

6. BEST SLEEPS & EATS

Las Vegas has more hotel rooms than just about any city in the world. It also boasts **nine of the world's ten largest hotels**. Vegas hotels now boast some the highest occupancy rates around, well over 90% and far closer to 100% on weekends. Many Strip hotels are quite nice, mostly in the three-to-five star range.

Las Vegas has become **one of the best cities in the world for dining**, often mentioned in the same breath as New York and Paris. That's not surprising considering how many of their best chefs have been lured here. And plenty of good eats can be found without breaking the bank. Buffets in particular are great deals, featuring fresh food, innovative preparations and custom cooking.



NORTH STRIP

Hotel Price Key

- \$ starting below \$50
- \$\$ starting at \$50-\$100
- \$\$\$ starting at \$100-\$150
- \$\$\$\$ starting above \$150

BEST SLEEPS

The Palazzo \$\$\$\$

The Strip's newest casino, a part of the gargantuan 7,128-room complex that also includes the Venetian and the Sands Expo Center, opened as this book was going to press. Expectations were high for the resort, which like its sister property, is an all-suite destination with a dazzling array of dining, retail and entertainment – think **Charlie Trotter, Wolfgang Puck, Mario Batali, Jay-Z**, Barney's of New York and the Tony Award-winning musical, *Jersey Boys*. The hotel has **warm, attractive spaces, much sleeker and classier** than the gaudy nouveau-riche Venetian, but there's a rub. The casino is tiny for a hotel of this size – and its sister property's overcrowded public areas make this a big question mark at this point. The rooms, actually more like mini-suites, are spectacular enough to roll the dice on the Palazzo. *Info:* www.palazzolasvegas.com. Tel. 702/414-1000 or 877/263-3001. 3325 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Sands. 3,068 rooms.

The Venetian \$\$\$\$

A \$100 million room renovation underway should bring the spacious Venetian guestrooms up to snuff with a warmer, more modern style than what had been seen here in further years. With over 4,000 rooms, this resort sometimes seems too big for its own good, and the Palazzo's impact is still TBD. However, there's no denying the **quality of the dining and entertainment** options here – not with names like Wayne



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Brady, Mario Batali, the Phantom of the Opera, Emeril Lagasse, David Burke and the Blue Man Group. AAA awarded the Venetian Five Diamonds. *Info:* www.venetian.com. Tel. 702/414-1000 or 877/883-6423. 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. between Sands and Flamingo. 4,027 rooms.

Wynn Las Vegas \$\$\$\$

Steve Wynn's Five Diamond, Five Star namesake is an obvious evolution from Bellagio and a triumph on almost every count.



The spacious rooms are **technologically advanced and sleekly stunning**, simultaneously modern and soft. Bedding is luxurious, and bathrooms are opulent. The **Tower Suites** are even better. The casino floor is navigable, intimate and

bathed in natural light. **Botanical gardens and Picasso paintings** grace the lobby. Eighteen restaurants include the Five Diamond winning Alex. Nightspots include Tryst and Blush, a so-called "Boutique Nightclub." The 18-hole golf course on the site of the old Desert Inn course is reserved for hotel guests, as is the spa. The Wynn also boasts exclusive shopping, a Ferrari Maserati dealership and two showrooms. Coming in 2009 is an all-suite sister property called Encore. *Info:* www.wynnlasvegas.com. Tel. 702/770-7100 or 888/320-9966. 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Spring Mountain. 2,716 rooms.

Mirage \$\$\$

The first modern mega-resort remains one of Steve Wynn's finest creations. An ambitious refurbishment has recently added several new restaurants and one of **the city's hottest nightclubs**, JET. Standard rooms are not huge, but quite luxurious. **Mirage's pool** is one of the nicest in town, with the same waterfalls and lush tropical vegetation as out front, plus a topless pool, appropriately called Bare. **Attention to detail** is a hallmark of this beautiful luxury hotel boasting eleven restaurants, a spa, a salon by TV

stylist Kim Vo, two show-rooms and an elegant casino. There's also a botanical garden and a beautiful aquarium in the atrium. *Info:* www.mirage.com. Tel. 702/791-7111 or 800/374-9000. 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S., between Flamingo and Spring Mountain. 3,044 rooms.



ti - Treasure Island \$\$\$

Mirage's sister hotel was recently stripped of its "pirate" theme, in favor of something more universal: sex. Evidence includes the Tangerine burlesque nightclub, the *Sirens of TI* show and the unique, oversized **50-person TI Party Tub Jacuzzi**. The rooms have been significantly upgraded both in décor and amenities. Treasure Island feels intimate and accessible. Soft earth tones, woodworking, traditional furnishings and fine European fabrics are now standard. Its sushi bar, Social House, is a popular celebrity hangout. *Mystère*, **Vegas' first permanent Cirque show**, is performed here. *Info:* www.treasureisland.com. Tel. 702/894-7111 or 800/288-7206. 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Spring Mountain. 2,885 rooms.

Stratosphere \$

The Strat has overcome a troubled opening and a terrible location, carving a niche as one of the **strongest budget-priced options** on the Strip. Its casino is boisterous, with strong video poker and low limit tables. There's quite a few restaurants. Accommodations range from roomy and comfortable to somewhat small (the original Regency tower has the smallest) but they're all serviceable. For what we've paid, we have no complaints. The \$5 "resort fee" that they charge actually includes some value-added amenities including free afternoon admission to its 109-story tower, free tickets to the American Superstars show and more. You'll probably want to rent a car, there's nothing worth walking to, unless you're into head shops and Asian massage. *Info:* www.stratospherehotel.com Tel. 702/380-

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7777 or 800/998-6937. 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. between Baltimore and Main Streets. 2,442 rooms.

BEST EATS

Alex \$\$\$\$

AAA awarded Alessandro Strata's French-Mediterranean-Continental restaurant **Five Diamonds** right off the bat. Its view of the Wynn's pools is spectacular, and the décor is rich with crystal and mahogany. Dining options include a \$120 four-course dinner or a \$150 tasting menu. Chef's table seatings are also available.. *Info:* Wynn Las Vegas - 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/770-3300. Closed Mondays. Reservations suggested. Jackets required.

CarneVino \$\$\$\$

Mario Batali's second Vegas restaurant, barely open for business at this writing, has garnered early attention for its appealing combination of traditional steakhouse fare, aged in-house and dry-rubbed with sea salt, black pepper and rosemary. The menu also includes Italian fare made from artisanal ingredients. *Info:* Palazzo Las Vegas - 3325 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Sands. Tel. 702/789-4141. Lunch and dinner.

Daniel Boulud Brassiere \$\$\$

Boulud, a James Beard winner, produces magnificent new French cuisine at another Wynn restaurant, taking full advantage of the resort's water features. It's all quite **innovative and robust**, but though there are nods to tradition, it's **not a butter-and-cream dominated menu**. *Info:* Wynn Las Vegas - 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/770-9966. Lunch and dinner. Reservations suggested.

Delmonico Steakhouse \$\$\$

Have some "Bam!" with your beef at Emeril's successful New Orleans/Creole steakhouse at the Venetian. Succulent hand-cut beef is prepared perfectly and served with flair. The **French onion soup here is a standout**, with an English muffin crouton. The wine list earns similar raves. *Info:* Venetian - 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

Restaurant Price Key

- \$ under \$25 per person
- \$\$ \$25-50 per person
- \$\$\$ \$50-100 per person
- \$\$\$\$ over \$100 per person

Tel. 702/414-3737. Lunch and dinner. Reservations optional. Dress code at dinner.

SW Steakhouse \$\$\$

The signature steakhouse at the Wynn features the masterwork of Eric Klein, one of *Food & Wine* magazine's 10 Best Chefs of 2004. It's one of the most intimate and romantic steakhouses in town, featuring **more diversity** than most. The view of the Lake of Dreams only add to the ambiance. *Info:* Wynn Las Vegas - 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/770-3320. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

STACK \$\$

At first glance, STACK seems a post-modern steakhouse. But it's much more than that. Imagine **upscale comfort food** in a contemporary, classy atmosphere. Pigs in blankets. Cheesy tater tots. Crab cakes. Dining to soothe your inner child. Then there's beef. Choose from cowboy steaks, Brooklyn filets, center-cut rib eyes, and NYC sirloin. Drinks and desserts also

seem to be stuck in arrested development, with s'mores available in traditional form and as an alcoholic beverage.

Top of the World \$\$

The menu at the Stratosphere's top restaurant is somewhat pedestrian albeit well-executed, offering new American and new

Best Buffets, North Strip

- **The Buffet** (\$\$) - Wynn.

Excellent food in a gorgeous, open and airy atmosphere. You'll be astounded at the amount of seafood on the breakfast buffet alone. Desserts are kind of disappointing. Bellagio just beats it out as the best in town.

- **The Buffet at TI** (\$\$) -

Treasure Island. More comfort food and a warmer atmosphere than you'll find next door, although this buffet in the same niche, right down to the cutesy name.

- **Cravings** (\$\$) - Mirage.

Its recent renovation ushered in the era of "action station cooking," and while preparation is fresh, the selection isn't on a par with others. Sushi and other seafood items are, however, in steady supply.

- **Courtyard Buffet** (\$) -

Stratosphere. Great appetizers and sides, not so hot on the main dishes. Acceptable for the price.

Best 24-Hour Cafes

On the Strip, these are the best cafes:

- **Grand Lux Café** – Venetian & Palazzo
- **Planet Dailies** – Planet Hollywood
- **Monte Carlo Café** – Monte Carlo
- **Augustus Café** – Caesars Palace
- **Raffles** – Mandalay Bay

French twists on the usual array of steaks, fresh fish and seafood. The reason to come here, however, is **the view**. At 108 stories above the Strip, the restaurant rotates once per hour, giving diners impressive vistas as day turns into night. *Info:* Stratosphere – 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/380-7711. Lunch and dinner served daily. Business casual.

Café Ba Ba Reeba! \$

We love a good tapas. It's got all the variety of a buffet, without the cattle-herd mentality and the indignities of underutilized sneezeguards. The small plates are perfect for sharing, enabling fun social meals taking the awkward sting out of a first date. They offer **al fresco seating** on one patio with Strip views and another with live entertainment. The potent sangria and heavenly paellas complement the small plates. Even if you've had tapas before, some of the menu items here still surprise. *Info:* Fashion Show Mall – 3200 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/258-1211. Lunch and dinner daily. Reservations optional.

Grand Lux Café \$

From the people behind the Cheesecake Factory is this recognizably derivative concept. A bit more upscale, the Grand Lux is open 24 hours and features many of the features that made Cheesecake so successful, like the **huge portions** and the phone book of a menu. The décor is more elaborate and fancy, but the place is still decidedly casual. The ambitious globe-trotting menu includes a bacon cheeseburger topped with short ribs, Jamaican pork tenderloin with black pepper sauce and mango salsa and Austrian style wiener schnitzel. Think ahead and order **baked-to-order desserts** like molten chocolate cake and New Orleans beignets. *Info:* Two locations: Venetian – 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. and Palazzo – 3325 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/414-3888. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served daily.

Peppermill \$

This Las Vegas legend, featured in the movie *Casino*, remains one of the most popular and timeless eateries in town, having barely changed in 25 years. It may seem like a diner, but it's very well done, with massive portions, familiar, friendly service and **old-school Vegas atmosphere**. The menu's actually broader than most diners, and most diners don't offer a place like the Fireside Lounge, **custom designed for snuggling and smooching**. *Info:* 2985 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/735-7635. Open 24 hours. Reservations optional.

CENTER STRIP

BEST SLEEPS**Bellagio \$\$\$\$**

As **the only AAA Five Diamond casino hotel on the Strip**, Bellagio offers every imaginable luxury and extravagance. It's one of the top hotels in the world, an **aesthetic wonder** inside and out. Its rooms are among the city's most posh, especially the new Spa Tower. Standard rooms are a generous 510 sq. ft. with marble floors, separate tub and stall shower, fine fabrics and wall coverings, and a **complete entertainment system**. Comfortable chairs and desks give plenty of working room. The pool is lovely. **Restaurants are out of this world**, including two Five Diamond joints, but even the casual bites cost a ton. The pricey buffet offers extremely exotic food. **Bars and clubs are superb** here, with live entertainment at Fontana, Caramel and the Petrossian. The Bellagio's nightclub is the new, ostentatiously upscale Bank. *Info:* www.bellagio.com. Tel. 702/693-7111 or 888/987-6667. 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Flamingo. 3,933 rooms.

**Caesars Palace \$\$\$\$**

Caesars Palace (see photo on page 128) celebrated its 40th anni-



versary in 2006, and remains one of the most **well-maintained and cutting-edge** hotels on the Strip thanks to constant improvements. Choose a lavish suite in the 26-story **Augustus Tower** or the freshly renovated Forum Tower. The over-the-top opu-

lence of the public areas is echoed in the amenities of these tasteful rooms, with amenities like whirlpool tubs and flat-screen TVs. The Palace Tower is also top-notch and fairly new. Some more unique offerings include its array of restaurants, focusing on **renowned chefs with limited geographic reach**, like Bobby Flay and Guy Savoy; and the new Qua Baths & Spa, which harkens back to the public baths of ancient Rome. For nightlife, the Shadow Bar, Cleopatra's Barge and PURE make a formidable trio. *Info:* www.caesarspalace.com. Tel. 702/731-7110 or 877/427-7243. 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Flamingo. 3,410 rooms.

Paris Las Vegas \$\$\$

The elegance and style of this cheerful hotel are among the city's best. Its casino is particularly welcoming, as are well-appointed rooms with pleasant touches like custom furnishings, crown moldings, French fabrics and ornate armoires. You can **swim in the shadows of the Eiffel Tower** or relax in the Mandara Spa. Napoleon's and Le Cabaret are **excellent bars with live entertainment**, although Risqué is B-list. Restaurants abound here, featuring varied French regional cuisine at Le Village Buffet and pan-Asian fare at Ah Sin. Of course, there's also the Eiffel Tower Experience, with a restaurant 100 feet up. *Info:* www.parislasvegas.com. Tel. 702/967-3836 or 877/796-2096. 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S., between Flamingo and Harmon. 2,914 rooms.

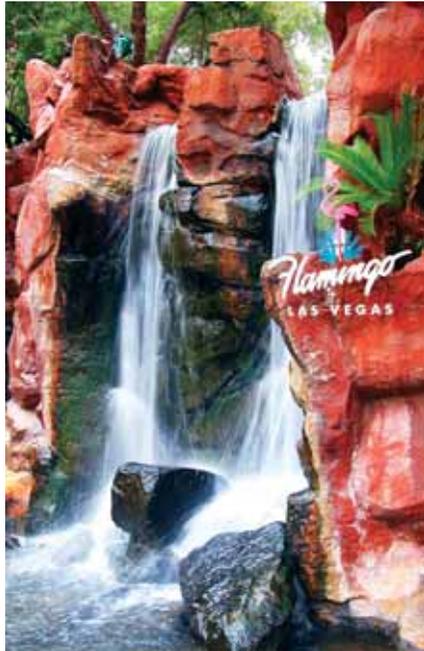
Bally's \$\$

She doesn't look like much from the outside, but Bally's is like a **time capsule of old-Vegas charm**. Though this is one of the Strip's older hotels, you'd never know it from the **frequently**

remodeled rooms. Bally's restaurants are good with affordable prices. The casino floor is tasteful, as is Donn Arden's Jubilee!, a topless show with 25 years of history. Another popular show is the **interactive afternoon Price Is Right Live show**, giving guests the opportunity to play classic games for cash and prizes. This hotel is often one of the better bargains on Center Strip. *Info:* www.ballyslasvegas.com. Tel. 702/739-4111 or 888/742-9248. 3645 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Flamingo. 2,818 rooms.

Flamingo \$\$

One of the Strip's most legendary names, Flamingo has freshened itself up for a younger demographic, adding **Toni Braxton** and psychic medium **John Edward** to the entertainment lineup – and a Vince Neil tattoo parlor at the adjacent O'Sheas. We can't deny the drawing power of Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville. The casino floor is **bathed in natural light**, a welcome rarity. Ask for a Go Room – recently upgraded and critically acclaimed for its retro-chic design and ultra-modern amenities. The centerpiece of the resort is its **beautiful 15-acre pool and wildlife preserve**. Somehow Flamingo achieves intimacy while boasting all the amenities of a first-class hotel. The rooms are decorated in an island motif, with rattan furniture and soft colors. *Info:* www.flamingolasvegas.com. Tel. 702/733-3111 or 888/308-8899. 3555 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Flamingo. 3,642 rooms.



Imperial Palace \$\$

The 1960s-vintage Imperial Palace is especially rollicking in the champagne pit and the "Dealertainers" pit, with **celebrity im-**

personators who throw blackjack in between on stage performances. On a recent visit, we saw Elvis, Neil Diamond, and an uncannily convincing Gwen Stefani and Alice Cooper. This whets your appetite for the highly recommended Legends in Concert show. The spacious rooms here are plain and do show their age, although they're certainly acceptable. The Strip-side Rockhouse is an unassuming nightspot with dive-bar excitement and ultralounge location. The Imperial Palace is a moderately priced Strip hotel with a **loyal fan base and a fun environment**, sadly, a dying breed. *Info:* www.imperialpalace.com. Tel. 702/731-3311 or 800/634-6441. 3535 Las Vegas Blvd. S., between Flamingo and Sands.

BEST EATS

Le Cirque \$\$\$\$

This AAA Five Diamond gem is decorated in festive colors and plush, overstuffed chairs for more of a **homelike, childish whimsy**. As for the food, it's **sublime** New French and Continental. Add a knowledgeable sommelier and fountain views and you have yourself a winner, provided you're ready to shell out \$100 for five courses or \$125 for seven. *Info:* Bellagio – 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/693-7223. Reservations suggested.

Picasso \$\$\$\$

Anyone can do china and silver and crystal. But **original Picasso paintings** on the wall? That's extravagant. Julian Serrano's cuisine at Bellagio's premier restaurant reflects the region that influenced the impressionist painter, with French and Spanish dishes like poached oysters, shrimp and scallops, grilled lamb on noisettes and roasted veal chop. Desserts are simply fantastic. Zagat named Picasso the best service and décor in town. Prix fixe menus range from \$70 to \$90. *Info:* Bellagio – 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/693-7223. Dinner served Wed-Mon. Reservations suggested. Dress code.

Restaurant Guy Savoy \$\$\$\$

This Michelin two-star restaurant showcases the cuisine of the Legion of Honor winning French epicurean. Spend an indulgent evening in the Jean Wilmotte designed dining room with the 16-course degustation menu or a quick indulgence of Champagne

and small plates at the Bubble Bar. Either way, don't miss his signature artichoke and black truffle soup. There's even a bar menu of small plates for those who want to experience Savoy's cuisine without the commitment of a whole evening or a belly full of Francais. *Info:* Caesars Palace – 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 877/346-4642. Dinner served Wed-Sun. Reservations suggested.

Andre's \$\$\$

The newer outpost of the award-winning downtown French, the intimate Renaissance-style dining room creates an **intimate environment** to consume one of over 12,000 bottles of wine along with your meal. **Haute cuisine** on the menu is rich as can be, with butter and cream sauces anchoring dishes of Dover sole, 2 lb. Maine lobster, Muscovy duck and rack of lamb. It's decadence as only the French can do it. *Info:* Monte Carlo – 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/730-7955. Dinner nightly. Reservations optional.

Bradley Ogden \$\$\$

The James Beard Foundation named this America's best new restaurant in 2003, and we're inclined to agree: A meal here is **absolutely heart-rending**, with artistic presentations, skillful contrasts of flavors and a creative flair executed with grace by the universally enthusiastic and talented staff. The menu changes

Best Buffets, Center Strip

- **The Buffet (\$\$)** – Bellagio.

The be-all, end-all of Vegas buffets, with truly exotic and well-prepared fare including wild boar ribs and salmon sausage.

- **Le Village Buffet (\$\$)** – Paris.

Could it be? The world's first theme buffet? The live-action cooking stations here each represent different provincial cuisines of France. Desserts are out of this world.

- **Paradise Garden Buffet (\$\$)** – Flamingo.

The atmosphere, overlooking beautiful waterfalls and lush landscaping, is unbeatable. The food service area is spacious.

- **Monte Carlo Buffet (\$\$)** – Monte Carlo.

Good value for the money, and at least it lacks that cavernous mess-hall feel you'll find at other buffets at hotels this size.

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based on seasonal availability, as **freshness of ingredients** is a key to its success. This is one of our favorite meals in all of Las Vegas, and we recommend it about as strongly as anything. *Info:* Caesars Palace – 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/731-7731. Dinner nightly, lunch during the week. Reservations suggested.

808 \$\$

Hawaiian ingredients meet French sensibilities at this innovative seafood-focused spot. The signature dish, featured prominently on posters around Caesars, is the **deconstructed Ahi roll**: tartare stacked upon avocado salad, crab ceviche and white truffle vinaigrette. Many entrées have varying Eurasian influences, making this one of the more diverse and palatable menus in town. The service can be hit or miss but when it's a hit, more often than not it's for extra bases. Tasting menus are available. *Info:* Caesars Palace – 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/731-7731. Dinner served Wed-Sun. Reservations suggested.

Mesa Grill \$\$

There's no denying the talent of brash, controversial New Yorker Bobby Flay. His piquant Southwestern cuisine has made him a superstar in Manhattan, and the Michelin-starred Caesars location is his first venture outside there. Fans of his television shows know that his emphasis is on **well-spiced grilled meats**. Coffee spice rubbed tenderloin is a signature dish, and his duck-stuffed blue corn pancake is the stuff of legend. They also offer an **innovative and ambitious brunch**. *Info:* Caesars Palace – 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/731-7731. Dinner served nightly, lunch on weekdays, brunch on Sat-Sun. Reservations suggested.

Mon Ami Gabi \$

Like Ah Sin, this is an al fresco casual dining restaurant with a **great view of the Bellagio fountains**. It actually echoes the Parisian theme of the hotel, with semi-Americanized French dishes. The steak frites are wonderful and the steaks are good for the price. The atmosphere at streetside is fantastic. In the shadows of the Eiffel Tower, you've got the fountains across the street, and you're perfectly situated to watch the crowd go by. *Info:* Paris Las Vegas – 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/944-4224. Lunch and dinner served daily. Reservations suggested.

Payard Patisserie & Bistro \$\$

Known as one of the world's finest chocolatiers, Francois Payard now sells his wares at Caesars. Try the pain perdu French toast for breakfast or the sublime, rustic croquet-monsieur for lunch. Sweet teeth will appreciate the dessert tasting menu, as well as the retail counter serving decadent pastries and chocolates. *Info:* Caesars Palace - 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/731-7731. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served daily.

SOUTH STRIP

BEST SLEEPS**Four Seasons \$\$\$\$**

Four Seasons is right in the middle of the action on the top five floors of the Mandalay Bay tower. The hallmark is **gracious, anticipatory, high-level service** attending to its guests' every whim and desire. That includes its littlest guests. Kids under 12 get a gift on arrival, infants and toddlers get in-room cribs, a basket of essentials and automatic childproofing, older kids get M&M goodies, child-sized bathrobes, kids menus and in-room entertainment options. Older guests can enjoy service **chilled towels, spritzers and fruit poolside**, twice-daily housekeeping service, nightly turndown, cold water and chilled towels for joggers, in-room coffeemaker, one-hour pressing; the list goes on for days. *Travel & Leisure* readers named this hotel #2 in the world for service. Other knock-em-dead features include Charlie Palmer Steak, named the best steakhouse in Vegas by *Review-Journal* readers just four months after opening, and a **spa rated four stars by Mobil** every year. The Four Seasons also holds the distinction of being the **first hotel ever to win AAA's Five Diamond rating in its first year** of operation. *Info:* www.fourseasons.com/lasvegas. Tel. 702/632-5195 or 800/819-5053. 3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S., at Russell. 424 rooms.





THEhotel at Mandalay Bay \$\$\$\$

While the Four Seasons is a hotel-within-a-hotel, THEhotel is more like an annex. Even though the separate, L-shaped tower looks similar to Mandalay Bay's colossus, THEhotel has its own **distinct style**. It's much more masculine and serious looking, with cherry woods and dark colors throughout. **Standard rooms are mini-suites** measuring 750 sq. ft., loaded with 42" plasma screen TVs and elegant marble baths. Mix Restaurant and Lounge are more subdued than what you'll find next door, but highly recommended. THEhotel also has its own spa, THEbathhouse and a 24-hour spot called THEcafe. Service here aims for boutique hotel ambiance but misses as often as it hits, it's hard to truly provide boutique service to over a thousand rooms. THEhotel guests can access to the main Mandalay Bay hotel, pool and casino. *Info:* www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com. 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Russell Rd. Tel. 877/632-7800. 1,120 rooms.

Mandalay Bay \$\$\$

One of our favorite Strip hotels, the 60-acre Mandalay Bay has some of the most attractive public areas in Las Vegas, with tropical South Seas décor never descending into kitsch. The hotel's centerpiece is its pool, Mandalay Beach, a **gargantuan complex with six-foot waves**, a lazy river and white sand. The rooms are generous, bright and cheery with robes and slippers, large screen TVs twin vanities and **oversized stone-floored bathrooms with irresistible soaking baths**. The restaurants here number over a dozen, and some are quite good. Charlie Palmer's showcase Aureole is a celebration on the plate, while rumjungle and Border Grill are also excellent choices. Three nightclubs, several bars and a production of Mamma Mia round out the offerings. *Info:* www.mandalaybay.com. Tel. 702/632-7777 or 877/632-7800. 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. between Tropicana and Russell. 3,268 rooms.

MGM Grand \$\$\$

MGM Grand has **steadily improved** with extensive room remodeling and exciting new restaurant offerings, earning the AAA Four Diamond for the first time this year. The



world's largest hotel divides its rooms into four 30-story emerald green towers. The oldest, the West Wing, was recently remodeled with a **sexy contemporary flair**. The rooms are smaller than elsewhere, but the vibrant décor makes up for it, as do **tech amenities** like Bose Wave radios, bathroom TVs, and flat-screens and DVDs in the bedroom. Bathrooms have retained the art deco look, with black and white marble. The downside of size is that the hotel's difficult to navigate. At the restaurants, celebrity is the keyword. Emeril and Wolfgang have namesake joints here. Michael Mina's Nobhill offers California-influenced continental. And French "chef of the century" Joël Robuchon has two. *Info:* www.mgmgrand.com. Tel. 702/891-1111 or 877/880-0880. 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Tropicana. 5,034 rooms.

Luxor \$\$

Nice rooms at a mid-price point can be found in both the original 31-story pyramid and in two adjacent towers at this hotel which is trading its ancient Egyptian theming for hipper-than-thou cachet, with LAX, the nightclub-of-the-moment, various stylish bars and several chic new restaurants. The open corridors provide striking views of the world's largest atrium, big enough to fit a jetliner. This is a very good choice for families, with a decent arcade and midway plus several IMAX movies and simulator rides. Carrot Top and the sexy Fantasy revue are the entertainment options. All in all, a better-than-average, middle-of-the-road choice. *Info:* www.luxor.com. Tel. 702/262-4000 or 888/777-0188. 3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Reno. 4,476 rooms.

Monte Carlo \$\$

Monte Carlo is inches away from greatness, which makes its

blandness that much more disappointing. Perhaps they were going for clean and uncluttered, but it just doesn't excite. That being said, the rooms are **excellent for the price**. The marble, granite and brass bathrooms are tasteful and the cherry wood furniture is nice as well. There are **two highly recommended food choices here**, the sublime French restaurant Andre's and the Brewpub, which sadly no longer makes its own beer in-house. Magician Lance Burton just marked his tenth year in residence. *Info:* www.montecarlo.com. Tel. 702/730-7777 or 888/529-4828. 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S., between Tropicana and Harmon. 3,014 rooms.

Planet Hollywood \$\$

The recent renovations at former Aladdin have made this formerly frustrating resort one of the best choices on the Strip. **Rooms include movie tie-ins and theming** with pleasant décor and plenty of space. The Spice Market Buffet and Planet Dailies, the resort's café, are **ambitious**. Planet Hollywood has **more entertainment to offer than most**, with a legendary performing arts center, a new showroom, and the Prive nightclub from Miami Beach heavyweights Opium Group. At the Miracle Mile shops, the V Theater, Steve Wyrick complex and Krave Nightclub add to the lineup. *Info:* www.planethollywoodresort.com. Tel. 702/785-5555 or 877/333-9474. 3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Harmon.

BEST EATS

Aureole \$\$\$\$

Let's start the discussion where everyone starts when discussing Charlie Palmer's post-modern gourmet room - the **wine tower**. Leather-clad "wine angels" rappel up and down the futuristic four-story vertical wine cellar, fetching bottles that go for as much as \$40,000. The food is plated in similarly spectacular fashion, although the taste isn't quite up to the presentation. Service here is enthusiastic, attentive and perfectly timed. The tasting menu here is an experience. *Info:* Mandalay Bay - 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/632-7401. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

L'Atelier du Joël Robuchon \$\$\$\$

You can enjoy the three-time Michelin three-star chef's cuisine without having to buy the most expensive meal in town. The

atmosphere is completely different at L'Atelier. Diners sit at a bar fronting an open kitchen and watch their meals' creation. The **Asian and Spanish influenced menu** includes tasting options, à la carte entrées and tapas perfect for sharing. While the price is significantly lower, the restaurant still offers magnificent décor and exquisite service. *Info:* MGM Grand – 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/891-7358. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

miX \$\$\$\$

Alain Ducasse earned two Michelin three-star designations in Europe, and looks to continue that tradition of excellence with a menu blending **American, French and eclectic flavors** in both classic and contemporary ways. Some of the most spectacular views in Vegas can be had here, and especially from the miX Lounge, which wraps around three sides of the building. *Info:* THEhotel at Mandalay Bay – 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/632-9500.

Charlie Palmer Steak \$\$\$

Palmer's second restaurant in the tower is perhaps even more acclaimed than the first. The *Review-Journal* named it the best steakhouse in Vegas only four months after opening. The focus is on **three-week artisan-aged beef**. The pepper-seared hanger steak is out of this world, as is the stuffed Maine lobster. Charlie Palmer is also known for his **signature potato sides**, like truffle baked potato and three cheese potatoes au gratin, and for innovative desserts. *Info:* Four Seasons – 3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/632-5123. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Fleur de Lys \$\$\$

Hubert Keller infuses his signature French Alsatian style with delicate hints of other ethnic styles, offering three, four and five course tasting menus plus caviar and artisanal French cheeses. The unusual décor eschews the typical post-modern hip



Best Buffets, South Strip

- **Spice Market Buffet** (\$) – Planet Hollywood: Some say it's the best in Vegas; it's certainly the most diverse. We're big fans of the Middle Eastern selection, including hummus, falafel, and tandoori chicken.
- **Bayside Buffet** (\$\$) – Mandalay Bay: What it lacks in variety, it makes up in atmosphere, overlooking the 11-acre lagoon. Everything is fresh and well-prepared.
- **Todai** (\$) – Miracle Mile: see review below.
- **More** (\$\$) – Luxor: Fascinating atmosphere and family friendly, which means the food isn't incredible – but a good choice if you're with the kids.

style for a more intimate look that uses **strata of stone and fresh flowers**. *Info*: Mandalay Bay – 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/632-9400. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Koi \$\$\$

One of the new restaurants at Planet Hollywood, Koi fuses Japanese cuisine with California accents in an environment inspired by feng shui, the Eastern art of arrangement. Eye-catching dishes include chamomile smoked salmon, crispy rice topped with raw tuna, Kobe-style filets and sirloins, and roasted duck breast with shishito peppers. *Info*: Planet Hollywood. Tel. 702/754-4555. 3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S. at Harmon. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Todai \$

Part of a small chain of excellent, affordable sushi buffets. It's so popular that nothing stays out long enough to get stale. The quality and selection are both excellent. Hot food, soups, salads and sides are also served. *Info*: Miracle Mile at Planet Hollywood – 3663 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/892-0021. Lunch and dinner daily.

EAST STRIP VICINITY

BEST SLEEPS

Hard Rock Hotel \$\$\$\$

A reported \$1 billion in changes are afoot here – including a new

poker room, 1,000 guestrooms and suites, a new live music venue, a new nightspot and new dining – plus additional space for one of the city’s smallest casino floors. Of course, it’s more of a place to see and be seen than to gamble. The Joint is **one of the best live music spots** in town, and Body English is an incredibly popular nightclub that hosts some of the world’s best DJs. The Circle Bar is perpetually bustling. The Hard Rock hits a **dining home run** with the famed Japanese gourmet, Nobu and Robert DeNiro’s Italian **AGO**. Sixty tequilas and Mexican food are featured at the Pink Taco. The **Beach Club** is a big draw, hosting the must-see summertime pool parties Rehab on Sundays and Relax on Mondays. If you can’t bounce a quarter off your abs, you’ll likely feel out of place. *Info:* www.hardrockhotel.com. Tel. 702/693-5000 or 800/473-7625. 4455 Paradise Rd. at Flamingo, 3/4 mi. east of the Strip.

Platinum \$\$\$

Located just one block off the Strip, Platinum is an attractive boutique hotel with a smartly appointed spa, an indoor-outdoor pool on the fifth floor and a decent restaurant with a view of the Strip. Every room is a suite – and not the mini-suites found at Rio, Venetian, THEhotel and Palazzo – these are the real deal, 900 square feet and up, including full kitchens, plasma screen TVs, Bose radios, whirlpool tubs and balconies – the latter of which is a true rarity in this town (too many jumpers?). *Info:* www.theplatinumhotel.com. Tel. 702/365-5000 or 877/211-9211. 211 E. Flamingo, 1/4 mi. east of the Strip.

Renaissance \$\$\$

Renaissance offers upscale accommodations for business travelers. It’s the biggest non-gaming hotel in the entire state. Its guestrooms are **noteworthy in terms of their size and design**. The layout oozes feng shui, with amenities like LCD televisions, data ports, work desks and a wet bar. The monorail station at the Convention Center makes the Strip easily accessible. Its steakhouse, Envy, is on a par with top gourmet rooms on the Strip. *Info:* www.renaissancelasvegas.com. Tel. 702/733-6533 or 866/352-3434. 3400 Paradise Rd. at Desert Inn, 1/2 mi. east of the Strip.

Westin Casuarina \$\$\$

The tiny casino almost seems like an afterthought at the former Maxim, an **attractive, upscale** hotel just off the heart of the Strip. The colorful exterior belies a **subdued, calming room décor** and modern amenities like infinity shower rods. Suede is an excellent 24-hour coffeeshop. Its spa is more relaxing and less flashy than some of the big-name places in town. *Info:* www.starwoodhotels.com/westin/lasvegas. Tel. 702/836-9775 or 866/837-4215. 160 E. Flamingo Rd. at Koval, 1/2 mi. east of the Strip.

BEST EATS

Nobu \$\$\$\$

The legendary neo-Japanese restaurant founded by Nobu Matsuhisa and Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto matches its hype, serving incredible, innovative dishes: primarily seafood, but the Kobe beef carpaccio is so tender you can cut it with chopsticks. You can't go wrong with any of the sushi offerings either. The setting is romantic, hip and sleek at the same time. If you appreciate good sake, Nobu is a must. *Info:* Hard Rock Hotel – 4455 Paradise Rd. Tel. 702/693-5090. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

The Tillerman \$\$\$

Fresh seafood is discriminatingly selected at this family-owned, 20-year Vegas landmark renowned for a wine list that includes well-known and boutique wineries. Their happy hour offers half price bottles. *Info:* 2245 E. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/731-4036. Dinner nightly. Reservations optional.

AJ's Steakhouse \$\$

Somehow the hip, modern, edgy Hard Rock Hotel boasts this totally retro flashback steakhouse. A live piano player, killer martinis and superb steaks and chops put AJ's among the top Las Vegas steakhouses, especially in terms of atmosphere. *Info:* Hard Rock Hotel – 4455 Paradise Rd. Tel. 702/693-5500. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Roy's \$\$

Roy Yamaguchi is famous for his Hawaiian fusion cuisine, pre-

paring fresh seafood with Pacific Rim and French touches. Black Ahi and macadamia-crusting mahi mahi are delicious, although everything has its charm, including the “aloha” service provided by the attentive, informed staff. *Info:* 620 E. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/691-2053. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Bahama Breeze \$

One of our favorite casual dine-and-drinks, Bahama Breeze features Americanized Caribbean cuisine in gigantic portions. Live music and a fire pit enhance dining outside, while indoors an open kitchen and colorful décor set the mood. We’ve yet to have anything we haven’t liked, and the appetizers, particularly the goat cheese and coconut-breaded onion rings, are favorites. Wild and potent tropical drinks are prominently featured. *Info:* 375 Hughes Center Dr. Tel. 702/731-3252. Lunch and dinner daily.

Bougainvillea Café \$

It may seem ironic, but the café at Terrible’s is anything but. The servers are consistently quick and affable, serving a wide array of dirt-cheap dishes including pages of Chinese and Mexican dishes. They have some of the best steak, rotisserie and breakfast specials in town. *Info:* Terrible’s – 4100 Paradise Rd. Tel. 702/733-7000. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily.

Casa di Amore \$

This is a relative newcomer, but you’d never know it from the distinct throwback vibe, familiar service and classic Italian dishes: copious plates of pasta, pizza that’s practically deep dish and retro appetizers like chicken pastina soup, baked clams and scungili salad. It’s got an unmistakably Vegas charm all its own. Open 24 hours. *Info:* 2850 E. Tropicana Ave. Tel. 702/433-4967. Lunch and dinner daily.

Firefly on Paradise \$

For tourists, this is a hidden gem off the Strip – but it’s far from a well-kept secret, as tables are hard to come by all night long at this excellent tapas restaurant. It’s hard to know where to begin with so many mouth-watering choices, but here’s a few recommendations: the decadent mushroom tart, smothered in boursin; the melt-in-your-mouth artichoke toasts; and a craveworthy

Best Buffets, Strip Vicinity

- **Carnival World Buffet** (\$\$) – Rio : One of two buffets at Rio, Carnival World single-handedly transformed the Vegas buffet to the gourmet experience.
- **French Market Buffet** (\$) – Orleans : Don't be fooled by the low price. The French Market serves up high-quality buffet fare in a festive, pleasant environment.
- **Village Seafood Buffet** (\$\$)– Rio : All-you-can-eat crab legs, lobster, and freshly prepared sushi. It's a little pricey, but coupons are readily available.
- **Seasons** (\$) – Silverton: Located on Blue Diamond, southwest of Mandalay Bay, the newly renovated Seasons is a great choice for breakfast or brunch.

mac-and-cheese made with manchego, a Spanish sheep's milk cheese and the filet mignon sliders, topped with crispy onions, cabrales cheese and Serrano ham. The service is frustratingly hit-or-miss, so be sure you have enough of the delicious sangrias or mojitos that you don't care when it misses. *Info:* 3900 Paradise Rd., Suite C. Tel. 702/369-3971. Lunch and dinner served daily.

Hofbräuhaus \$

This is an authentic, licensed recreation of the famous original Hofbräuhaus beer hall in Munich, Germany: an exact copy, inside and out. Three types of beer imported directly from Munich are served in large steins, accompanied by hearty and delicious German cuisine. Diners can eat in the Schwemme (beer hall) or the faux outdoor Biergarten.

The beer hall features live entertainment and communal seating for eight to 16. If you're looking for an intimate, romantic, quiet night out, this is not that night. *Info:* 4510 Paradise Rd. Tel. 702/853-2337. Lunch and dinner served daily. Reservations optional.

Lotus of Siam \$

The city's best Thai restaurant, like most truly great ethnic restaurants, is a hole in the wall. But the food is spectacular. In fact, *Gourmet* magazine called it the best Thai food on the entire continent. There's a Northern menu featuring chili dips and milder dishes, plus a wide array of traditional, powerfully flavorful dishes. Their pad thai is a superb take on a classic dish, while

options like Issan sausage (a hearty street food) or the nam kao tod (crisped rice with ham, red and green onion, ginger, peanut, cilantro, dried chiles and lime) are things we've never even seen another Thai restaurant offer. Best of all, it's dirt cheap. Perhaps Mario Batali said it best: "Long before I wanted to go to any celebrity restaurant in Las Vegas, I wanted to go to Lotus of Siam. It's world-class." Well played, sir. *Info:* 953 E. Sahara Ave. Tel. 702/735-3033. Lunch served weekdays, dinner nightly. Reservations recommended for dinner – don't dare show up without them on weekends.

WEST STRIP VICINITY

BEST SLEEPS

Palms \$\$

Owner George Maloof has one-upped the Vegas ethos: "Whatever happens at the Palms never happened." The home of *Real World Las Vegas*, this star-studded hotel is a prime place to get into trouble. Its recently remodeled \$40 million pool is a **jumping party spot**. Palms offers **excellent slot and video poker payback**, creating a diverse mix between bluehairs and A-list celebrities.

The new **Fantasy Tower** includes the **Playboy Club** and additional nightspot Moon atop the building. Excellent restaurants here include Garduno's for cheap Mexican and Alizé for high-end French. Spacious, modern guestrooms with lots of amenities have **great views** from the tall, narrow towers. Palms also offers a tattoo parlor, live music venue, movie theater and a spa. Free shuttles connect Palms with the Forum Shops and Fashion Show Mall. *Info:* www.palms.com. Tel. 702/942-7777 or 866/942-7777. 4321 W. Flamingo Rd., between Valley View and Arville, 1 mi. east of the Strip. 794 rooms.





Rio \$\$

Rio's "suites" are actually oversized rooms with separate sleeping and sitting areas. Still, at 620 sq. ft., they're some of the most spacious rooms in town. The rooms are gorgeous, with **floor to ceiling glass windows** and lots of little amenities. The hotel's Carnivale atmosphere is conducive to partying, with one of the liveliest bar and club scenes around. The hotel boasts **over a dozen restaurants of nearly every style and flavor** imaginable, including

two award-winning buffets. The entertainment lineup is stacked shows and lounges. Along with the Palms, this corridor of Flamingo Road posts a **mean one-two punch** for party people. Free shuttles are offered to Caesars Palace, Bally's and Harrah's. *Info:* www.riolasvegas.com. Tel. 702/252-777 or 800/752-9746. 3700 W. Flamingo Rd., between I-15 and Valley View, 3/4 mi. west of the Strip.

Orleans \$

The spirit of the Big Easy is alive and well at the Orleans, a very popular locals' casino whose appeal has crossed over to tourists thanks to **budget pricing, cheerful public spaces and oversized, comfortable accommodations**. Most rooms have separate sitting areas, some even boast four-posters. The Orleans also has a **bowling alley**, a child care center and an arena that hosts everything from football and ice hockey to concerts and circuses. We strongly recommend the Orleans for **budget-conscious travelers who still want the perks** of a Strip casino. *Info:* www.orleanscasino.com. Tel. 702/365-7111 or 800/675-3267. 4500 W. Tropicana Ave. at Arville, 1 1/4 mi. west of the Strip. 1,426 rooms.

BEST EATS

Alizé \$\$\$\$

Andre Rochat outperforms even his namesakes at this gem atop

the Palms. Superb haute French cuisine is featured at this truly elite spot. The two-story wine cellar houses nearly 7,000 bottles, some over 200 years old. You'll also find over a hundred cognacs, top-notch service, beautiful décor and a spectacular 56th floor view. *Info*: Palms - 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/951-7000. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Café Martorano \$\$\$

Thanks to the storied Mafia past of Las Vegas, the city boasts countless great Italian restaurants. Some of them have more wiseguy cred than others. How does Steve Martorano's joint stack up? He catered every Sopranos season wrap party. His joint is jumping, with eye-popping portions of flavorful South Philly style food, including an \$18 cheesesteak appetizer, outrageously good shrimp Scampi and many more great dishes. As for the atmosphere, it's pure party - Martorano dashes between his sauté pans and an Apple laptop from which he mixes music and controls the visual stimulation, which includes scenes from classic mob movies. We once witnessed a surreal moment where he played the pivotal Ezekiel 25:17 scene from *Pulp Fiction*, and the entire restaurant went silent, gaping as Samuel L. Jackson delivers one of the most famous and foul-mouthed monologues in movie history. This is the kind of place that virtually guarantees stories the next day. *Info*: Palms - 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/942-7778. Dinner nightly. No reservations.

Little Buddha \$\$\$

Little Buddha adds French influence to the Asian menu. This Palms restaurant is another visually enticing, popular celebrity hangout. Besides sushi, the pan-Asian menu here is quite tempting. The Maui onion crusted mahi mahi and the boneless Kobe short ribs are particularly noteworthy, although the surroundings are better than the food or service. *Info*: Palms - 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/942-7778. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

N9ne Steakhouse \$\$\$

The Vegas branch of a Chicago steakhouse, everything's high quality and well prepared although no new culinary ground is broken. What seems to be the major drawing card is N9ne's

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champagne and caviar bar. This is one of the best places in Vegas to spot celebrities. *Info:* Palms – 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/951-7000. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Nove Italiano \$\$\$

The upscale Italian from Chicago-based N9ne Group crowns the Palms' new Fantasy Tower with elegant simplicity, featuring an extensive selection of seafood crudos, pastas, Caesar salads tossed at tableside, and more. The house specialty is the Spaghetti Nove, piled high with lobster, shrimp, crab, scallops, calamari and basil. The rest of the pasta dishes are more traditional, with contemporary twists that make this restaurant an interesting alternative to the same-old same-old Italian. *Info:* Palms – 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/951-7000. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Rosemary's \$\$\$

In only a few years Rosemary's has become one of the city's most popular and exceptional restaurants. The menu is American but shows distinctive French, Italian and other influences. All the desserts are simply delectable but the standout has to be Rosemary's crème brûlée. The knowledgeable and gracious staff doesn't overdo it. An extensive wine list is featured as well. *Info:* 8125 W. Sahara Ave. Tel. 702/869-2251. Lunch served weekdays, dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

VooDoo Steak \$\$\$

Another in the Rio restaurant juggernaut, this attractive rooftop dining room with blacklit bayou décor and the city's best views serves Creole and Cajun fare: spicy, rich and seafood-centric. Innovative dishes include grits-stuffed poblano peppers and stuffed blue crabs in red pepper sauce as well as updated classics like Maine lobster Thermidor and seafood gumbo risotto. *Info:* Rio – 3700 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/777-7800. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Buzio's \$\$

Buzio's is an acclaimed New England style seafood restaurant with some innovative fusion on the expansive menu. Bouillabaisse, cioppino, and Thai green curry are savored in the brass-

and-dark-wood dining room. Traditionalists choose Chilean sea bass, lobster, crab or other deliciousness from the deep. The oyster bar is a local favorite and patio seating is available. *Info:* Rio – 3700 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/777-7293. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Hash House a Go Go \$

Though it's a lengthy drive from the Strip, we'd venture to Hash House every weekend. Sassy waitstaff serve up reasonably priced drinks and huge portions of superb food. It's hard to know where to start. Their awesome bloody Mary and the tangerine mimosa are great eye openers to accompany a chorizo hash or a salmon, pesto and brie scramble. At lunch, try a one pound stuffed burger. Their sage fried chicken, chicken pot pie and hand-hammered pork tenderloin get well-deserved raves. *Info:* 6800 W. Sahara Ave. Tel. 702/804-4646. Dinner served nightly. Breakfast and lunch served weekdays, brunch served weekends. Reservations optional.

Ping Pang Pong \$

The Gold Coast does cater to a large Asian clientele so they opted to go the authentic route, with positive results. Dinner is served here until the wee hours of the night, making it an excellent spot for an alcohol-soaked nightcap, if you're not expecting Ameri-

Best Graveyard/ Breakfast Specials

- The **Vegas Club** offers \$2.99 graveyard specials between 11pm and 6am for: two oversized pancakes with bacon or sausage; or eggs, potatoes and toast with your choice of New York steak, bacon, sausage or corned beef hash.
- Suncoast's **Café Siena** also has breakfast specials from midnight-9am Mon-Fri, for \$1.95. Choose from two pancakes with two eggs, bacon or sausage; two buttermilk biscuits with gravy or two eggs with bacon, potatoes and toast.
- **Wildfire Casino**, offers all-you-can-eat pancakes for \$1.99, 24 hours a day.
- On the Strip, **Circus Circus** has a \$3.95 graveyard special at the Pink Pony.
- **Del Taco** is open 24 hours and overnight sells big honkin' one-pound breakfast burritos for about three bucks.

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canized Chinese. *Info:* Gold Coast – 4000 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/367-7111. Dinner nightly. Reservations optional.

RUB BBQ \$

Pitmaster Paul Kirk is better known as the “Kansas City Baron of BBQ,” a title he’s earned by winning over 400 awards for his mastery of the delicate art and science of smoking meats. The burnt ends and St. Louis ribs are house specialties, while the pastrami is unlike any you’ll find at your favorite deli. Start with Frito pie, house-cured and triple-smoked bacon or cornmeal-dusted fried dill pickles, but leave room for dessert – deep fried Oreos and cobblers make satisfying codas for your meal. *Info:* Rio – 3700 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/777-7293. Lunch and dinner nightly.

Thai Spice \$

They’ve been packing in locals here since 1994 for dishes like Nevada chicken, served in a panang-style sauce, Thai-spiced BBQ chicken, baked Siamese duck, chili beef and catfish curry. Spring mint chicken is a house specialty. Its location is quite convenient, and lunch specials are as cheap as any. *Info:* 4433 W. Flamingo Rd. Tel. 702/362-5308. Lunch and dinner served daily. Reservations optional.

DOWNTOWN

BEST SLEEPS

Golden Nugget \$\$\$

Amidst an ambitious \$100 million, two-year expansion and remodeling, Golden Nugget has **old-school class and European elegance** in the casino, with crystal chandeliers, fresh flowers and marble. The oversized rooms have always been kept up to date, with plentiful features and custom bath amenities. Owners Landry’s Restaurants added a spectacular pool with a waterslide that goes right through a shark tank, several excellent restaurants, a remodeled showroom, a new sports book and poker room – plus a whole lot more. The Carson Street Café is **downtown’s best 24-hour joint**, and the buffet is better-than-average. The new Gold Diggers lounge has a great vantage

overlooking Fremont Street.
Info: www.goldennugget.com.
 Tel. 702/385-7111 or 800/846-5330. 129 E. Fremont St. between First and Casino Center. 1,907 rooms.



Main Street Station \$\$

This is one of our favorite downtown haunts. Ornate stained glass, antiques and glittering lights dominate the décor, making it one of the warmest spots in the neighborhood, with bright and cheerful rooms resembling a Victorian garden. The casino is spacious for downtown and is filled with good cheer and helpful staff. The **rooms are a great value**, and the facilities are top-notch. We especially like the **Triple 7 Brewpub**, serving decent sushi in addition to typical bar fare and microbrews. Note: this is not a Station casino. *Info:* www.mainstreetcasino.com. Tel. 702/387-1896 or 800/713-8933. 200 N. Main St. at Stewart. 406 rooms.

El Cortez \$

A year ago, we never would have considered including this historic hotel in a best-of book – but their **new renovations** have made this a perfectly acceptable stay – and with rates starting below \$25, “perfectly acceptable” is a steal. Especially when a room comes with a funbook that includes free slot play, dining discounts, table match plays and more. *Info:* www.elcortezhotelcasino.com. Tel. 702/385-5200. 600 E. Fremont St. at 6th St.

BEST EATS

Hugo’s Cellar \$\$\$

This is one of the most elegant restaurants to be found downtown, located at the everyman Four Queens. Prime rib and steaks aged 21 days are excellent but Hugo’s also serves a variety of traditionally prepared fish and seafood. The room’s name comes from its extensive private wine cellar. The service is attentive without being overbearing. *Info:* Four Queens – 202 Fremont St. Tel. 702/385-4011. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Best Cheap Shrimp Cocktails

- **Golden Gate** is often imitated but never duplicated, its deli offering a heaping tulip glass of shrimp for 99 cents, with housemade cocktail sauce, no veggies, no filler. There's also a \$2.99 with jumbo shrimp, but why bother?
- **The Plaza** snack bar also has a 99 cent shrimp cocktail, but don't be a lamer. Just cross the street for the Golden Gate's.
- **Arizona Charlie's Boulder** has its own 99 cent shrimp cocktail.

Vic & Anthony's Steakhouse \$\$\$

The gourmet room at the Golden Nugget is a classy affair - a dimly lit, plushly appointed steakhouse featuring various cuts of USDA Prime grain-fed beef, along with a dazzling array of appetizers ranging from Blue Point oysters and Beluga caviar to Maple Glazed Quail. It's intimate but at the same time has a palpable energy and a vibe that recalls the cool of the Rat Pack effortlessly. *Info:* Golden Nugget - 129 E. Fremont St. between First and Casino Center. Tel. 800/634-3403. Dinner nightly. Reservations suggested.

Binion's Ranch Steakhouse \$\$

No other restaurant downtown can match the sweeping vista provided by the 24th floor vantage at this Vegas gem. Come here for steak and lobster. In a welcome change from most other steakhouses, dishes are not à la carte, but accompanied by vegetables and potato. *Info:* Binion's - 128 E. Fremont St. Tel. 702/382-1600. Dinner served nightly. Reservations suggested. Business casual attire.

Carson Street Café \$

The 24-hour café at the Golden Nugget is one of the best in town. This pleasant, cheery sidewalk-style spot offers a vast menu of eclectic something-for-everyone fare and consistently friendly service. During peak hours the service can slow, but the restaurant generally does a fairly good job of managing its crowds. *Info:* Golden Nugget - 129 E. Fremont St. Tel. 702/385-7111. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served daily.

El Sombrero Café \$

Downtown is rife with inexpensive Mexican and Latin American restaurants, and El Sombrero is a particularly good choice with 50 years of history under its belt, drawing a loyal, vociferous crowd including politicians and celebrities. The menu is simple, emphasizing their fiery colorado and verde chiles. Generous portions and sub-\$10 prices make this a place to bust your belly without busting your budget. *Info:* 807 S. Main St. Tel. 702/382-9234. Lunch and dinner served Monday through Saturday.

**Best 24-Hour Cafes
Off the Strip**

- **Carson Street Cafe** - Golden Nugget
- **Mr. Lucky's Cafe** - Hard Rock Café
- **Grand Cafe** - Station Casinos (various)
- **24 Seven** - Palms
- **Jerry's Famous Coffee Shop** - Jerry's Nugget

Florida Café \$

Of the decent Cuban restaurants scattered throughout Las Vegas, none is quite as surprising as this family-owned place located at a Howard Johnson on a seedy section of the Strip. Classic dishes like ropas viejas and leg of pork are served with hearty black beans and rice. *Info:* Howard Johnson - 1401 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/385-3013. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served daily.

Rincon Cirillo \$

How did so many excellent Cuban restaurants end up in Las Vegas? This one's just a couple blocks north of Florida Café, with similar menu offerings. If your party is three or more, opt for the excellent and cheap paella. Otherwise, you can't go wrong with bistec criollo, pressed Cuban sandwich or the rich potaje de frijoles Colorado, a ham and red bean stew. Don't expect much in the way of atmosphere though. *Info:* 1145 Las Vegas Blvd S. Tel. 702/388-1906. Lunch and dinner served Tuesday-Sunday.

Triple 7 Restaurant & Brewery \$

The brewpub at Main Street Station crafts quality beverages, offering a selection of five award-winning beers. The food is well-prepared and reasonably priced bar food for the most part, but

Best Off-Strip Buffets

- **Feast Around the World** (\$) – Green Valley Ranch: Upscale, gorgeous, especially tempting at brunch, which includes champagne and eye openers. One of the best in town at any price.
- **Feast Buffet** (\$) – Sunset Station or Red Rock: Almost identical to the Green Valley buffet, but a little more affordable.
- **The Buffet** (\$) – Golden Nugget: Downtown prices, Strip quality.
- **Garden Court Buffet** (\$) – Main Street Station: Avoid it on steak night, but otherwise enjoy good selection and an upbeat staff.

the restaurant also has a sushi and oyster bar. Open until 7am nightly, \$1 beers and breakfast specials make this an excellent late-night option. *Info:* Main Street Station – 200 N. Main St. Tel. 702/387-1896. Lunch, dinner and late-night breakfast served daily.

Upper Deck \$

Located at the edge of Fremont Street, the Vegas Club is a spacious and airy casino with an ostensible sports theme, carried through to the hotel's 24-hour café, which features palatable stadium fare. It's known for its burgers, voted the best in the city by AOL Cityguide. The Big Daddy is a pound and a half of beef with all the fixings. Now that's what you call mad

cow! *Info:* Vegas Club – 18 Fremont St. Tel. 702/385-1664.

HENDERSON, LAKE LAS VEGAS, & SOUTH OF THE STRIP

BEST SLEEPS

Loews Lake Las Vegas \$\$\$\$

Lake Las Vegas is admittedly a haul from the Strip, 27 miles drive down the Beltway and through Henderson. At the end of the road are first-class accommodations with a "destination resort" feel worlds away from the Strip madness. This Moroccan-influenced Loews, formerly a Hyatt Regency, is as nice as the finest property on the Strip. The two signature pools here are gorgeous, recalling temple ruins, while Spa Moulay and the hotel's kid's club offer

broad appeal. The focal point of the hotel is the 320-acre Lake Las Vegas, the captivating body of water around which the community is built. You can explore the lake with a rental kayak, pedal boat or canoe, or golf on one of two 18-hole masterpieces by Jack Nicklaus and Tom Weiskopf. In the rooms, you'll find terry robes, 37" flat screen TVs, organic Bloom toiletries, coffeemakers, high-speed Internet and much more. *Info:* loewshotels.com. Tel. 702/567-1234 or 800/233-1234. 101 MonteLago Blvd., 7 mi. from where I-215 and I-515 meet, off Lake Mead Pkwy. 493 rooms.

Ritz-Carlton Lake Las Vegas \$\$\$\$

Another Lake Las Vegas lodging choice is one of the finest hotels in all of Nevada, the sunny, refined Ritz-Carlton. The buildings form a crescent around the lake, echoing the Mediterranean theme of the shoreline village. The **service** here is a key selling point, with its competent, eager staff going well above and beyond the call of duty. Rooms feature lake or **mountain**



views, and offer spacious and beautiful accommodations to discriminating travelers. The Ritz-Carlton Club level ups the ante yet again, featuring food presentations throughout the day in a private lounge with its own concierge staff. The 30,000 sq. ft. Spa Vita di Lago is a **world-class facility**. The adjacent MonteLago Casino offers elegant surroundings for strong games. Ritz-Carlton guests have golf privileges at the courses at Lake Las Vegas Resort. *Info:* www.ritzcarlton.com/en/properties/LakeLasVegas/. Tel. 702/567-4700 or 800/686-2759. 1610 Lake Las Vegas Pkwy., Henderson, 7 mi. from where I-215 and I-515 meet, off Lake Mead Pkwy. 349 rooms.

Green Valley Ranch \$\$\$

Green Valley Ranch is one of the best known locals' casinos thanks to its starring role in the fascinating *American Casino* reality show. You'll find luxurious accommodations, an absolutely beautiful casino floor, an ultralounge and lots of great restaurants. The **rooms here are four-star**, with robes, slippers,



coffee makers and down comforters. GVR can go head to head with any of the Strip properties, offering a **gorgeous premium spa** that sets certain rooms below overhead pools through which filtered sunlight shim-

mers down. The Tuscan-influenced hotel almost seems like a separate entity, but you're never far from the action. The swimming pool here is stunning; there's also a movie theater, a high-end outdoor shopping district, tennis courts, a vineyard and even a helipad. Some of the rooms here have breathtaking views of the Strip and the Las Vegas Valley. Overall GVR is **one of our strongest recommendations**. *Info:* www.greenvalleyranchresort.com. Tel. 702/617-7777 or 866/782-9487. 2300 Paseo Verde Dr. at Green Valley Pkwy., just off I-215 in Henderson. 497 rooms.

Sunset Station \$\$

Sunset Station is the nicest of the non-premium Station casinos, and as an in-between option, offers much of the same aesthetically pleasing atmosphere and primo dining as the higher-end, without charging an arm and a leg for the rooms. The **rooms are much better than average**, with pleasant light shades in Southwest and Mediterranean styles. Sonoma Cellar offers award-winning steaks and California wine, and there's also a Hooters. Entertainment options include a bowling alley, movie theater and Club Madrid's **fun 80s night**. Live bands often perform at the poolside amphitheater. The recently remodeled Feast Buffet here is **quite good, and cheap**. *Info:* www.sunsetstation.com. Tel. 702/547-7777 or 888/786-7389. 1301 W. Sunset Rd., Henderson, about 7 mi. east of the Strip.

Fiesta Henderson \$

The casino floor here is **one of the most cheerful in town**, resembling a Mexican festival. We're big on the Fiestas in general because they cater to a very wide range of spending levels without making anyone feel out of place. Fiesta is an especially good choice for low-rollers, with tons of penny slots and full-pay video poker from

nickels to quarters. The rooms are **dirt cheap but quite nice**. The downside to this place is its location: not as far as Lake Las Vegas but just as remote, necessitating a decent drive to get to any shopping or dining options. *Info:* henderson.fiestacasino.com. Tel. 702/558-7000 or 800/388-8334. 777 W. Lake Mead Pkwy., Henderson at I-215/I-515. 224 rooms.

BEST EATS

Hank's Fine Steaks & Martinis \$\$\$

Hank's is a fine steakhouse (with a good smattering of seafood dishes on the menu as well) with high quality, unobtrusive service. The restaurant is very attractive, with a glitzy look from polished metal, a large onyx bar and a Czech crystal chandelier. The martinis have their own menu. *Info:* Green Valley Ranch - 2300 Paseo Verde Pkwy., Henderson. Tel. 702/617-7515. Dinner served nightly. Reservations suggested.

Michael's \$\$\$

If there was but one restaurant in town that **epitomized the old Vegas of high-roller lore**, this is it. This beautifully decorated Victorian room features **attentive, deliberately paced service**, giving you time to appreciate the crudités, the bread baskets, the spectacular steak and seafood entrees, and the platter of chocolates and fruit that are brought out after the

Best Steak Bargains

- **Monterey Room** - Gold Coast : \$9.95 gets you a 16 oz. T-bone, baked beans, salad, onion rings, potato wedges, garlic bread, and a 12 oz. draft beer. Available 24 hours.
- **Mr. Lucky's** - Hard Rock Hotel: 777 Gambler's Special - \$7.77 gets you a steak and three grilled shrimp combo platter. It's not on the menu, so you'll have to ask for it
- **Victorian Room** - Barbary Coast: \$10.95 for a 10 oz. prime rib with salad, onion rings and potato. They also have an 8 oz. top sirloin with all the fixings for \$13.95. Both available 24 hours.
- **Courtyard Café** - Orleans: 16 oz. T-bone, dinner salad, onion rings, French fries and bread for \$10.25, 24 hours a day.
- **Restaurant at Ellis Island** - Ellis Island: \$4.95 for a 10-ounce steak plus potato, bread and veggies, 24/7.

meal. For dessert, try bananas Foster and cherries Jubilee prepared tableside. Tableside prep makes even a pedestrian Caesar salad memorable. Old-school to the max, super-pricey, and probably something every Vegas visitor should do once but never needs to do twice. *Info:* Barbary Coast – 3595 Las Vegas Blvd. S. Tel. 702/737-0555. Dinner nightly. Reservations required. Dress code.

Café Tajine \$\$

Steakhouse fare with Moroccan influences, as you might guess from its vibrant décor. Savor chick pea soup, prawns with spiced dates and spit-roasted, citrus-glazed chicken, and straightforward steaks and chops. *Info:* Loews Lake Las Vegas – 101 MonteLago Blvd., Henderson. Tel. 702/567-1234. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served daily.

Sushi Mon \$\$

Ask any sushi aficionado in Henderson for a recommendation, and you'll hear "Sushi Mon." Their all-you-can-eat sushi meal includes appetizer and dessert. Take out and à la carte are also available. They also feature a wide selection of premium chilled sake from various regions of Japan. Innovative rolled sushi is their forte. *Info:* 9770 S. Maryland Pkwy. Tel. 702/617-0241. Lunch and dinner daily.

Lucille's Smokehouse \$

Live blues and BBQ! What more could you ask for? Lucille's offers the usual array of hickory-smoked meats: hot links, pork, chicken, ham, Angus beef, and three different kinds of ribs as well as an impressive selection of sandwiches, including portabella, marinated sirloin, and po'boys. It's a little pricey, but we can't argue with the quality. Blues musicians perform on weekends. *Info:* The District at Green Valley Ranch – 2245 Village Walk Dr., Henderson. Tel. 702/257-7427. Lunch and dinner served daily.

SUMMERLIN & NORTH LAS VEGAS

BEST SLEEPS

JW Marriott Las Vegas Resort & Spa \$\$\$\$

The JW Marriott has consistently been named one of the top golf

resorts in the US. Guests get priority tee times at the adjacent TPC and Badlands golf courses. The Aquae Sulis spa is a most welcome amenity here, as is the bustling and bright Rampart Casino, on-site but independently owned and operated (by the Cannery folks). The rooms are spectacular, with plush bedding, premium sound, and marble bathrooms with double vanities, whirlpool tubs and separate shower stalls. The whole place has a Spanish revival architecture sort of feel to it, and feels very much like a non-gaming luxury resort. The Strip and Downtown are easily accessible via a 15 minute drive. *Info:* www.jwlasvegasresort.com. Tel. 702/869-7777 or 877/869-8777. 221 N. Rampart Blvd., off Summerlin Pkwy. 541 rooms.

Red Rock \$\$\$

Forget the Strip. This is THE casino you need to see to believe. Bellagio, Wynn, Mirage – **Red Rock trumps them all**. It combines the boundless amenities and strong gaming of a locals' casino with the design sensibilities of a top-tier boutique. The most striking thing about this \$1 billion casino is its gorgeous public spaces, which echo the strata and colors of the nearby namesake Red Rock National Conservation Area. Innovative fountains, elegant typography, and untold millions of dollars worth of crystal chandeliers are nothing short of stunning.

The rooms are **practically space-age** in their sleek modernity, with some of the most striking décor we've ever seen. Large windows provide excellent views either of the mountains or the Strip. The resort's A3 (Anytime, Anywhere, Anything) service essentially lets leisure travelers enjoy the convenience and luxury of having a host at your beck and call, a perk enjoyed by casino guests for years. The three-acre pool and beach complex is a focal point of the hotel, and you'll find almost as many hot bodies at Cherry, its nightclub. The



other nightspot here is the Rocks Lounge, featuring the 21st century's Steve and Eydie, a duo named Zowie Bowie. They perform a diverse array of high-energy covers here three nights a week.

Station casinos are known for their food, and this one is no exception – **the highlight here is Salt Lick BBQ**, an out-of-this-world joint lured here from Austin. You can smell it from halfway across the property. But don't stop there. We're enthusiastic about just about all of the restaurants here, including unusual food court options like Capriotti's Sandwiches, Fatburger and Rubio's. A 16-screen movie theatre, state-of-the-art bingo parlor and full-service spa round out the amenities. *Info:* www.redrockstation.com. Tel. 702/797-7777 or 866/767-7773. 10973 W. Charleston Blvd. at CR 215 (Las Vegas Beltway), about 11 miles west of the Strip. 414 rooms.

BEST EATS

Austin's Steakhouse \$\$\$

Austin's delivers. Diners rave about the flavorful seasonings and sauces that accompany expertly cooked cuts of prime beef. This well-rounded restaurant also earns high marks for its appetizers, soups, salad and their practically mandatory sides. *Info:* Texas Station – 2101 Texas Star Ln. at Rancho Dr., North Las Vegas. Tel. 702/631-1033. Dinner served nightly. Reservations suggested.

T-Bones Chophouse \$\$\$

Red Rock, being the first billion-dollar casino built off the Strip, would be remiss without at least one spectacular gourmet room. As the name indicates, T-Bones specializes in bone-in chops, steaks and seafood. Try the Jumbo Jackpot platter: Maine lobster, oysters, prawns, sweet Maryland crab and crab crawl. The wine loft contains 7,500 bottles, and the poolside patio is the perfect martini spot. *Info:* Red Rock – 11011 W. Charleston Blvd. Tel. 702/797-7595. Dinner served nightly. Reservations suggested.

Agave \$\$

This Summerlin cantina features attractive décor, authentic Guadalupe light fixtures, a strong selection of tequila-based specialty drinks (made from 100 different tequilas), and a bold menu. Agave serves unusual and tasty variations on classics, like

freshly made guacamole with jumbo lump crab meat, chiles rellenos stuffed with rock shrimp, goat tacos, and blue corn chicken enchiladas. *Info:* 10820 W. Charleston Blvd. Tel. 702/214-3500. Lunch and dinner served daily.

Ceres \$\$

Is it a coffee shop? Is it a gourmet room? Ceres straddles the line, offering affordable comfort food with occasional flashes of gourmet brilliance. Its setting is striking and soothing, overlooking the hotel's extensive water features. American and Continental dishes populate the menu, varying from textbook executions of classic dishes like crab cakes, to intriguing twists like a rich cream-based onion soup. *Info:* JW Marriott - 221 N. Rampart Blvd. Tel. 702/869-7381. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Reservations optional.

American and Continental dishes populate the menu, varying from textbook executions of classic dishes like crab cakes, to intriguing twists like a rich cream-based onion soup. *Info:* JW Marriott - 221 N. Rampart Blvd. Tel. 702/869-7381. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Reservations optional.

Salt Lick BBQ \$

The heavenly aroma of the Salt Lick can be detected long before you walk through the doors of Red Rock. This BBQ joint has been an Austin landmark since 1969. Ribs, brisket, pork and even turkey are dry-rubbed and smoked in house. It's one of the best barbecues in this town or any other. *Info:* Red Rock - 11011 W. Charleston Blvd. Tel. 702/797-7576. Lunch and dinner served daily.

Best Cheap Hotdogs

- **Mermaids** downtown features Nathan's dogs for 99 cents.
- **Slots-A-Fun** offers belly-bomber 1/2 lb. hot dogs for 99 cents, 50 cents more if you don't have a Circus Players card. Try not to think about the sort of meat that costs \$1.98 a pound - including the bun.
- The **Gold Coast, Suncoast** and **Orleans** each have 75 cent hot dog stands.

BOULDER STRIP

BEST SLEEPS

Sam's Town \$

Sam's Town is quite possibly the most popular locals' casino. The hotel's facilities are actually quite nice. Some rooms look out onto

168 OPEN ROAD'S BEST OF LAS VEGAS

the hotel's lobby, the large atrium known as Mystic Falls Park. There's a **cool laser/light show** here a few times a night. The restaurants here are generally good and unassuming, offering diverse options to a diverse customer base. Sam's Town offers **free shuttle transportation** to downtown and the Strip. *Info:* www.samstownlv.com. Tel. 702/456-7777 or 800/897-8696. 5111 Boulder Hwy. at Nellis, one block south of Flamingo. 650 rooms.

BEST EATS

Guadalajara \$

Excellent value for your dining dollar. Authentic Mexican food is served in great quantities by a friendly and efficient wait staff all amid a delightful, vibrant atmosphere. The salsa bar has a staggering array of choices, from tropically sweet to flavorfully fiery. *Info:* Boulder Station - 4111 Boulder Hwy. Tel. 702/432-7777. Lunch and dinner served daily. Reservations optional.

