

Chapter 1

Hauntspitality



Welcome to Las Vegas; a city in continual flux. Developers with deep pockets discover the valley and build fabulous hotels that are remodeled, renamed, and imploded, so that other developers with even deeper pockets can start the process all over again. All the while the neon never dims, and the doors never close. So when does the city sleep? It doesn't. And that round-the-clock action, coupled with a toasty desert climate (more than three hundred days of sunshine each year) has helped to make Las Vegas one of the world's top tourist destinations. Each year millions of visitors come to the city seeking its special brand of excitement not found anywhere else. In this atmosphere of 24/7 pleasure, some overindulge and burn the candle at both ends. Eventually though, even the hardiest of souls needs some rest.

Before You Check In . . .

The hotel industry in Las Vegas, AKA Sin City, strives to make its visitors feel welcome; this is in the hope that visitors will spend hours, and dollars, at the slot machines, the roulette wheels, and the card tables. Yes, there is world-class shopping, entertainment, and dining here, but it is gambling that built this metropolis of a million-plus denizens.

Behind their outward facades, large resort hotel/casinos are arranged similarly. Row after row after row of slot machines frame the pit where the card tables and the roulette wheel are located; farthest from the action is usually



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the keno game. What distinguishes one establishment from the next are its décor and theme, giving each its own unique ambiance and charm. Charming as they may be, hotel/casinos fiercely compete to keep customers loyal to their particular property. The magic word here is “comp.” The more you spend, the better your comp.

Never forget that this is a quid pro quo sorta city; the person who spends the most receives the most. It’s logical. The whale (Las Vegas lingo for someone who drops more money in the casino annually than most people earn in a decade) will get the most lavish comp package of all. Nothing is too good for the gambler who isn’t afraid to let the dice, and the good times, roll. Round-the-clock gourmet meals, a penthouse suite, a Jacuzzi hot tub the size of most hotel rooms, champagne (no cheap stuff) in a silver ice bucket, orchids, roses, chocolates, and high-definition TVs that cover the walls—all part of the we-love-ya treatment.

Coming back down to earth, the loyal low-budget gambler is also comped, but not nearly so regally: a free meal here and there, a show ticket or room on occasion. The gambler with less money to burn usually has to ask for any comps. Just remember not to ask if you aren’t dropping a steady stream of dollars. This way you won’t be too disappointed when management politely declines, because it will. Don’t take it personally. It’s all about the bottom line.

In Vegas the room choices are limitless. Whether you choose to stay in a lavish resort hotel on that two-and-a-half-mile length of Las Vegas Boulevard known as “The Strip,” or a more pocketbook-friendly motel nearer the airport, you just might have a brush with the supernatural side. It’s no secret that many of Las Vegas’s hotels and motels have a ghost or two in residence, guests who have checked in and never checked out. You may not find mention of them in any of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority’s slick magazine and television ad campaigns. But they are here nonetheless.



Bally's Las Vegas

Most paranormal experts agree that ghostly activity is often the result of great tragedy and sudden, unexpected loss of life. The MGM Grand Hotel fire early on the morning of November 21, 1980, was certainly such an event. Built in 1973 the MGM Grand Hotel Casino was ultramodern and up to the minute. Towering over many of the other hotels in the city, the twenty-six-story hotel at 3645 Las Vegas Boulevard was to be the signal of a new era dawning in Las Vegas, an era of even more change and excitement than that of the previous decade. Instead, it became the site of the worst disaster in Nevada's history, and one of the worst hotel fires in the world.

Thanksgiving was six days away. In other climes, December's bitter cold was fast approaching; in Las Vegas the weather was typical, warm and mild. The city was swarming with tourists. Comdek, the large electronic convention, was in town for its annual preview of all things new and exciting in the electronic industry. Business was brisk throughout the city. The MGM Grand was booked at 99 percent capacity, due in part to Comdek and the popular Mac Davis Show that was being featured in the fabulous nine-hundred-seat Celebrity Room.

While many of the hotel's guests slept, faulty wiring ignited a fire in the wall of the ground-floor deli. Two employees tried to contain the fire and failed. The horror was set in motion. It was already too late to avert the fire's destruction. Within minutes the fast-moving flames fanned out and spread through the casino floor. Plastic molding, carpeting, wallpaper, and other such combustible materials used in the hotel's construction quickly ignited and melted in the fire's wake, releasing toxic fumes into the air. There was no time to think, no time to run. People working and gambling in the ground-floor casino were overcome by the fumes and died where they stood.

Many tower guests were unaware of the danger until it



was too late. As flames engulfed the ground floor, shooting upward, thick black smoke rose up through the building's heating and air conditioning system. Alerted by several helicopters hovering around the building, and the unmistakable smell of the spreading flames, guests started dialing the hotel front desk. There was nothing left of that area. Phone lines were dead. Panic stricken, the anxious guests turned on their televisions and realized what was happening.

Reactions were swift. Calmly placing wet towels over their faces, a number of guests awaited rescue that would not come in time to save them. Others were doomed when they rushed out into hallways and opened stairwell doors. Frightened and disoriented, one person leaped from the north side of the tower to the parking lot far below. A lucky few would manage to escape death by making their way through the blinding smoke and noxious fumes to the rooftop where firemen and rescuers had stacked bodies for transport on helicopters that hovered noisily overhead. The dead were taken to the parking lot for further identification; the injured were transported to local hospitals. It would take another four hours for the building to be evacuated.

Of the more than five thousand people in the MGM Grand Hotel on the morning of November 21, 1980, six hundred and fifty were injured enough to seek medical attention. Eighty-seven perished in the fire.

Months passed. The lengthy investigations were completed; the charred rubble was cleared away. And the lawsuits began—lawsuits that totaled more than 200 million dollars (in 1980 dollars), enough to bankrupt any but those with the deepest of deep pockets. As a result of the tragic MGM Grand fire that might have been prevented had the entire building been fitted with sprinklers, the state of Nevada has enacted some of the strictest fire prevention building code laws in the United States.

Money may talk elsewhere; in Las Vegas it screams. Property on The Strip is far too valuable to remain dormant for very long. The burned-out MGM Grand Hotel was sold.



And the bulldozers rolled in. Under new ownership and stricter building codes, the building was repaired and rebuilt. When the transformation was complete, the hotel/casino became known as Bally's Las Vegas.

From the first came reports of unexplained weeping and screaming in certain areas of the upper-floor hallways. Could this be the ghostly cries of those who perished in the MGM fire decades ago? Some ghost investigators believe it is. And what of the disoriented apparitions that have been reported in certain areas? While some might argue that these sights and sounds are nothing more than imagination, others who have experienced them aren't so sure.

"I don't care what anyone says. I know what I saw," one person explained. "It was misty bluish green, about the height of a tall woman. One minute she was there. And the next she was gone. There is no other explanation for me. That was a ghost."

It is only fair to mention that a new MGM Grand Las Vegas was eventually built; it stands a few blocks from where the original once stood.

Las Vegas Hilton

Legalized gambling was still very much a Nevada-only activity when the International Hotel opened in July 1969. It was the largest hotel in the world, and no expense had been spared. With a price tag of more than \$60 million, the palatial International boasted white marble throughout its twenty-four floors and a 30,000 square-foot casino. But savvy gaming execs realized it would take more than that to draw the money and the crowds. So they resorted to the tried-and-true Vegas hook; they booked a top-name entertainer, velvety voiced Barbra Streisand, to wow the opening-night crowd. And that she did. Star power, in Vegas it works every time. During her engagement, the glamorous Ms. Streisand performed before a packed house that included the governor of Nevada, two senators, TV



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comedian Lucille Ball, and other notables of the day.

When Streisand's stint ended, Elvis Presley sauntered in. Thirteen years had passed since his last performance in Las Vegas. Gone was the swivel-hipped youngster who shocked television viewers with his antics on the old Ed Sullivan Show one Sunday night in 1956. His naiveté long vanished, Elvis was on top of his game. He had met the challenge of being an aging teen idol by discovering a new persona within himself. Skintight leather pants, sequined white polyester jumpsuits, white patent leather boots, and red silk scarves, he wore them all with aplomb.

Elvis broke Las Vegas attendance records that summer at the International; every one of his fifty-eight consecutive shows was a sellout. While he performed for standing-room-only crowds in the two-thousand-seat showroom, he resided in the penthouse on the thirtieth floor. Today the penthouse is still known as the Elvis Suite.

During the early 1970s the International Hotel was sold to Hilton Hotels and renamed the Las Vegas Hilton. Elvis continued pulling in the crowds until his last performance in December 1976. He was the King, and still a major draw.

But the Grim Reaper takes us all, without regard for talent, wealth, and fame. We will never know whether or not Elvis would have endured, as other ageless performers like Tony Bennett, or retired to live out his life in peaceful anonymity. On August 16, 1977, he died in the bathroom of his Memphis home. He was forty-two years old. In honor of the King's contribution to the Hilton, the hotel erected a bronze statue of him a year later. On hand for the unveiling and dedication ceremonies were his father Vernon and ex-wife Priscilla. The statue is in the Hilton lobby.

The first reported sightings of Elvis at the Hilton happened shortly after his death. In his autobiography *Once Before I Go*, longtime Las Vegas entertainer Wayne Newton tells of seeing the deceased Presley in the audience during one of his performances. He is not the only person to have



had the pleasure of seeing the ghostly King. Sightings most often occur in the backstage area where, according to one former employee, he and the phantom Elvis crossed paths one morning years ago.

“I have seen hundreds of Elvis impersonators, some good, some not so good. When I saw him I thought, ‘Man, if this guy’s not a dead ringer for Elvis, I don’t know who is. He’s got the same way of walking and is easily one of the best Elvis impersonators I’ve ever seen.’ I was fixing to tell him so when he walked up to me. We got within a foot of one another, and all of a sudden I felt so cold, like the heat had gone off or something. I started to ask if he noticed it too, when he just dissolved right there in front of me. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the best way I can describe it.”

In fairness to all those ghost hunters seeking Elvis, it should be mentioned that the King’s apparition has also been reported at his Graceland home as well as other locations. However, here in Las Vegas he is as popular as he ever was. Any Elvis impersonator worth his sequins will tell you this city still admires Elvis. And it could be this very admiration that keeps the ghostly Elvis ever near. Then too, it could be a strong desire to remain where the action is or the memories of *Viva Las Vegas* when he and his beautiful costar Ann-Margaret took the city by storm.

According to some, Elvis may not be the only ghost at the Hilton. Early in the evening of February 11, 1981, a disgruntled employee deliberately started a fire in an eighth-floor lounge area. As flames leaped up the sides of the building, firefighters averted tragedy by using techniques they had learned in the disastrous MGM Grand fire. When the blaze was contained, eight people were dead, and several others were injured.

A few years ago a woman reported watching a handsome young couple as they sashayed through the casino. She



smiled, remembering her own long-ago honeymoon days. *How sweet*, she thought, *a couple of starry-eyed newly-weds*. The smile was wiped from her face when the couple stopped, passionately kissed, and then calmly walked into thin air.

There's a Ghost in Our Room

You won't read about it in any of the slick magazine ads put out by the Las Vegas Visitor's Authority. But prostitution is a fact of life and legal in many areas of Nevada. However, it is illegal in Clark County, which effectively makes the oldest profession against the law in Las Vegas, the county seat for Clark County.

This doesn't stop the ladies from plying their trade at venues throughout the city. Some are flagrant; most carry on clandestinely. What do you expect? Everyone has to make a living some way. Unfortunately, numerous crimes are associated with illegal prostitution. Drugs, assault, robbery, you name it; all this, of course, keeps Las Vegas police officers busy. You may have even seen some of them enforcing the law on the television show *COPS*. Theirs is work that never ends.

People die in hotel/motel rooms all the time. Since it does nothing for business, no one advertises this fact to tourists. If the death happens to be a violent murder, lips are sealed even tighter. But what if you check into your hotel and notice an unexplained cold spot in your otherwise comfortably warm room? What if the television and the radio are off, and you hear very distinct voices? Perhaps it is an echo from the past, or a ghost. Will you really know what transpired in this room a year ago, last month, a week ago, or even yesterday?

If violent unexpected death causes paranormal activity, we may have an explanation for the following ghostly encounter that reportedly happened at a resort hotel on The Strip.

Linda, Susan, and Shelley had been friends since high



school. When they came to Las Vegas on a girls-only weekend getaway, they expected to have some fun and excitement. None of the women thought they would be encountering a ghost.

They arrived in Las Vegas on a rainy March afternoon. The flight had been a long one; they were tired and wanted to relax before hitting the casino downstairs.

As they always did when they traveled, the women shared the same room; it was a matter of safety and of economics. On this trip Susan was glad she had the other two with her.

I went in to take a shower. As soon as I closed the door I heard someone crying. I opened the door to see what was wrong. Shelley and Linda were jabbering away over a room service menu. “Did you hear anything?” I asked.

They shook their heads and went back to the menu. I closed the door, and there it was again; someone was crying. “Linda! Shelley!” I screamed. “Come here.”

That brought them running. “What on earth is going on?” Shelley asked.

Just then the bathroom door slammed shut, and the crying got louder. Linda pushed the door open. “This place is built too well for that to be someone in the next room . . . I’m going to ask for another room. This is too weird.”

For some reason, I’ll never know why I did it, I looked in the mirror and saw this young woman looking back at me. Tears were streaming down her face; someone was choking her. It was awful. Shelley gasped. Then I knew she saw it too. “Yes, let’s get another room,” she said.

Linda called down to the desk and asked what was up with our room. They agreed to give us another room, and acted like they didn’t know what she was talking about. But when the bellman came to help us with our luggage, he said that a prostitute was murdered in the room a couple of months back. Shelley and I think it was her ghost we saw in the mirror. Linda heard the crying, but since she didn’t really see anything, she doesn’t know what Shelley and I saw.



A view of the Luxor through the palm trees (note the MGM Grand to the right)

Luxor

Themed hotels have been a mainstay of Las Vegas since the 1940s when Cowboy Western was hot stuff. The long gone Rancho Las Vegas and Last Frontier accommodated



with establishments that bespoke boots and saddles and wagon wheels and knotty pine times at the old log cabin. Then Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel came along and forced hotel casinos into a new direction of sophistication. Still it was the theme that held the power to entice, and so it has endured.

When King Tut’s Tomb in Egypt was opened and plundered in 1922 it’s a safe bet that no one was thinking of future gambling establishments in faraway Nevada. It doesn’t matter; the boy king would no doubt be proud to know that the Luxor features a full-scale reproduction of his tomb. In keeping with the ancient Egyptian theme, the interior of the pyramid-shaped Luxor boasts the largest atrium in the world and is decorated with reproductions of artifacts from Luxor and Karnak Temple.

But it is the Luxor’s exterior that causes the most comments. According to some, the sphinx that faces east toward the rising sun should actually be facing westward. This innocent disregard for ancient tradition has cursed the city and brought bad luck, they say. And if that’s not enough, some insist that the world’s most powerful beam of light located on the top of the pyramid should be capped for the very same reason. Never mind that the light shines so many miles up into the night sky that astronauts were able to pick out Las Vegas, or that pilots hundreds of miles away can also see it.

Given all the Luxor’s ancient Egyptian décor, one might think its ghosts would be from that time period. But this doesn’t seem to be the case. According to a long-held Las Vegas rumor, the Luxor was built atop a mob dumping ground; those who “cracked wise” to the wrong person were quickly dispatched to the next world and their bodies unceremoniously buried here.

The ghost most often associated with the Luxor is that of a worker who was accidentally killed during construction of the \$375 million hotel/casino in 1993. Keeping him company is the specter of a young woman who committed suicide there shortly after the hotel/casino opened.



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In leaping to her death, she used the Luxor's unique design to her advantage. The 120,000-square-foot ground-floor casino area is surrounded by its 4,407 hotel rooms. Instead of looking outward, the room windows face the casino area. Like Denver's famous Brown Hotel, the Luxor is designed so that people can walk out into the hallways on each floor level and look down at the main floor. This permits an unusual view of the casino action below.

To get to and from their rooms, guests take elevators, or inclinators, as they are so dubbed at the Luxor, that travel at a thirty-nine-degree angle. On the day of her death, the woman took the inclinator to one of the upper floors and gazed down at the casino a moment. Then, without warning, she jumped. She landed near the all-you-can-eat buffet, which was quickly closed. Employees in that area were cautioned to remain tight lipped and were sent home for the day. Time is money; the investigation was quickly completed, and employees were urged to be discreet. The area was thoroughly cleaned and sanitized. And the buffet was relocated to another part of the casino where it continues serving up pasta, salad, and other budget-friendly buffet staples.

And yet, on numerous occasions a ghostly woman has been spotted in the area where the buffet once stood. Those who have seen her describe a young woman in a bright red garment. By all accounts, she appears to be very sad. She's not the only jumper. A few years ago a young man dove off one of the top-floor landings and crashed to ground at the reservations desk. His ghost is also said to roam the casino.

Suicides and deaths by natural causes have probably occurred at every hotel and motel in the world. Throw in those unfortunate gangsters whose bones may molder deep beneath this sparkling black glass pyramid, and you've got the possibility for a lot of paranormal activity.

Could the ghostly middle-aged man in the striped brown suit be the victim of a long ago mob hit? His apparition has



A glimpse of downtown before the high-rises

been seen several times aimlessly wandering the hallways of the upper floors. If you don't get out of his way, some claim, he will walk right through you; and when he does, it is like an ice block. Others who've encountered him say he vanishes rather than step aside. All agree that he seems a bit preoccupied and angry. Years ago a local paranormal aficionado sought to investigate this ghostly gent further. The request was nixed even before the last words tumbled from the requester's mouth.

Plaza Hotel

When it was built in 1971 the Plaza Hotel in downtown Las Vegas was called the Union Plaza because it stands on the spot where modern-day Las Vegas truly began, at the site of the old Union Pacific Railroad depot. A stone's throw from the spectacular light and sound show that is the Fremont Experience, the hotel was one of the first high-rise hotels to be built in the historic downtown area. With



The old downtown train station circa 1930s

only 1,037 rooms, the Plaza may be small by some standards, but its proximity to so many attractions makes it worthy of a visitor's consideration.

Some believe that a shadowy, unknown ghost, who met his fate in a nearby railroad accident, hangs out at the Plaza. But it is the eerie showroom stagehand that people refer to when they talk about the Plaza Hotel's showroom ghost.

His is the story of a love affair gone sour; the loser in a love triangle, he saw no reason to go on living without the woman he loved. There is some disagreement as to how the spurned stagehand took his life. Some say he went home and shot himself; others claim he hanged himself backstage or in the darkened showroom. Whatever way he departed this earth, he apparently rues his decision. Suicide can, and sometimes does, give rise to a ghost, especially if the departed regrets choosing a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

This one isn't a vicious or mean ghost, and is said to really like the ladies. The ghostly stagehand has been known to sneak up on a beautiful showgirl backstage and give her a



kiss. The playful specter also likes to blow icy air on the neck of some unsuspecting woman. Misplaced items are commonplace in the dressing rooms; hairbrushes, greasepaint, and makeup are fair game.

Years ago, master magician and Houdini expert Dixie Dooley was starring in a tribute to Houdini in the Plaza showroom. Ghostly antics increased significantly. No one was ever sure if it was the ghost of the great Houdini who had come to Vegas to oversee his tribute, or the stagehand run amok. Some women experienced taps or light pinches on their shoulders. And then the ghostly pranks dwindled to an occasional kiss or lost item.

The Mirage

Think opulent Polynesian décor: waterfalls, grottos, a lagoon, and tropical gardens. There is no question why a ghost might decide to stop by and set up housekeeping at this resort. But why haunt one of the women's bathrooms? With more than three thousand rooms at its disposal, it seems odd that the ghost on premises has chosen to camp out at that particular location. But some insist that is exactly the case. The proximity of the 1,250-seat Danny Gans Theater to the so-called haunted bathroom might lead to the belief that the ghost is a diehard fan of impressionist singer/comedian Danny Gans, one of Las Vegas's top entertainers. Now that is understandable.

It all started a few years ago when the automatic faucet sensors started to turn themselves on and off. One night a startled housekeeping employee was so shaken by the bizarre turn of events, she blamed a ghostly presence and refused to ever again work alone in that bathroom. Could it be the workings of a prank-playing ghost? After all, it's not unheard of for a ghost to hang out in a bathroom. Then again, it's also not unheard of for automatic faucet sensors to malfunction. Without any sightings, or other phenomena, the jury is still out on the bathroom ghost. And until

are still a few vacant lots of desert dirt and underbrush, but they are quickly disappearing in the onslaught of new Las Vegans and their insatiable need for housing and fast food.

One of the older motels on this stretch of highway is said to be haunted by the ghost of a young woman. As sometimes happens in the search for a ghost's beginnings, there is more than one story that explains it. The first story has the young lady dying in a horrible automobile accident in the 1960s. True enough, this highway has seen its share of accidents. In the other story she is the victim of a lover's quarrel, shot to death in her room in the 1970s.

Either way, she met a sudden, violent, and unexpected death and has every reason to wonder what went wrong. Her glimmering blue apparition has been spotted in a certain room in the motel on more than one occasion. According to someone who saw her, the apparition never said a word; she briefly loomed at the foot of the bed and was gone.

Moulin Rouge Memories

Back in the day, people of color often referred to Las Vegas as the Mississippi of the West. They had good reason to do so. Until the Moulin Rouge was opened in 1955, African Americans were not always welcome in the large Las Vegas hotel/casinos. Oh sure they could wait tables, cook meals, and change the sheets, but sitting down at the blackjack table was another matter entirely. This terrible injustice didn't apply only to the guests and the hired help; African American celebrities like Pearl Bailey and Nat King Cole also found themselves facing the same discrimination. The message, while not spoken, was clear: Entertain our paying customers all you want, but when the set is over, go on back to the other side of town.

Many celebrities still remember the days of being forced to find room and board on the Westside, which was predominately African American, while performing at one of the big hotels on The Strip. The opening of the Moulin