



Millions fly in to Las Vegas each year looking for a good time and, maybe, a pot of money. Of course, it's all a mirage. But then, reality was never the point — this is a city that has smiled in the shadow of a nuclear test site for 40 years

Vampire Vegas

By **Melanie McGrath** Photographs by **Carl De Keyzer**



Debbie settled herself into the hot tub. "Someday I'm gonna meet a Mr Right," she said, tying up her hair. She had the blonde, browned and boobed look you see everywhere in Las Vegas, the look of expensively reprocessed flesh. A high-quality human luncheon-meat look. A dove landed on the date palm beside us. I looked up and saw a series of green and orange flares snaking across the night sky. "What d'you think that is?" "Oh, just some old missile tracing," Debbie said. "It'll be in the paper tomorrow." She turned the subject. "Did you see the La Hoya fight?" I hadn't, though I knew there had been a lot of money riding on it. Debbie had served drinks at the fight. She'd met a number of nice gentlemen and given them her phone number. Evidently, she was hopeful, and I thought it would be mean to remind her that we were in Vegas, the city of a thousand private escorts, topless bars and nice gentlemen with wives and kids back home. "I don't think they should let older women be cocktail waitresses," said Debbie, contemplating her future. "Cellulite is so off-putting." I said I thought that was one way — a very Las Vegas way — of looking at it and we fell silent. A rush of traffic took over. The air was thick, as though carrying rain. "I'll be a greeter by the time I start

falling apart," said Debbie. Her orthodontic work made a clicking sound. "It's more dignified — though I'll be married by then, of course." Las Vegas is full of half-lit Debbies. Seven thousand people move into the city every month, drawn by the sheeny lights and the non-stop dollar bills. But few ever get what they came for. Las Vegas is a temporary mirage, a city built to deliver the average dreams of the average visitor on their average 2.8-day stay. It was a hot September night and I was stuck in a line of taxis heading out towards the airport. Eight hundred flights take off and touch down at McCarran Airport every day, ranking it among the ten busiest airports in the world. Last year, there were at least 30 million visitors. I'd been living in Vegas 11 weeks — many times the average stay — researching a novel, and my mind had grown used to blanking out the vast electronic billboards, the lines of topless bars and advertisements for cheap eats and loose slots. On that September night, I drove into the neon cloudshine with a feeling of disquiet. Everyone knows Vegas is a made-up world, a desert Disneyland, but I had been trying, over the weeks, to build up a picture of the town beneath the smile and what I had found was troubling me. If there is a single truth about Las Vegas, it is that nowhere on Earth so efficiently evades truth. In a city whose \$5.7 billion-a-year

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◀ gambling business it is to serve up pleasure, reality doesn't sit so well as fantasy. Vegas is a city in denial of the facts. A city where the birds are scared from the trees by ultrasonic beepers to stop them pooping on passers-by, where prostitution is illegal, but there are 70 Yellow Pages of ads for private entertainers, where to water a single golf course costs \$12 million a year. Reality is Las Vegas's Mrs Rochester, its shameful hidden secret, stashed away and going quietly bonkers unregarded.

As I drove by the Little White Chapel a couple in an Oldsmobile were getting married at the 24-hour drive-thru window, one of the 100,000 weddings registered in Vegas every year. The week before, an article had appeared in the local paper announcing that, from now on, the marriage register would be available on the Internet, apparently as a convenient resource for hung-over newly-weds desperately seeking the name of the person they'd married the night before.

Vegas is set to collide with the facts before too long. Mrs Rochester is knocking at the door. Currently the fastest-growing city in America, Las Vegas, Nevada, is only just beginning to wake up to its problems. The smog is now as bad as in LA. The suburbs grow virtually uncontrolled in a town not used to planning. Sewage and water systems are struggling to keep up. Las Vegas's schools are turning out illiterates and there is a serious street-gang problem. You cannot drive more than a couple of hundred yards without witnessing some traffic accident, the joint product of overcrowded roads and endemic alcohol abuse. And if that were not enough, Vegas is the compulsive gambling and suicide capital of America.

"You know what they call Las Vegas?" a taxi driver once asked me.

"No".

"Lost Wages".

Lost Wages. It was a joke I would hear a hundred times. As I was driving, a radio newflash announced that the El Niño storm was heading for Lost Wages, bringing four inches of rain to a city whose average yearly rainfall is only four inches. The air smelled electrical, but chain gangs of tourists were still tramping up and down the Strip in regulation T-shirts and shorts, and I wondered if they knew what was coming.

My car, a perky jalopy from Rent-a-Wreck, tooted past Carl's Junr burger bar, where a man had been shot dead a day or so before. Tonight, the place was full, all evidence of the murder carefully obliterated. Guns are easily come by in town. Only the previous evening, an employee of an off-Strip gun

range had offered me an Uzi for \$300, saying he could pack it so that customs would never know. He said it was light and woman-friendly. Handy for self-protection.

The cult of individualism that stocks gun ranges encourages Las Vegas to avoid its problems. A population accustomed to being subsidised by the gaming and rooming taxes imposed on out-of-towners, to paying no state income, inheritance or capital-gains tax is suspicious of collective needs. When the question of failing schools was raised a while ago, Vegas residents suggested that the casinos fork out for improvements.

I drove on south, past the Corinthian plinths, the pyramid, the Ferris wheels, the third-size Statue of Liberty that make up the Strip's phenomenal skyline. A group of men in suits — most likely conventioners from one of the city's 3,000 annual conventions — tumbled out of the Riviera Hotel and into a mini-bus, headed perhaps for one of the string of legal roadside brothels that have set up across the Clark County line in Lincoln and Nye.

"One day this will be a great archaeological enigma," prophesies Myram Borders, head of the Las Vegas News Bureau. "An Egyptian pyramid next to an Arthurian castle next to a Roman villa next to a volcano next to a pirate ship." By the end of this year, there will be more: the \$1.3 billion Bellagio, inspired by the Lake Como resort; the \$750m Paris with its replica Arc de Triomphe and River Seine; the \$1.5bn Project Paradise, the \$2bn Venetian. In the hunt for profit, Vegas has created an expectation it must now fulfil. Its visitors demand reinvention, so after five years of marketing itself as a family destination, Vegas is growing up. Family Entertainment Vegas is dead. Long live Adult Resort Las Vegas.

As happens after every good succession, there will be a spring cleaning of the facts, and Vegas's past will be hastily rewritten to suit its most recent incarnation. For now, though, the official version goes something like this: in 1942, mobster Bugsy Siegel motors into a one-cactus town of 20,000 lost souls with a dream and the dirty money to make it happen. Four years later, the Fabulous Flamingo Hotel opens on the two-lane highway to Los Angeles and the Las Vegas Strip is born. But Bugsy doesn't live to enjoy the fruits of his success. A shower of bullets blasts his face, and his life, away.

By the mid-Fifties, the Strip is smoking. Sinatra is frontlining at the Sahara, Dean Martin is drunk in the Dunes and Sammy



After five years of marketing itself as a family destination, Vegas is growing up. Family Entertainment Vegas is dead and gone. Long live Adult Resort Las Vegas

Davis Jnr is playing to an all-white crowd on weekend furlough from the southern-Californian suburbs. The movie stars are moving in, and before you know it, Las Vegas has become the world's most famous little town, a desert oasis watered by a silver stream of money.

East Coast banks won't touch the place. It takes a loose alliance of Mormon bankers and Midwest mobsters to bankroll the city's swish new resort hotels and carpet-joint casinos, and Vegas becomes a financial frontier, where racketeering, tax evasion and money laundering are the accepted modus operandi. Millions are skimmed off the gaming Drop and despatched to the Chicago and Cincinnati outfits and, every so often, someone's bones turn up in a shallow grave out in the sage. But still, everyone knows everyone; and everyone knows that no one who sticks to the rules gets hurt.

By the Seventies, the silver stream of money flowing through Mob 'n' Mormon town has burst its banks and the East Coast financiers and Wall Street-listed corporations are beginning to change their minds about the world's most famous little town. A tidal wave of Hiltons and Sheratons washes that silver stream sparkly clean and brings in its wake more investment capital than the outfits could have mustered in a century. With the help of the FBI, the Mob is gradually squeezed out.

Out go the dingy gambling dens, the late-night lock-ins, the mom-and-pop casinos, and up go the mega-resort hotels. By the late Eighties, the town has grown into a big, fat city, a bursting sprawl of smog and shopping plazas and gated suburbs and backed-up freeways, centring on the venal, unearthly beauty of the Las Vegas Strip.

It's hard to piece together the unwanted

details, the inconvenient facts, the bits in between. Early on in my stay, I rang Robert McCracken, a well-known local historian, and we fixed up a time to meet. The following day his daughter called to say her father had become suddenly indisposed.

"I'm here for a few weeks yet," I offered.

The daughter coughed. "I think my father is likely to be too busy," she said.

"For 12 weeks?"

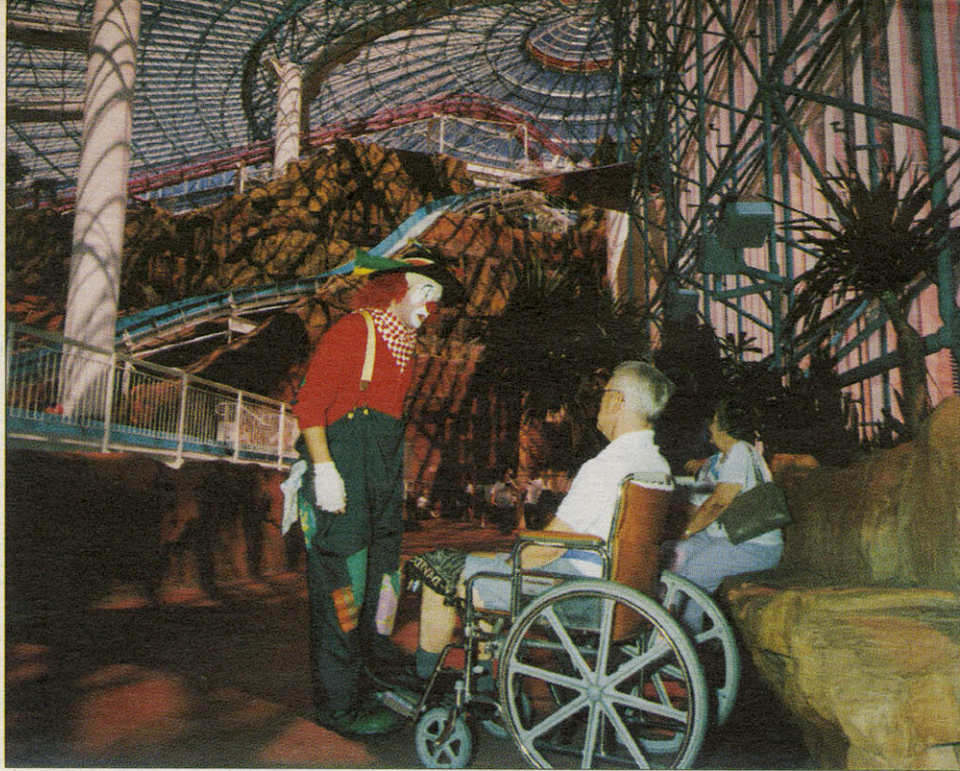
"Yes," she said. "For 12 weeks."

What kind of town is it, I asked myself, where the local historian won't talk? Vegas has rewritten its past, cutting out the inconsistencies, the uncomfortable clots of fact. The librarian at the University told me that "researchers have only really just got interested in the city's history", and there are few books. What I did find out is that the official line — from Frontier Vegas and Bugsy Vegas through Rat Pack Vegas and Mob Vegas to Corporate Vegas — doesn't allow for the diverting complexities of the place. For example: it wasn't simply the Mob 'n' Mormons who built Las Vegas. Bugsy Siegel and his boss, the Mob financier Meyer Lansky, were Jewish. Casino moguls Sheldon Adelson and Steve Wynn are Jewish, too. The town boomed not because gambling was legal but because the railroad ran right through it. And, far from being the centre of licence it likes to think itself, Vegas was racially segregated right into the mid-Seventies. (Twenty years before, Bugsy Siegel booked Lena Horne to perform at the Flamingo, but made her sleep elsewhere and instructed the chambermaid to burn her bed-linen.)

The trouble with the schematic history is not so much that it isn't true, but that no one really cares either way. So long as the narrative fits the present's purposes, which is to say so long as the past boosts the present's profits, there are few in Vegas who will bother to question it. History has, in large part, been privatised. Almost every historical "attraction" in and around Vegas — from the Liberace Museum and the Bonnie Springs Frontier Town to the Ethel M Chocolate Botanical Garden — is a company enterprise, designed more to push product than to present the past.

In the north-west of the city lie the remains of a crude stone fort built by Mormon settlers in 1855. A tiny, stain-rimmed plaque marks the spot, and on all the occasions that I drove past it, I never once saw anyone there. The News Bureau's official list of ▶





◀ attractions includes World of Coca-Cola, the Favourite Brands International Marshmallow Factory and Ocean Spray's Cranberry World West. Mormon Fort doesn't get a look in.

Still, the official history does have some claim to the truth, for Vegas is, as it suggests, a city periodically colonised by competing interests with the single aim of making money, a boondock serving impulses greater than itself, a libertine and libertarian space where the ordinary rules of exchange and social relations do not apply, a brilliant and gaudy gutter built to catch a silver stream.

In this respect, Corporate Las Vegas isn't much different from Mob Las Vegas. Back in the Eighties, an investigation into corruption in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where gaming is more highly regulated than in Vegas, "found everything, just everything", according to the Vegas columnist, John L. Smith. Money laundering, corporate tax evasion, embezzlement, insider trading and illegal stock manipulation. "It's hard to pin down," Smith told me, referring to Vegas, "because the corporations control access to their information and employees so tightly. Back in the Mob days, the mobsters would either talk to you or not." I couldn't draw him further. He would only say: "Hey, Las Vegas is a company town!"

The Mob swells its profits by expanding its reach, but listed companies are always under pressure to increase their shareholder dividends from existing operations, and casino stocks are both notoriously overvalued and volatile. "They've gotten greedy," observed John L. Smith, meaning that every part of a hotel-casino operation is now expected to turn a profit. In the Mob days, a casino would only report its overall results. Free lounge acts and big-fee stars were often just loss leaders designed to bring in the gamblers. That's all gone. Virtually nothing's for free in Vegas any more. Room rates are rising, show tickets can hit \$100 a head and the famous buffets aren't as cheap as they used to be. Even the fat-fee stars who used to give Vegas its glitter have gone, replaced by long-running shows carefully managed to appeal to Germans, Jamaicans and Japanese.

I went along to one of these new-style shows at the Riviera. They put me next to a couple from Dundee. A photographer came

and snapped a pic (\$10). We ordered our watery drinks and smiled weakly at one another. A troupe of topless dancers burst from backstage and displayed their breast implants. Mr Dundee shifted in his seat and began to look uncomfortable. There was a juggler, followed by another bout of breasts. A cavalcade of motorbikers performed some death-defying stunts. There were more breasts. A magician made a woman disappear. Some breasts appeared, this time with nipple fixings. The music throughout was canned, as by now was Mr Dundee. We shuffled out without making eye contact. Bye bye Sinatra, so long Streisand, howdy Starlight Express.

In Vegas, every big flea has a flea on its back to bite it, and if the corporations play games with fact, so swindlers in turn cheat them. Around \$70m a year is lost through cheating — by substituting loaded dice, marking the backs of cards, past-post betting, false shuffling, counterfeiting chips and slot tokens, paying off dealers and gaffing slot machines. A competent gang can fix a slot machine in six seconds, less if security is in on the scam, switching the reels to a jackpot or using optical wands to daze the machine's scanner into releasing the contents of its coin hopper. One cheat, Tommy Glenn Carmichael, allegedly ripped off \$34m before getting caught.

Mike Cassell, an agent at the Nevada Gaming Control Board, told me: "We arrested a guy who'd cheated \$8m out of video poker machines. He was someone's grandpa kind of thing. He did it for the buzz, to beat the machines." Many casinos see cheating by outsiders as a cost of business. "If you make a slot machine sensitive enough to distinguish between genuine quarters and fakes, it's also sensitive enough to go off at the smallest thing and that slows up play," said Mike.

The casinos are only really paranoid about insider cheats. One medium-sized casino ran an incentive scheme whereby the dealer with the highest table winnings for the house had first dibs at the shift rota, which may not sound much, but when your income is dependent on tips, it's a significant incentive. You don't make much on the graveyard shift. So the story goes, one of this casino's blackjack dealers had a sick wife, and he badly needed to be able to take the early shift so he could pick his kids up from school. He knew that if he asked for special dispensation, he'd be shown the door. So this dealer began removing the tens from his decks of cards in order to

reduce the punters' odds of winning and so increase his table earnings. After a very short while, he was discovered and dismissed, but not before word had got round that the casino had employed a crooked dealer. Overnight, its custom vanished and within days, it was bankrupt.

The morning after my disillusioned drive along the Strip, El Niño finally broke, blowing rain in sheets. For the next day and night, run-off roared through the storm drain next to my room and made it impossible to sleep. On the second morning, a blue scar appeared in the sky, followed by a shadowy sun. I ventured out and took a stroll. Down by the palm tree there was Debbie, sitting alone in the hot tub, immersed in Cosmopolitan, with the flood-water lapping at her ears.

"If you've got a weakness, Vegas will find it," John L. Smith said. Debbie's weakness was for persistent fantasy. Mine was for gloom. There is something about Vegas that kills your spirit as it pleasures your senses, a sort of undeadness. Looking back, I can see it begins with a loss of sensibility, a numbness brought on by the overwhelming blare of lights and the feeling of disorientation that comes from living in a city where midnight is a reiteration of midday. There's a belting unquietness to Las Vegas. As a matter of survival, anyone who stays must learn to tolerate its profligacy, the gobbling light, the pouring water, the alpine wastes of food, the routine degeneracy of booze and greed and tits 'n' ass. There is simply too much to be angry about to be able to continue being angry.

If there is a lonelier place on Earth, then I have yet to find it. At night, with the lights pinking out the darkness, Vegas is the sparkliest, the swirliest and the smiliest. I'd often spend my nights quite happily hopping casinos, enjoying an expansive terrain of anonymous gambles and unnoticed exits.

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It was the kind of freedom that, as a woman, is unavailable to me elsewhere.

But Vegas is a vampire. The dawn arrives and the city shrinks and then it hits you. You are utterly alone. Not alone among the stars and not alone among friends. Just plain solitary. It's then you notice the flashes of female body parts on the discarded pages of the freesheet escort mags that struggle along in the breeze like wounded birds, the boozers slumped at bus stops, the pick-ups parked outside the porn stores. It's then you remember that the waitress in your local diner won't smile at you because she assumes you'll have left town tomorrow. You start to feel sorry for yourself, embarrassed by your night-time confidence. You remember how little anyone cares. You're mawkish in your solitude and your mind plays back to the Debbies with their dreams of glittery jobs and Misterys Right and you realise that Vegas lonely is a whole other kind of lonely. You wonder how its manifest illusions ever took hold.

For a while, I could gamble away my blues, but I am not a true gambler and blackjack doesn't take me out of myself for long. Perhaps I'm too familiar with the tricks casinos play to keep gamblers at the tables. A mathematician called Jess Marcum (who helped develop the neutron bomb), worked out that a craps player, staking \$200 a game for 25 minutes, has a one in 15 chance of winning \$1,000 before he loses \$1,000, whereas the same player staking \$1 a game for two months reduces his chances to one in two trillion.

Casinos are miniature laboratories of behavioural science, where daylight and clocks are banished to give the impression that time has infinite elasticity, where the carpets, the lights and sounds are all designed to draw you in. Slot machines at the ends of rows are brightly coloured — predominantly red — to attract attention, and tend to pay out frequent small sums in imitation of the patterns of positive reinforcement, which, the American researcher Skinner discovered, increased motivation in rats. The centre machines are pastel-coloured for those slot-hogs whose eyes have tired of red. Most slots have one-arm bandit handles to increase the player's feeling of having a role in the outcome, though the position of the reels is actually determined by a computerised random-number generator set inside the machine.

It's unwise to underestimate the power of such psychological tricks. During one October weekend in 1991, the Chicago ►



neurologist Alan Hirsch sprayed a pheromonal scent called Odorant 1 into the slot casinos at the Las Vegas Hilton and increased the house Drop by 45 per cent.

The only reality Las Vegas has not yet learned how to cheat is the persistent presence of mortality. But even then it has a go. Up in the north-west of the city lies the sunset-pink pall of Sun City, an "age-restricted community", where southern California's over-55s play golf and screen out the discomfiting memento mori that might come from engaging in a world full of folk younger than themselves. I drove up there one day and got shown around. We strolled from golf course to hot tub to pool. Every so often a trophy wife jogged past, making a disconcerting, almost vulgar, show of youth. My companion said that, whatever you might think about age-restricted communities, they were "a clean way to bolster the economy".

Perhaps it's not surprising, with so many retirees moving to Vegas, that it is more profitable to be an undertaker in Nevada than in any other part of the US. I learned this at the Association of Funeral Directors, a group of 6,000 undertakers gathered in Vegas for their annual convention. It was, coincidentally, the anniversary of my father's death and only a week or so after I had personally received a death threat from a Vegas attorney who represents many of the mobster-types in town, and played himself in Martin Scorsese's movie of the Seventies mobster period, *Casino*. We were at a fund-raiser for a school and I'd crossed him over something. He leaned toward me and whispered: "There's a four-foot hole waiting out in the desert for you." It was a joke, but all the same, what with that and my dad's death, my mind was rather tied up in mortality.

Though you had to walk through a Star Trek exhibition, a casino and a coffee shop to get to it, I found the display of coffins, hearses and all the vast paraphernalia of death at the convention vaguely comforting. Here, it seemed to me, there was at least a glimpse of reality, albeit rather stark. As luck would have it, the American poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch was at the convention. I'd read and enjoyed his book of memoirs, *The Undertaking*, and I was curious to know what he thought of Vegas.

"It's a place where people have turned pleasure into sickness," he remarked.

"Don't you find it soulless?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Everywhere has a soul."

I was beginning to think that death might actually be the key to understanding the real



Las Vegas. The official history touches on Las Vegas's long-time proximity to the Nevada atomic weapons test site, but focuses on the city's attempts to make light of its dark-hearted neighbour. During the Fifties, when mushroom clouds were regular fixtures over the Las Vegas horizon, the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a Miss Atomic beauty pageant, there was an atomic hairdo (a version of the beehive) and the casinos served "atomic" cocktails. Tourists would be bussed out to vantage points to watch the mushroom clouds.

Never mind that the downwind population living to the north-east of Las Vegas began to suffer birth defects, that somewhere between 10,000 and 75,000 children developed thyroid cancer. Vegas celebrated. The Nevada Test Site brought good jobs and better money and, most likely, Vegas didn't feel it had a choice.

Unable to shake my new idea, I went up to the Nevada Test Site, 65 miles north of Vegas. It was at the NTS (which, along with the Nellis Airforce Range, occupies an uninhabited area of 5,000 square miles of the Nevada Desert) between 1951 and 1992 that 928 atmospheric and underground atomic and thermonuclear devices were tested, 24 of them jointly with the UK.

LaTomya, a public-relations officer for the Department of Energy, took me through security ("Warning: unauthorised personnel present, no classified discussion")

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and we drove out to Frenchman Flat, where many of the early atmospheric tests were conducted. It was an eerie grey colour. The sage brush and creosote bushes seemed dead to me, but LaTomya said that was just the way the desert looked. Actually, it wasn't the way the rest of the desert, brightened by El Niño's rains, looked at all, but I didn't care to argue. Scattered about were the twisted remains of materials experiments and Doom Towns, where mannequins dressed as Fifties (nuclear) families were placed in Fifties homes and blown to shards. We passed by animal pens, where living pigs and sheep were blasted into clouds of blood. "Remnants, where they exist, are kept frozen here on site," said LaTomya.

We drove 150 miles that morning, passing huge falls in the earth carved out by bombs and huddles of experimental huts and bunkers and razor-wired areas marked: "Hazardous, Do Not Enter". As far as the eye could see, the road was layered where the quakes from bombs had folded it. We passed a sign reading: "Stop For Convoys With Blue Flashing Lights".

"Who needs to be told to stop for an A-bomb convoy?" I asked.

"You'd be surprised," said LaTomya. "People overtake. You can even get a parking ticket here. The sheriff comes round." As if that anchored the place and somehow made it normal.

We passed by the grey stump of a mountain melted by the unexpected venting of a bomb three times the size of the one dumped on Hiroshima. "You can't go into Smoky without radiation suits and special clearance," said LaTomya, pointing to the nub of rock.

"I think I'll pass," I said.

Some parts of the NTS have been closed off permanently. Plutonium Valley, for example, is a no-go area, and if Congress

approves, by 2010, Yucca Mountain in the south-west corner could follow it, becoming a permanent repository for 80,000 metric tonnes of high-level nuclear waste — a sort of plutonium cemetery. I couldn't resist asking about Area 51, where the US Airforce supposedly keeps UFO and alien remains.

"There is no Area 51," said LaTomya. "The area you mean is up by Groom Lake." I suggested we drive over and take a peek.

"We can't do that," she said. "We'd get into trouble."

We drove instead to Sedan Crater, an alluvial cone 1,280ft wide and 320ft deep, part of a 1962 test to investigate the possibility of using A-bombs to widen the Panama Canal. The blast shifted 12 million tons of soil, but it was months before it was considered safe for scientists in radiation suits to venture into the crater, so they gave up on the idea of widening the canal. Thirty-five years later, nothing grows in Sedan. A hot wind fell over the lip. There were piles of tyres at the crater's base.

"They must be using it as a dump," volunteered LaTomya.

I do not pretend to be objective. Sedan Crater is the nearest place to Hell I have ever been. We sat in the Fifties canteen in Mercury, the Test Site town, and ate school dinner food. At the height of the cold war, 1,000 people lived here, but it's a ghost town now, the perfectly preserved bowling alley and movie theatre used as stores. I spread out my official map of the NTS and retraced our day's journey with my finger. The map was quite obviously partial.

"This isn't a true representation is it?"

LaTomya looked uncomfortable. "No," she said. That night I found Debbie in the hot tub again. I said: "Aren't you scared about that missile we saw the other day?"

"Oh no," she said. "Things like that don't bother me." Perhaps it isn't so surprising that Vegas thrives on a denial of the facts, when the gates to Hell are only 65 miles up the road.

I came grudgingly to admire Las Vegas. It is America's purpose-built escape from its puritanical traditions. And in a culture where the rich are often confused with the morally righteous, Vegas's lack of hypocrisy is remarkable. Money will buy you just about everything in Vegas except virtue. Often I was tempted to be offended by the city's amorality, but with hindsight I realise that Vegas doesn't make us what we are. We are, in varying degrees, what Vegas knows us to be: greedy, libidinous, celebratory, scared, infantile, orgiastic, experimental, conforming and conservative.

Towards the end of my trip, my mother came to visit. We drove down Tropicana Avenue and hit the Strip at the New York-New York hotel. It was night and the lights shook like aspens. We drove past the pink porte cochère of Caesar's Palace. We watched the fake volcano going off. "Isn't this just marvellous," my mum said, giggling with pleasure. We ate double-decker ice-creams among the cords of brilliant neon and below us, invisible to the eye, flowed the thick water of the silver stream. Thomas Lynch, the poet-undertaker, told me his aunt always used to say that life is wonderful if you can resist temptation, and wonderful if you can't. That night, we watched the smudge of traffic and we felt our best selves. Mum didn't notice the vacant lots, the dust of building sites, the drunks slumped at bus stops. She saw what Vegas wanted her to see.

"It's so enormous and tacky and beautiful," she said.

And she was right. It was. ■

