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VIVA LAS VEGAS

“Nevada is a tale of two cities. Three of every four Nevadans live in or just outside Las Vegas or Reno”.

- Neil Morgan

(11/18/98)

Viva Las Vegas. Yes friends, its time, once again, for a Vegas update, a look at just what the heck is going on in my favorite city (to write about).

So take out your gold spandex and put on the four pound pinkie ring, we're gonna sit in the El Dorado and cruise down Las Vegas Boulevard to see where those ever-twinkling lights will take us.

Let's begin with a look at the entertainment scene in Vegas. Drew Carey is in the main room at Caesar's, O.K., not Sinatra, but Drew's a funny guy, isn't he?

The Desert Inn has been taping Bill Maher's hot show "Politically Incorrect". Dennis Miller just left. Meanwhile Johnny Mathis is at the Hilton. I still get excited saying the name. Chances are you remember Johnny singing Chances Are. I'm told that he still wears pressed white slacks and that he hasn't aged a bit.

The MGM Grand has an interesting series of bookings. Carrot Top will be headlining over Thanksgiving. Do you know anyone who actually thinks that Carrot Top is funny? Last week, Gladys Knight performed at MGM, without her Pips. I wonder just how difficult it was for Gladys.

The MGM Grand is huge, of course, and it has several show venues. In December, guests will get to see "Riverdance ". This will be followed by a New Years performance by Neil Diamond. I admire the fact that Neil Diamond can still stay up past midnight.

They don't book talent at the Mirage Hotel – they just have Siegfried and Roy. The last time I saw their show, they made certain counties in Alabama disappear to a thunderous ovation.

Vegas insiders, and I'm surely not one of them, have long speculated about what the new, fabulously expensive to build, Bellagio was going to throw at the boys and their white tigers. Despite the fact that Steve Wynn and associates, owns both properties, there has to be a little show competition between the Mirage and its new neighbor. Well the answer is "O", a sexy, electric, version of Cirque du Soleil, the revue that makes you want to seek chiropractic assistance simply by watching the impossible moves on stage.

I am afraid that I am not familiar with any of the acts such as Better Than Ezra, Rob Zombie, or Chris LaDoux that will be headlining at the new, Hard Rock Café. I only know that reading the roster of performers at this particular hotel makes me feel rather old. So let's move on quickly.

Of course the really big news in Vegas is what they are calling "The Era of Elegance". Although I have always thought it rather untoward to throw around

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one's net cost or net worth, Casinos in Vegas have no such reservations. Thus we hear that the Bellagio cost \$1.6 billion, a figure slightly higher than the gross national product of nearly every country south of Mexico and south of Portugal.

The next 12 months are going to really big in Vegas, as the new high-end casinos come on line. The city has, off the record, given up on its plans to attract the Disney crowd. The Mirage has actually posted signs banning the use of strollers in the resort. In addition to the Bellagio, which sits perched on an 8-acre man-made lake just a few feet back from the roadway, several other top-drawer casinos/hotels will open.

One of the largest projects is the 3,700 room Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. It sits just across from the Luxor hotel, the place that makes a trip to Egypt entirely redundant, or so the PR releases seem to imply. Mandalay cost just under a billion and is so large that it will, in fact, house another hotel within its walls. The Four Seasons Hotel will occupy the 35th-39th floor. With 424 rooms, the puny Four Seasons will be an ocean of civility in a town that desperately needs it. Guests will have their own entrance on Las Vegas Boulevard with private elevators and registration desk.

The Mandalay has tried to hire some of the best known chefs in America to compete with the seven James Beard award winners who will be operating restaurants at the Bellagio. Wolfgang Puck will have a place and Charlie Palmer will set up a branch of his famed New York dining spot, Aureole. There will also be a China Grill, the hot restaurant in Miami, as well as Red Square, a Russian restaurant that features a frozen ice bar with more than 100 kinds of vodka.

Of course, right now Bellagio is the hottest game in town. High-rolling former guests of the Mirage, which owns the new resort, have been invited out for stay at reduced rates, but for the ordinary visitor, getting a room there anytime soon may prove difficult. The Las Vegas Review Journal reported that 80,000 people visited Bellagio during its first 18 hours of operation. What they saw was a recreation, everything in Las Vegas is a recreation of something somewhere else, no one seems able to describe anything actually created within the city limits, of a northern Italian lakeside town, something like Lake Como or – Bellagio. In case the aura of Europe is not enough to impress guests, the resort has been developed as an art center with just over \$300 million in “classic” art. This means that the Picasso restaurant has real Picassos.

One of the things that is never reported about a huge hotel opening like this is the need to hire a few people. The Bellagio had 9,500 jobs to fill, a problem they solved by receiving 75,000 applications. I don't know where all of the employees come from but about a hundred or so graduated from the boot camp for first-time felony offenders at the Indian Springs Prison.

Now that the area around Lake Como has been created, we can all look forward to the new Venetian Resort and the Paris-Las Vegas Hotel-casino in the fall. So I don't see any reason for travelers to consider visiting Venice or Paris next summer. After all, the new resort will have a replica of the Eiffel Tower.

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Of course, the Vegas replica of New York opened last year. In fact, the Coney Island Emporium which features a real roller-coaster that wraps its way around the resort, has just won a major architectural award. The hotel's room towers are designed to reflect New York's soaring skyline. My suggestion to have actual New York cabbies driving guests from registration to their rooms was, unfortunately, rejected as being "impractical". But I didn't think anything was impractical in Las Vegas.

The media generally missed it, but a loaded Japan Airlines 747-300 touched down at Vegas' McCarran International Airport on October 2nd. As the guests on this inaugural non-stop flight from Tokyo stepped off the plane, they were greeted by a "welcome arch" of water, a bevy of genuine showgirls, several Elvis "replicas", and a host of eager hotel executives. It was not reported exactly how many of the tired Japanese tourists got frightened and climbed back on the plane.

To those of you who have stuck with me for the past several years, please take note that I have just completed an entire article dedicated to Las Vegas without mentioning Wayne Newton's name even once.

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