor Adventures Near Las Vegas, Nevada



Las Vegas Outdoors Adventures – Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

Las Vegas is a masterpiece of illusion, built on two man-made artifices—impounded water and gaming (aka gambling) laws. There is no logical reason for Las Vegas to exist, sprawling out in the middle of the desert. Yet 42 million people visit it each year.

Both the glitter of Las Vegas and the outdoor wonders of southern Nevada first appear before the visitor as a mirage in the desert.

Las Vegas itself is a neon oasis, where robust life is possible only because of dam-stored water and the 1931 Nevada state law allowing gambling. You could gamble here and also get an easy divorce.

Without water, life would be extremely fragile here and the human population would be low, as it was when the Paiute and earlier pueblo Indians survived here. The pervasiveness of the desert impresses a visitor flying into the region. The water was first artesian water pumped from aquifers below the city. Then Colorado River water was trapped by the Hoover Dam.

Without the law legalizing gambling, there would be some farming here, but no population like the 2.1 million metro area residents.

The main natural attractions around Las Vegas also contain elements of illusion and imagination. The two major parks nearby, Red Rock Canyon to the west and the Valley of Fire to the east, exhibit a flaming red appearance, due to iron oxide in the soil. Fingers of rock reach skyward, as if on fire.

The major man-made creation in the area, Hoover Dam, is so immense and so effective in controlling the Colorado River that it ranks as one of the major engineering feats of the human animal. While floating on a houseboat on Lake Mead, which extends 105 miles behind Hoover Dam, one can't help but feel surrounded by a mammoth body of man-controlled water, a mere mirage in the minds of all but a few visionaries until the late 1930s. It could be said that Lake Mead reduces the odds of drought and a thirsty demise here to near zero. Until Hoover Dam was built,

the cycle of annual flood or drought from the river was risky, a precarious throw of nature's dice. The city of Las Vegas now has a "straw" sucking water directly from the depths of Lake Mead. Las Vegas will never go dry.

Illusion, mirage, imagination, and artifice play on the senses of all travelers to Las Vegas. The feeling of artifice, without any pejorative connotations, is more complete in Las Vegas than in the other major Nevada city, Reno, because of two factors. First, Reno has extensive forested mountains as well as desert. Any city in a predominantly desert area is a thoroughly man-made artifact. And second, the large body of water at Reno, Lake Tahoe, is a legacy of nature, while the large body of water at Las Vegas, Lake Mead, is a man-made wonder.

Visitors to Las Vegas traditionally have fallen into two groups. Some immerse themselves in gambling and entertainment. Others commune with nature and the outdoors in the parks and on Lake Mead. Whether you fall into one group, or find parts of yourself in both, Las Vegas has much to offer.

From the beginning there was an important element of illusion and fantasy for travel to Las Vegas. The first casino on the strip was called El Rancho and done in western dude ranch motifs, used to send a stage coach to the airport to pick up deplaning passengers at the dawn of the mass air-transport era.

There is one further attraction of Las Vegas not yet mentioned. Las Vegas is a major "weather escape." The visitor who nearly rusts to death in Portland or Seattle due to interminable winter rain longs for the bright sun that Las Vegas is selling. The Toronto or Chicago resident, suffering from a wind-chill factor, looks for relief in the assured warmth of Las Vegas in winter.

Getting To and Around Las Vegas and Southern Nevada

Conditions of travel to Las Vegas have improved measurably since Major John Wesley Powell floated his dory down the silt-laden red river, the Rio Colorado, in 1869. Nearly as precarious then was the thirsty overland route that Mormon pioneers fashioned, looking for the meadows, las vegas in Spanish, that could

support livestock and crops.

Some of today's travelers arrive by car, an easy six-hour ride from Los Angeles or 10 hours from Salt Lake City, to name just two origins. Most travelers arrive by air at the handsome, ever-expanding McCarran International Airport, a short taxi ride south of the casino-lined Strip or downtown. The rise of Las Vegas as a destination has paralleled the age of jet travel.

Within the region, travel to the natural wonders requires either a car or a tour, offered at some hotels, emphasizing Hoover Dam or the parks. A car provides maximum flexibility.

However you arrive, the month of arrival is not a casual matter here. The summer sun can burn exposed skin in minutes. Summer temperatures are so high that air conditioned transport and lodging become a necessity and are taken for granted at hotels, shops, restaurants, and rental car agencies. The other way to cool off is by immersing yourself in Lake Mead, but you would most likely do this from a rented houseboat, itself air conditioned so you can sleep at night.

Life was not always so comfortable here, of course. For \$4 per day, minus \$1.60 for meals and lodging, skilled workers of the 1930s spent 12-hour shifts building Hoover Dam, often in 120-degree summer temperatures, with plenty of ambulances available to take the heat-prostrated and dehydrated to the waiting hospital in Boulder City.

The shoulder seasons of April-May and September-October are among the most comfortable months here, but that is more relevant to the outdoors enthusiast than to the casino patron, who may care little about the month and even less about the hour of the day while mesmerized in front of the slots at 4 a.m.

History of Las Vegas and Southern Nevada

The earliest people here were Indians at the confluence of the Virgin and Muddy Rivers, east of Las Vegas. As early as 10,000 years ago, but predominantly from 300 B.C. to 1100 A.D., they moved gradually from subsistence hunting to farming of beans, squash, corn, and cotton, irrigating crops from the rivers.

Their story is best seen in their own petroglyphs at Valley of Fire State Park and in the elaborate range of their artifacts gathered at the Lost City Museum in Overton, east of Las Vegas. The more recent Indian groups inhabiting the area when the whites arrived were Paiute and Moapa, skilled subsistence hunters and gatherers who lived a precarious life in the desert.

Jedediah Smith passed through in the 1830s, ostensibly seeking furs, but also interested in the pure adventure of discovery. Mormon farmers moved south from Salt Lake in the 1860s and later. Prior to the building of Hoover Dam, the Colorado River was navigated by an irregular schedule of paddle wheel steamers, which reached what is now Callville Bay. Anson Call's port was also a military establishment that qualified easily as a hardship post.

In the 20th century, the completion of Hoover Dam and the passing of a state gaming law assured Las Vegas's prosperity.

The city didn't actually exist until the 20th century and calls itself the largest U.S. city founded in the 20th century. The first hotels with gambling were downtown, but a resourceful developer decided that an establishment a few miles closer to Los Angeles, in an area that eventually became the Strip, would cause the weary car traveler from Los Angeles to stop. Why go farther? The dual locations of Las Vegas, Downtown and the Strip, are linked by taxi.

The advent of inexpensive air flight made it possible for masses of people to arrive. With the water shortage forever resolved, the future of Las Vegas looks assured, as long as there is sufficient fuel to transport people and their support systems, such as mounds of delicious food, to this desert neon oasis.

The major outdoors travel pleasures near Las Vegas are Lake Mead/the Colorado River, Hoover Dam, Red Rock Canyon Park, Valley of Fire Park, and the Lost City Museum.

Lake Mead

Lake Mead is the mammoth aquatic playground and fishery located 45 minutes south of Las Vegas. From marinas at Callville Bay and Echo Bay you can rent

houseboats for leisurely trips on the lake, which has a 550 mile shoreline. The closest rental to Las Vegas is at Callville Bay Marina. Houseboats at Callville come equipped with two motors, which gives the novice added assurance of returning safely to port if a motor fails. The boats rent for three-days-to-a-week periods. A major provider is Forever Resorts (<http://www.callvillebay.com>).

Summers are the hottest and busiest months, with April-May and September-October as attractive, alternative times. The water has fully warmed for swimming and the air becomes pleasantly cool in September-October. Rental houseboats sleep up to 12 people, but more than six adults is likely to strain the psychological carrying capacity of the boat unless said adults have particularly cozy feelings about each other. The houseboats come fully equipped, including linen and blankets. All you need to bring are clothes, swim suit, sun screen, fishing gear, food, and drink. An ice machine at the docks can cool down your beverage of choice. All houseboats have refrigerator-freezers and a large picnic cooler on deck.

Houseboating on Lake Mead is a special experience. No other houseboating ambiance, such as Lake Shasta or the Delta in California, approaches the size of Lake Mead, the largest man-made reservoir in the U.S. The almost endless shoreline can accommodate a large number of boaters. Terrain around the lake offers both a desert and mountainous shores with some sandy beaches. The Callville people can review a nautical map with you and propose some suitable destinations.

For example, an hour east on the lake from Callville you can turn into Hamblin Bay and relax on the sandy, protected beach, immune from winds that can appear suddenly. This bay is also popular with the grebe diving ducks that proliferate on the lake. If your goal is relaxation, this may be your chosen destination for the whole trip.

The explorer, on the other hand, may choose to boat farther east along the lake and navigate small rocky coves, such as Sidewinder or Wishing Well, and then push on to see Boulder Canyon, which was one of the preliminary dam sites (downstream Black Canyon was the final choice). Boulder Canyon, with jagged stone cliffs towering on either side, ranks among the most scenic sites on Lake Mead.

Farther east there are coves filled with driftwood for fires, such as Burro Bay. Along

the way you may see wild burros or desert bighorn sheep. At the campsite, white datura flowers show prominently in spring. More ambitious travelers can venture on to Sandy Point, another good beach, where you may see tracks of foraging coyotes and mountain lions. However, this distant destination means several hours of houseboat driving and careful allotment of gas. Most visitors will prefer a closer-in cove.

Head west and south, towards Hoover Dam, and you might pull into a secluded campsite of your choice at Swallow Bay. From there, a day excursion by boat could take you all the way to Hoover Dam, where you can see the historic dam, from upstream, and the newer highway bridge below the dam, over the gorge. Post 9-11, you must observe the no-boating zone very close to the dam. You might also glimpse the paddle wheeler *Desert Princess*, out of Boulder City, taking day-trippers on a nostalgic narrated journey close to the dam, with plenty of food and drink on board to make the excursion pleasant and memorable

Onboard your houseboat the main pursuits are relaxing and unwinding, eating, drinking, enjoying the conviviality of your comrades, reading, perusing the flora or geology of the shore, sunning, swimming, and fishing. One special night activity here is star gazing, with the stars showing brightly against a dark sky, far from the star-obscuring urban lights that restrict the sky-watching pleasures of most people.

Prized-eating species of fish in Lake Mead are striped bass, called stripers, and largemouth bass. Fishing is legal year round and all marinas sell appropriate licenses. (Trout were also planted and were abundant for a few years, but the stripers ate the trout.) Both types of bass are introduced fish that have flourished here, feeding on a smaller introduced fish, called the threadfin shad, which in turn feeds on the zooplankton that bloom in the lake.

The bass fishing is best in summer when the warm water stimulates the stripers to move out of deep, cool water and begin their frenzied feeding on shad, causing the water to assume a boiling appearance. Stripers have an ability to herd schools of shad into a ball, then plunge through them quickly and stun the small fish with a thrashing tail. Stripers then consume the slow-moving, groggy shad. If you witness the phenomenon of stripers herding the shad, the experience and noise can be

primordial. The largest striper taken from the lake with rod and reel is said to be about 52 pounds. Informed locals doubt that larger fish will be caught because the trend in the lake is to more numerous, smaller fish. Largemouth bass always remain close to shore, within 30 feet of lake bottom, but the stripers are sometimes taken in deeper, open water.

Hoover Dam

Hoover Dam is a major attraction at the west end of Lake Mead, an hour by car south from Las Vegas. As you approach the dam, stop in at the Alan Bible Visitor Center to see a 15-minute film on the construction of the dam and to peruse the area literature available. The Alan Bible Center is not a theological institution, but a park service interpretive center honoring a Nevada senator named Bible. As at other ranger stations in the area, the landscape decor, amounting to labeled local flora, is instructive.

The name for the dam is bound to cause confusion. Originally it was named by statute the Hoover Dam, after Herbert Hoover, largely for his skillful work in negotiating with the seven states in the watershed how the impounded water would be divided. Without this agreement, the dam could never have been built. This negotiation was Hoover's most triumphant political accomplishment and occurred while he was Secretary of the Interior. However, the dam was dedicated by Franklin Roosevelt, who was no friend of Republicans in general and Hoover in particular. Roosevelt referred to the dam as the Boulder Canyon Dam. (Actually, the dam is in Black Canyon, not upstream Boulder Canyon). In 1947 a Congressional Act resolved the issue and restored the name Hoover Dam to the structure, but in local parlance both the Hoover and Boulder names continue to flourish and cause confusion to this day.

At the dam, park as close as you can in the ever-changing security issues related to 9-11, and walk around it to get views of the massive concrete structure. Then stop for the 10-minute narrated show in the Exhibit Hall. The talk spotlights different places on a topographical scale model of the 1,400-mile Colorado River Watershed. The show will enhance your knowledge of the entire drama and politics of the Colorado River, an epic story. Untamed, the Colorado oscillated between years of

extreme flood and utter drought. One flood in 1905 created the Salton Sea when the river lunged out of its banks and into the California low desert for 16 months before being diverted back into its channel. Hoover Dam provides irrigation for 3/4 million acres, drinking and industrial water for 12 million people, electrical power divided 2/3 for California and 1/3 for Nevada-Arizona, and water recreation opportunities on Lake Mead.

After the Exhibit Hall, make the half-hour guided tour of the dam that takes you to the concrete innards and acquaints you with the turbines and piping so crucial to the operation. You'll emerge with an appreciation of the dam as one of the engineering masterpieces of the modern world. Your head will be swimming in a lake of statistics, some bizarrely stated. The dam is almost as thick at the base (660 feet) as it is tall (726.4 feet). There is enough concrete in the dam to pave a highway eight inches thick from coast to coast. The water in Lake Mead would cover the state of Connecticut to 10 feet.

The Visitor Bureau at nearby Boulder City plays continuously a 28-minute movie about "The Story of Hoover Dam." The Visitor Center is opposite the historic Boulder City Hotel, which is on the National Register. Boulder City was built as the residence town for the 5,000 dam workers who toiled here during the four-year construction period in the 1930s.

Below the dam, it is possible to do a rafting or kayaking trip to experience the Colorado up close. This is quiet, slack-water rafting on huge pontoon boats, accessible to everyone. Local adventure travel guides offer the trips. The water is chilly for swimming, but the scenery is intriguing, with waterfalls, caves, and an abundance of flora and fauna. Mountain sheep are usually seen near the water.

Red Rock Canyon Park

The two major parks near Las Vegas are exhilarating places to visit, but be forewarned that the heat of summer makes them enjoyable after mid-day only from an air-conditioned vehicle. Early morning hikes are a worthy strategy, especially in the heat of summer.

Red Rock Canyon, a half-hour west of Las Vegas on Charleston Road, is a remarkable series of rock formations colored by the red iron oxide in the sandstone. The red oxide not only colors the stone; it also binds the stone together. Stop at the Visitor Center to see the interpretive exhibits and then drive the 13-mile one-way road that loops through the park. The most attractive view is at the stop called Calico Hills.

All along the route, in spring, there are excellent places to see wildflowers, such as white yucca, blue indigo, and red mallow. Hiking in the area reminds you of what life must have been like for the Indians and early whites who lived here in the era before roads. Occasional springs, such as at Willow Springs, bubble up life-sustaining water. Willow Springs is a good picnic stop, resting place, and hiking option. Rock scrambling and climbing are popular. After you make the loop drive, a panoramic vista turnoff on the main highway synthesizes the experience. Be sure to carry an ample supply of drinking water on your person at all times in the deserts of the CA/Southwest.

Valley of Fire Park

Valley of Fire State Park, an hour-and-a-half east of Las Vegas, offers similar but more extensive red rock and grey limestone formations, plus Indian petroglyphs and petrified wood.

The valley does indeed look as if it were on fire if you see the rocks in a certain light. Stop in at the Visitor Center to orient yourself to the park, which offers extensive spring flowering of desert plants, such as prickly pear cactus, brittlebush, and creosote bush. In the coolness of spring and autumn, the campsites here, set amidst the rock, are attractive, but the summer is searing. Day-use picnic areas make good lunch or rest stops.

As you tour the park, four interesting stops are Mouse's Tank, Atlatl Rock, the Beehives, and Petrified Rock Turnoff.

Mouse's Tank consists of a half-mile walk down a canyon to a rock depression, called a tank, that collected precious run-off water. Paiute hunters who lived in this area

were able to survive because of their knowledge of these water sources. One such Indian, nicknamed Mouse, fought back against white encroachment in the late 19th century, eluding his pursuers in this rocky area. At the head of the trail, pick up the excellent self-guiding trail brochure describing the flora and the petroglyphs that you'll see. The Mouse's Tank trail passes many well-preserved Indian petroglyphs. The petroglyphs are scratchings done through a black manganese-iron oxide coating that forms on the red rock, over time, as water evaporates from the rock. Lichens may assist in making the black oxides endure. Colloquially, the oxides are called "desert varnish."

You gaze at the symbols of mountain sheep and the sun. There are other deciphered marks representing a family. As you study what the archaeological detectives have discerned, you may be overcome with emotion at the thought of human beings leaving their personal records here from times long past. The petroglyphs may be from only a few hundred to thousands of years old. Some experts believe they were made by a group called the Anasazi, the early basket weaver culture, and are approximately 900 years old. Some evidence among the petroglyphs suggests an earlier era dated by pictures of throwing spears with a stick, called an atlatl, a technique that predated the bow and arrow.

Why the Indians carved petroglyphs is not accurately understood. Perhaps they were hunters whiling away their time during the heat of the day.

Beyond the road to Mouse's Tank is a promontory called Rainbow Vista, one of the most appealing views in the area because of the miles of multicolored rock.

Atlatl Point offers another interesting collection of petroglyphs. Tragically, the park service has allowed the petroglyphs to be destroyed in a misguided effort to introduce them to the public. On a large rock with many petroglyphs at Atlatl Point, the park service has built an extensive steel stairway that passes within a couple feet of the petroglyphs. This is excellent for viewing the art objects. But it has also allowed the uncivilized among us to scratch their initials and make other defacements on these major archaeological treasures. Few greater errors of poor but well-intentioned judgment in the annals of park service management of archaeological sites come immediately to mind.

The Beehives is another named stop, referring to red stone sculpted by water and wind into shapes that look like round European reed beehives.

Petrified Rock Turnoff displays four specimens of the ossified trees, now mercifully protected from misguided collectors by steel fences. The fallen trees are from ancient forests of the region whose trunk cells were gradually replaced with silica until the entire organism became one large stone.

The Lost City Museum

To complement your trip to Valley of Fire State Park, continue on to the Lake Mead road and turn north to Overton, a Mormon farming community. At Overton, visit the Lost City Museum, a major collection of artifacts from southern Nevada Indians. The museum celebrates an extensive pueblo culture, called the Basketmakers by archaeologists, which originated where the Virgin and Muddy Rivers empty into the Colorado. Indians flourished here from 300 B.C. to 1150 A.D. before abandoning the area for reasons not yet clearly understood. The peak period of this culture was around 800 A.D. when about 5,000 Indians lived here. The museum itself is built directly over one of the archaeological digs.

The Indian culture gradually evolved as they learned how to farm corn, beans, squash, and cotton by irrigating the crops with river water. Their diet included the earlier staples of large and small game, fish, and seeds. The museum displays extensive collections of the Indian pottery, basketry, arrowheads, food, trade goods, and ornamental artifacts. Some of these artifacts were recovered from lands now inundated by the rising Lake Mead.

Beyond this more recent period, the museum also displays evidence of man here for the last 10,000 years. One of the fascinating discoveries was well-preserved skin and hair from giant ground sloths that populated the area as the Ice Age receded. It is probable that the sloths were a major food supply for the earliest human residents. The museum is housed in an adobe structure built by the Conservation Corp in the 1930s.

If you venture beyond the urban attractions of Las Vegas, the possible outdoor

adventures are of jackpot quality.

Las Vegas: If You Go

For overall tourism information on Las Vegas, the source is the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Bureau, www.visitlasvegas.com.

For an overview of the state as a travel destination, see the Nevada Commission on Tourism site at www.travelnevada.com.