

Rock 'n' roll tour of America

tips



deal me in: Get across all Sin City has to offer, www.visitlasvegas.com

neon relics: Book a tour of the Neon Boneyard, for plenty of photo opportunities and an amazing insight into the history of Las Vegas, www.neonmuseum.org

got soul: Nourish body and soul at the House of Blues Gospel Brunch, with hand-clapping and all you can eat for \$50 per person, www.houseofblues.com

staying with the stars: Get a feel for old-world Vegas, and plenty of history, at the Sahara Hotel and Casino, www.saharavegas.com

THEY say that getting lucky in Vegas is like backing a winner in the Melbourne Cup. Only a mug would try. But, luckily for me, I'm that mug. I'm in Sin City for a week, and I've hit the jackpot.

I'm staying at the oldest casino on the strip, the Sahara, and the folks have put me up in the Beatles suite. It's a huge 23rd-floor apartment, with a balcony that looks out over the Moroccan neon of the Sahara sign and into the desert.

The Liverpool lads stayed here when they played Vegas in 1967. Back then, management put a slot machine in the room for their gambling convenience — now, the room is full of gorgeous retro furniture, a three-stool bar, blown-up Beatles photos and me dancing around singing *Can't Buy Me Love*.

The relic is a gem among some of Sin City's less lustrous musical endeavours. Canadian wailer Celine Dion famously filled a 4000-people-a-night arena at Caesar's Palace for five years, allegedly getting a helicopter ride from her Las Vegas Lake home to the show every day.

(She later denied that, but that doesn't stop a dozen different locals pointing out the helipad to me).

And, of course, tacky tribute acts, mimicking everyone from Michael Jackson to Neil Diamond and Garth Brooks, still play casinos along the strip every night of the week.

But amid all the new sleek glitz and kitsch song-and-dance, Vegas is

Mary Bolling gets the inside story on the Beatles in Las Vegas

still rocking — hard. Once home to the big band and banter of the Rat Pack, modern-day Vegas offers a more polished entertainment.

And unlike Deano and Frankie, the members of Cirque du Soleil would be struggling to pull off their performance while drunk.

The Beatles LOVE at the Mirage is a breathtaking 90 minutes, as trapezes, trampolines and even roller-blades catapult the huge, costumed cast into acrobatics above the audience. And the nothing-but-hits Fab Four soundtrack isn't too bad, either.

For new music out of Vegas, there's no bigger name than the Killers. The band's second album, *Sam's Town*, was named after an edge-of-town Vegas casino, but the best slice of their home town can be found at the Neon Boneyard, where the band filmed the video clip for *All These Things That I've Done*.

A sprawling graveyard of neon signs, the collection has come together as the city's casinos have been remodelled, or simply flattened.

The relics are bound for a museum, but in the meantime, anyone can make an appointment for a tour of the weird junkyard — and for a look at how the face of Vegas has shifted, it's worth the \$15 entry fee.

Even more old school is a visit to Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel.

With the (up-front) cost of getting

hitched starting at \$US100, packages can be tailored to include the classic Elvis celebrant, an edgier Egyptian theme, or *Rocky Horror Picture Show* costumes for the entire gathering.

The downtown chapel also has a costume shop on site, with Elvis suits as well as wedding tuxes and photos of celebs that have showed to weddings line the walls.

Among the newer casinos, the pursuit of tastefulness is a clear priority. Hip restaurants are replacing the omnipresent all-you-can-eat buffets and SushiSamba at the Palazzo is at the head of the pack.

Get in early to bag a table among the Vegas glitterati. Take in a mesmerising menu and cocktail list influenced by Peruvian, Brazilian and Japanese cultures.

Or for more casual dining, head to Sunday morning Gospel Brunch at House of Blues inside the Mandalay Bay, where the best of southern fare, including a meat-carving station, is on offer.

The food is all-you-can-eat and the faith-fix is an oasis amid Sin City's hedonism, with the most beautiful rendition of *Amazing Grace* you'll hear.

Back among the sinners, wander downtown's Fremont St to get another taste of old school Vegas.

Home to the iconic cowboy and cowgirl neon signs, you can also

stock up on 99 cent shrimp cocktails and margaritas.

And you'll need a few of the latter, to prepare yourself for the Fremont St Experience — a free sound and vision show on the light-up canopy of the pedestrian mall, which ramps up on the hour, and pays quirky digital homage to musical acts including KISS, Queen, and Don McLean.

And, of course, it wouldn't be Vegas without Elvis. I get my King fix back at the Sahara, where Elvis was a regular guest — in the presidential penthouse, of course.

The huge two-bedroom relic features mirrors on every surface, and chandeliers cascading from every ceiling.

While room service doesn't offer Elvis's favourite deep-fried peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich, Sahara staff instead fill me up on the room's dirty secrets: apparently, the King holed up in the luxurious penthouse with his co-star Ann-Margret while in town to shoot *Viva Las Vegas*.

The pair didn't leave the room for days and the affair was the talk of tabloids for months.

I guess not everything that happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.

Next week: Scarred for life — tattoos and music on show in southern California

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