

# Insider city guides 2016: Las Vegas

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The Las Vegas skyline (Alamy)

Elvis's old stomping ground is upping the ante, with crazy new multibillion-dollar resorts and all-out entertainment that arguably outguns any other city. This town can make marriages, break marriages (what happens in Vegas and all that), grow wealth, obliterate fortunes, stretch waistlines, kill inhibitions and expand horizons. Viva Las Vegas!

**The new district: 18b** Back in 1998, the wealthy owner of a photographic studio quietly created “18b” — also known as the Las Vegas Arts District — near downtown. It comprises 18-plus blocks (hence the name) packed with galleries, design studios, antiques dealers, vintage clothing stores and a handful of hipster-grade cafes, bars and restaurants ([18b.org](http://18b.org)).

Flee the rising heat with a cold-brew coffee at Makers & Finders (£3; [makerslv.com](http://makerslv.com)). Across the street is Buffalo Exchange, where rails of vintage clothing house designer bargains, presumably from hapless gamblers who sold the Balmain off their backs to raise a few dollars more ([buffaloexchange.com](http://buffaloexchange.com)).

Cross East Charleston Boulevard to the Arts Factory, where you can wander two floors of galleries and studios, and chat to the artists ([theartsfactory.com](http://theartsfactory.com)). Enjoy a game of darts, a pint and a pasty here, too, at the 24-hour British-themed Downtown Crown Pub.

Authenticity: iffy ([downtowncrownpub.com](http://downtowncrownpub.com)).

Twenty-four stores make up Antique Alley, where you can live out your Celebrity Antiques Road Trip fantasy. Vintage Vegas and Retro Vegas are both filled with hilarious Americana; the upscale Patina offers more discerning options (tiger-print sofa aside).

Swing by 18b on the first Friday of the month between 5pm and 11pm to check out its free festival celebrating the area's culture and creativity ([ffflv.org](http://ffflv.org)). This is best followed by a craft cocktail at Velveten Rabbit (from £7; [velveteenrabbitlv.com](http://velveteenrabbitlv.com)).

**Casinos** Some are small, most are vast, but the bombshell is that, broadly, all the casinos are the same. They offer “table games” such as live poker, blackjack, roulette and craps. They also have acres of video poker machines, slots and reels — many of them branded (Friends, Britney Spears, The Walking Dead).

If you've no idea what you're doing, it's simple: don't gamble. You can lose an awful lot in no time. Curious? Most casinos offer free introductory lessons at quieter times, during which a croupier will

teach you the game and you don't have to spend a cent. The Strip — officially, South Las Vegas Boulevard — houses all the big players. The MGM Grand has by far the largest casino, and you could be lost in there for days ([mgmgrand.com/casino](http://mgmgrand.com/casino)). The Bellagio lends a veneer of luxury to identical proceedings ([bellagio.com/casino](http://bellagio.com/casino)). Both are solid bets for an initial wander, and maybe even your first roll of the dice.

Smaller casino floors are found at newer hotels such as the Cosmopolitan ([cosmopolitanlasvegas.com](http://cosmopolitanlasvegas.com)) and SLS ([slslasvegas.com](http://slslasvegas.com)), and are far less daunting. For old-school, with a side order of kitsch, head downtown to where Vegas started, to the eye-opening Binion's — sexy croupiers wearing not much, a photo op with a million bucks ([www.binions.com](http://www.binions.com)) — or the famous El Cortez ([elcortezhotelcasino.com](http://elcortezhotelcasino.com)).

**Shopping** The Shops at Crystals, by the Aria hotel, is an architecturally captivating building catering to high rollers: outlets include Stella McCartney, Céline and Prada. Stroll in and imagine what might have been if only you'd won that last hand

([theshopsatcrystals.com](http://theshopsatcrystals.com)).

Grab limited-edition trainers at CRSVR (pronounced “crossover”), inside the Cosmopolitan, or 12amrun, co-owned by the hip-hop heavyweight Nas, on the LINQ Promenade ([12amrun.com](http://12amrun.com)).

Kappa Toys is an emporium of fun for children, with classic and design-led items for adults, too ([kappatoys.com](http://kappatoys.com)). Seek it out amid the other boutique stores at the new Downtown Container Park ([downtowncontainerpark.com](http://downtowncontainerpark.com)). Another find here is Art Box, where the city's artisans showcase their lovingly crafted jewellery, home furnishings and accessories ([artboxdesigns.com](http://artboxdesigns.com)).

The standard retail experience is alive and well, too: lost-luggage disasters can be fixed with a quick trip to H&M or Gap at the Forum Shops, in Caesars Palace, where there are 9ft-tall talking statues. There's an Apple Store here, should you wish to load up on tech at US prices.

For something completely different, 10 minutes west of the Strip on Spring Mountain Road, the Zombie Apocalypse Store hawks all sorts of survival gear, as well as essential undead-silencing paraphernalia such as machetes and stun guns ([zombieapocalypsestore.com](http://zombieapocalypsestore.com)).

## **Nightlife**

Hakkasan is the MGM Grand's superclub, and it reigns supreme in Vegas because it has all the best DJs: there's a 29-artist roster for 2016, headed up by Calvin Harris. The light show in the main room, which includes floor-to-ceiling LED screens, is like something from outer space ([hakkasanlv.com](http://hakkasanlv.com)).

DJs are present, but aren't the focus, at the Skyfall Lounge cocktail bar, atop the Delano hotel ([delanolasvegas.com](http://delanolasvegas.com)). It's more about the view, which, if you're slightly potty, you can enjoy out on the wind-ravaged terrace — you're 64 floors up, remember. The chef extraordinaire Alain Ducasse's new Rivea restaurant is next door, if you get peckish (mains from £25; [alain-ducasse.com](http://alain-ducasse.com)).

Dive bars are an institution in Vegas, and you should visit at least one. Atomic Liquors, downtown, dates from 1945 and is named after the nuclear testing in the Nevada desert that people used to flock to watch. After a night on its 7.4% Golden Road lager, your head may feel a bit like the desert did the morning after (from £2; [atomicvegas.com](http://atomicvegas.com)).

**Culture** The Neon Museum is an outdoor “boneyard” of Vegas's huge (and hugely valuable) neon hotel and casino signs. There's a story behind each of them, so you'll want to book tickets in advance for the hour-long tour, which regularly sells out (£13; [neonmuseum.org](http://neonmuseum.org)).

A world away from the era of the Rat Pack, Vegas shows today are dominated by divas. Jennifer Lopez and Britney Spears share Planet Hollywood's Axis theatre — Lopez and her All I Have show is the new, critically acclaimed arrival, with Britney's Piece of Me extravaganza still going strong after three years. They alternate stints, so check your dates (from £42; [caesars.com/planet-hollywood/shows](http://caesars.com/planet-hollywood/shows)).

For some peace and quiet, try the Mandalay Bay's new Sea Monsters Revealed exhibition. Running until October, it features extraordinary “exploded” carcasses of preserved ocean life, including an emperor penguin and an enormous whale shark (£9; [mandalaybay.com](http://mandalaybay.com)).

**Out of town** Hire a convertible Ford Mustang and — roof down, sun cream on — launch yourself towards the Grand Canyon (car hire about £30 a day; shop around online). It's just over two hours' drive from Vegas to the West Rim or five hours to the South Rim. The



former is the site of the Skywalk, the glass walkway cantilevered 4,000ft above the canyon floor. It's part of a longer tour, so you can't enjoy it in isolation; the Legacy Gold package, on a hop-on, hop-off bus, is the cheapest online (£57; [grandcanyonwest.com](http://grandcanyonwest.com)). Big spenders can save themselves a drive and book a helicopter from McCarran airport, in Vegas (from £270pp; [sundancehelicopters.com/grand-canyon](http://sundancehelicopters.com/grand-canyon)).

Or why not head west out of Las Vegas to Red Rock Canyon, only half an hour from the city? Drive its "scenic loop", camp overnight and keep your eyes peeled for everyone's favourite cartoon bird, the roadrunner (£5 entry per vehicle, pitches from £11 a night; [redrockcanyonlv.org](http://redrockcanyonlv.org)).

### **Clever classics**

**Fremont street** The original Las Vegas is now pedestrianised, domed and called the Fremont Experience. It offers old casinos, bars and street performers, and there's one great way to see it all: almost 77ft up, from a zip line that runs the length of the street from the top of a giant slot machine dubbed SlotZilla (zip-line tickets from £14; [vegasexperience.com](http://vegasexperience.com)).

**Cirque du Soleil** Vegas is home to the gravity-defying circus arts troupe Cirque du Soleil, which has no less than eight separate shows on offer. The ode to Scouse pop, The Beatles Love, at the Mirage, has been revamped this year for its 10th anniversary, with new acts, costumes and choreography. O, at the Bellagio, is a spectacular show that partly takes place in water; and Zarkana, at the Aria, is a journey through an abandoned theatre as a circus returns to life (tickets from £48; [cirquedusoleil.com/las-vegas](http://cirquedusoleil.com/las-vegas)).

### **Restaurants**

**Mr Chow** The seventh opening from this esteemed global chain serves a fantastic (and apt) Gamblers Duck — a quarter of the bird, marinated for 12 hours and served with pancakes and spring onion. The fiery beef is exceptional, too.

*Mains from £15; [mrchow.com](http://mrchow.com)*

**Carbone** The successful NYC chefs Mario Carbone, Rich Torrisi and Jeff Zalaznick have brought their Italian-American experience to the Aria hotel. This is waist-expandingly good gastronomy; the spicy rigatoni vodka is a standout.

*Mains from £15; [aria.com/en/restaurants/carbone.html](http://aria.com/en/restaurants/carbone.html)*

**The Goodwich kiosk** The Goodwich has done so well with its award-winning sandwiches that it is moving to larger premises. The parking-lot kiosk is now an incubator for fresh food talents; the current crop serve slow-cooked meat sarnies with American-French influences. Dynamite.

*Mains from £7; [thegoodwich.com](http://thegoodwich.com)*

**Rose.rabbit.lie** This restaurant meets music club is tucked away in the Cosmopolitan. The focus is big, modern flavours on small plates (don't miss the duck confit pasta). Ask for a table opposite the house band in the main room for VIP views of the live music.

*Mains from £9; [cosmopolitanlasvegas.com/restaurants/rose-rabbit-lie](http://cosmopolitanlasvegas.com/restaurants/rose-rabbit-lie)*

**Hotels The Cosmopolitan** Conspicuous for its two skyline-piercing towers, this hotel courts the creative crowd and is popular with celebs and sports stars. Rooms are modern without being minimal; some have views of the Bellagio fountains next door.

*Doubles from £143; [cosmopolitanlasvegas.com](http://cosmopolitanlasvegas.com)*

**Delano** The original Delano is in Miami, next to the water. This one is in the desert, opposite the Mandalay Bay. It's nowhere near as laid-back as its art deco sister, but has a far calmer vibe than most Vegas hotels — there's no casino, which helps. The rooms are Miami cool, with marble bathroom suites, and the eucalyptus steam room in the spa is a great place to recover from any excess. *Doubles from £118; [delanolasvegas.com](http://delanolasvegas.com)*

**Aria** A giant curved structure in the centre of the Strip, the Aria is duelling with the nearby Cosmopolitan for "hotel of the moment". Rooms feel less contemporary than the glassy exterior suggests, but are well equipped, with a control-all tablet for creature comforts. It gains huge bragging rights this May, when its superclub, Jewel, opens.

*Doubles from £112; [aria.com](http://aria.com)*

**Golden Gate** When this place at the end of Fremont Street opened in 1906, a year after Vegas was born, room and board cost 70p a day. It's still going strong. The rooms are comfy and surprisingly up to date, with wi-fi, 32in flatscreens and club chairs. Everywhere else, though, it's vintage casino Victoriana. *Doubles from £20; [goldengatecasino.com](http://goldengatecasino.com)*

### **A local's view**

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### *the downtown area of the city*

Downtown is vintage and cultural Vegas at its best. The 18b arts district has a vibrant street-art scene and galleries ([18b.org](http://18b.org)), and I'll sometimes pop to Fremont Street for an exhibition — the nearby Mob Museum is good right now, with Breaking Bad and El Chapo exhibits ([themobmuseum.org](http://themobmuseum.org)). I often catch a Broadway show, such as The Book of Mormon, at the art deco-inspired Smith Center (from £26; [thesmithcenter.com](http://thesmithcenter.com)).

For old-school Vegas eats, there's no place like Piero's Italian Cuisine, in the Convention Center District (mains from £19; [pieroscuisine.com](http://pieroscuisine.com)), and the Triple George Grill does the best steak (mains from £12; [triplegeorgegrill.com](http://triplegeorgegrill.com)). I usually hit the Downtown Cocktail Room after dinner for expert mixology in the glass and on the decks (cocktails from £7; [downtowncocktailroom.com](http://downtowncocktailroom.com)). When I want to escape the city, it's Death Valley National Park. Just two hours away, it beats the Grand Canyon ([nps.gov/deva](http://nps.gov/deva)).

**The discovery: Akhob** The Louis Vuitton store in Las Vegas (the largest in North America) hides a secret light installation called Akhob, by James Turrell, a leading American artist associated with the Light and Space movement. You have to email about a fortnight in advance, due to demand; once confirmed, staff will guide you into the series of light-bathed rooms, where you'll experience a rare treat in Vegas: sensory deprivation ([akhob@us.vuitton.com](mailto:akhob@us.vuitton.com); [theshopsatcrystals.com](http://theshopsatcrystals.com)).

**The trend: outside** For years, Vegas has embraced the vampire life, shunning its magnificent desert location for 24-hour indoor gaming. That's slowly changing. New promenades have opened for al fresco drinking, dining and shopping. The most recent is the LINQ ([caesars.com/linq](http://caesars.com/linq)). It has a 4½-acre outdoor shopping area with boutique stores, gastro eateries (Gordon Ramsay opens his fish-and-chip shop here soon) and the 550ft High Roller observation wheel. And new this year is the Park — the first on the Strip. Connecting the New York-New York and the Monte Carlo, it's an outdoor oasis with a water wall and giant tulip-like structures that perform light shows at night. There will be gigs here, as well as bars and dining. A real breath of fresh air.