



MGM CityCentre

MGM CityCentre construction site



Mandarin Oriental



The Harmon Hotel

Viva LAS VEGAS

Can the bright lights of Sin City keep burning through the credit crunch? You can bet on it, says **Tom Otley**

Las Vegas is going through hard times, although judging by the cranes on the horizon, you wouldn't guess it

Las Vegas is a young city, but it has already been through several image changes, from mafia playground to city of sin, and then, most recently, family-friendly resort. In the past few years, it has partly reverted to type as an adult-entertainment centre, but with

the current economic downturn it would seem that the biggest gamblers are the developers. Las Vegas is going through hard times, although judging by the number of cranes on the horizon, you wouldn't guess it. Look out onto

the fourth-floor pool deck of the Venetian and the view of weekend visitors swimming, sunbathing, drinking and lounging is against the skeleton of yet another new building rising into the desert sky. The Venetian, and its hotel-within-a-hotel the Venezia at the Venetian, were joined in January by The Palazzo, with more than 3,000 suites, and during the course of this year, around the corner, the Encore Wynn Las Vegas will open along with the Fontainebleau Miami Beach Las Vegas and the Echelon Las Vegas. Perhaps most impressive of all is CityCentre, a massive development on the four-mile long Las Vegas Boulevard South (aka the Strip), which promises a 61-storey, 4,000-room hotel/casino; two 400-room, non-gaming hotels; a 46,000-sqm

retail and entertainment district called The Crystals; and about 2,650 luxury-condominium and hotel-condominium units. There's obviously no lack of confidence in the future. In part, this is because of the reputation Las Vegas has gained in recent decades. It has been the biggest boomtown in the US over the last 30 years, and against some pretty stiff competition – consider Phoenix in Arizona, where the population of Greater Phoenix has doubled since 1990. Las Vegas has a population of around two million, twice what it was ten years ago, and in addition welcomes around 40 million visitors each year. Fourteen of the world's 20 biggest hotels are in Vegas, the largest being the MGM Grand with 5,690 rooms.

LAS VEGAS CONVENTION AND VISITORS AUTHORITY
For information on accommodation, restaurants and entertainment go to visitlasvegas.co.uk.
To find out more about CityCentre visit the Sales Pavilion in Las Vegas, located at 3780 Las Vegas Boulevard South. Open daily from 10am to 7pm. Visit citycenter.com.

And it's the owner of that hotel, Kirk Kerkorian, who is behind CityCentre, which dwarfs those that have gone before it. It hasn't been without problems, however. A series of profit warnings eventually resulted in Dubai World taking a 50 per cent share in the ownership of it for

US\$2.7 billion, and investing another US\$2.4 billion in MGM Mirage stock. That Dubai World has a hand in the project seems appropriate when you visit the sales office next to the CityCentre construction site. Here you will find full mock-ups of the rooms for each of the separate developments. You can walk into a Mandarin Oriental residence and out of the window see a painted backdrop of the desert. For a moment you could be in the Middle East, where such sleights of hand have become commonplace. And the analogy with the Gulf states extends to the use of celebrity architects to market the development – eight companies are involved in the design, including Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects, Daniel Libeskind, Foster and Partners, and Helmut Jahn.

Due to open late next year, on 67 acres of land between the Bellagio and Monte Carlo resorts, this is a colossal US\$8-billion development with a mix of some 2,600 luxury condominiums and hotel rooms in four buildings including the Mandarin Oriental, The Harmon and the residential Veer Towers. Of course, the nature of property development is that new projects are started in boom times and open in lean times, but for the developers demand still seems to be strong. The least expensive development at CityCentre is Vdara, an all-condominium hotel with prices starting at US\$500,000 and half the 1,500 units have been sold already – many, perhaps, to investors who believe they can rent them out to offset the cost.



BLUE MAN GROUP

Nightly shows start at 7.30pm and/or 10.30pm with occasional Saturday matinees at 4.30pm. They run for approximately one hour and 45 minutes with no intermission. The Blue Man Theatre is located on the casino level of The Venetian Las Vegas. Tickets cost around US\$65, US\$85 or US\$120 (excluding tax and service fees). Visit blueman.com or call +1 702 697 1655. Group tickets are also available.

New York, Las Vegas



At the other end of the scale, there are the 227 additional Mandarin Oriental residences, which start at just under US\$2 million dollars each and go up to US\$12 million. Even here, there is no shortage of demand – over 90 per cent of these are sold.

There are challenges, however, not least because Vegas is once again altering the profile of the visitors it wants to attract. Gone is the emphasis of the Nineties on families. The city has realised that, while families may remove some of the stain of sin from the city, mums and dads spend less at the gaming tables when they travel with their kids, and since the laws about having children in casinos are strict, the city has refocused its attention on adults – after all, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas...”

There is also a “flight to quality” common to many tourist destinations. High-earning, high-spending travellers are targeted at the expense of a greater volume of low-spending visitors, hence the

raft of all-suite hotels, and three-figure ticket prices for shows. It’s a good move, particularly since US consumers on middle or low incomes have less money than ever because of the sub-prime crisis.

Unfortunately, because these lower-earners are travelling less, the airlines are cutting back on both routes and capacity. And if the plane doesn’t fly, that means those

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high-spending tourists with holiday condos in Vegas will also find it more difficult to visit.

For all this, it’s the conventions which power Las Vegas, and until you’ve been to a convention here, you haven’t been to a convention at all. It’s not that they do it better than anywhere else – even the five-star hotels seem to think it normal that, once you have checked in, you

HOOVER DAM

Top of the list of day trips from Las Vegas is the Hoover Dam, and despite the fact that it has been superseded in size by more recent ones, and public opinion has swung against these great constructions because of environmental concerns, it’s a definite must-see.

The dam, built during the Great Depression, is more than just an impressive structure. It was planned not only as a means of storing water, flood control and irrigation, but also as an ambitious work-creation scheme providing jobs during times of widespread unemployment. After taking a tour of the site, it is almost

impossible not to regard the men who worked on it, and the women who supported them, as American heroes.

The building site was 30 miles from the dusty “nothing town” of Las Vegas and, for the first few years before Boulder City was built, workers lived in Ragtown in terrible conditions. To make matters worse, the spring and summer of 1931 were the hottest on record, with temperatures reaching 143 degrees.

In the early stages, work involved tunnelling to allow the water to be diverted around the dam site, and many people died of carbon monoxide poisoning. But it was the high scalers who had the most dramatic jobs, swinging on bosun’s chairs along the canyon walls, finding areas where the rock face was unstable, planting dynamite, lighting it and then kicking themselves out of the way.

According to the guides, the subject of death comes up regularly, perhaps because the overall cost of the project – US\$60 million – no longer seems so impressive with inflation, but a

death is a death. However, rates were kept low by only counting fatalities which occurred on-site, rather than later in hospital.

Many stories are told on the tour, and there is plenty of black-and-white footage of the construction process, but it takes imagination and the sight of the dam itself to bring home the achievement, not least that it was completed two years ahead of schedule.

For a closer look, choose a tour which includes a raft trip on the water below. From there you not only get a real sense of the size of the dam but also see the marks of the original construction. At the end, having seen the Turbine Room and walked along some of the tunnels, you come up to take pictures, have a drink at the High Scaler Café, or check out the new road bridge, now two years behind schedule after the cranes fell into the gorge.

PINK JEEP TOURS

Pink Jeep Tours runs a “Hoover Dam Top to Bottom” tour, picking you up at your hotel, taking you to the dam, and then subcontracting with Black Canyon River Adventures (blackcanyonadventures.com) for the raft tour – the combined option costs US\$149 per person. There’s a promotional video of the trip which can be viewed on the website. Visit pinkjeep.com.



HOOVER DAM FAST FACTS

1. The Hoover Dam is 221 metres high. The towers and ornaments on the parapet rise an extra 12 metres.
2. There are 2.5 million cubic metres of concrete in the dam.
3. A total of 21,000 men worked on the construction of the dam. The average wage was 62.5 cents per hour.
4. The dam can store up to 9.3 trillion gallons of the Colorado River in its reservoir, Lake Mead.
5. The Hoover Dam weighs more than 6.5 million tons.

BIGGER AND BETTER...

The 335-metre Rogun Dam, started in 1976 but then put on hold in 1991, is set to be the tallest dam in the world. (It was recently announced that construction would resume this year.) The current holder of the title – the 300-metre high Nurek Dam – is on the same river, the Vaksh in Tajikistan, but further upstream.

Meanwhile, with an estimated cost of US\$25 billion, the Three Gorges Dam in China is likely to become the most expensive in history.



CATHOUSE

There are a lot of fine-dining options in Vegas, but for good food combined with the sort of experience this city excels in, Cathouse at the Luxor takes some beating.

So what's so different about it? Well, a 19th-century brothel-themed restaurant is a pretty novel idea, although since it is in the middle of the giant Luxor casino resort – a black pyramid in the Nevada desert – being subtle would rather miss the point.

While attention to detail is missing in many of the rival theme restaurants, something original has been attempted with Cathouse. You enter from the casino floor and head up a wooden staircase past walls decorated with black-and-white photos of prostitutes. Once inside, there is a bar and lounge area, a restaurant and, after 10pm, a nightclub.

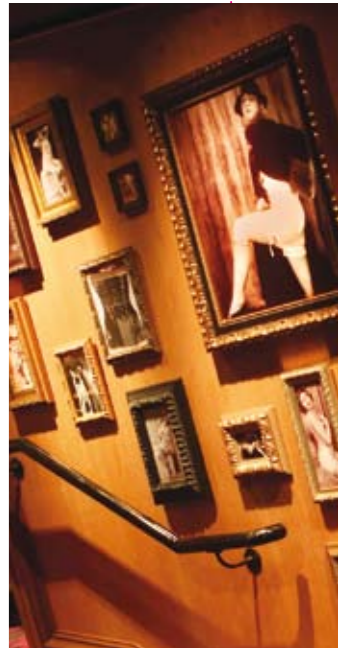
The bar and restaurant are furnished like a Parisian bordello, with chandeliers,

blue velvet booths and PVC walls. It sounds awful, but looks seductive, an impression reinforced once you've met one of the waitresses. All are dressed in signature Cathouse lingerie, which is also modelled three times a week by the restaurant's "coquettes".

In one corner there's a glass booth which lights up every so often and allows diners to spy on one of the "working" girls preparing herself for the night, while the steady thump of music never lets you forget that the meal is just the beginning of your evening's entertainment.

None of this would be worth the price tag were it not for the quality of the food from chef Kerry Simon, who is also responsible for Simon LA in the Sofitel Los Angeles (see *Business Traveller* June 2008).

Listed on menus decorated with miniature garters, it starts with "Le Snax", while main courses include brick-roasted organic chicken, faro and beet greens (US\$24) and braised beef short ribs with kabocha squash and polenta (US\$28). Visit cathouselv.com for more details.



should drag your luggage across the casino floor before reaching the bank of lifts which take you to your room – it's just that they do it on a scale you find hard to believe.

The conference facilities are usually in a massive basement area, although the lack of natural light is less noticeable here than in the resorts themselves (many ground and first-floor casinos don't have windows so that gamblers won't know when the sun has come up), and because of their size, there are often several conventions going on at once. Or so it used to be. These conventions, however, are expected to decline by 15 per cent this year and that will hurt the hotels.

Even the casinos are suffering, despite the fact that traditionally gambling has been recession-proof. The Tropicana filed for bankruptcy

this year and shares in Las Vegas Sands Corporation – the owner of the Venetian and Palazzo resorts – have fallen by 40 per cent. Yet for all that, arriving from anywhere else in the world, and particularly from Europe, it's hard not to be bowled over by the Las Vegas experience.

You might not want to live here full-time, or even part-time (although on my Virgin Atlantic

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return flight, several couples in premium economy were clearly winter residents), but there's no doubt the city has its own sense of style. It has taken that West Coast confidence and turned it into something so brash and over-the-top that all you can do is shake your

head and enjoy what's on offer, be it the restaurants, special adaptations of famous Broadway shows, shopping, nightclubs or, of course, the casinos. So will Las Vegas survive? You'd be foolish to bet against it. ■

