

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

Las Vegas: Hot!

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Las Vegas in July? Where the temperatures can top 100 degrees? Was I crazy? Perhaps, but I was there for meetings and the rooms were cheap.

Nevada was populated for thousands of years by paleo-Indians and then Anasazi Indians before a young scout, Rafael Rivera, first spied, in 1829, a green valley with a plentiful supply of water. He named it Las Vegas, Spanish for "the meadows."

Rivera was followed by the "Great Pathfinder," John C. Fremont, whose journal entries attracted people to the area. In the late 1800s and early 1900s

prospectors discovered mineral deposits that brought more people to the state, and in the early 1900s a rail line connected Nevada with Southern California and Salt Lake City, easing its isolation.

Las Vegas, an actual oasis in the desert, provided a place to take on water, thus enabling commerce to develop. But it was the legalization of gambling in 1931 that really put Las Vegas on the map.

Although the state legislature had enacted a strict anti-gambling law in 1910, Las Vegas fell into gambling after a series of events, including World War I, battered the economy.

When a major road finally connected the remote and isolated Las Vegas to California, the city became a destination for people looking for speakeasies. As a consequence, organized crime gained a foothold in the city. Among the various crime bosses were our coreligionists, Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky.

During the 1940s nightclubs and resorts began to pop up on the area known as "The Strip."

Although local Las Vegas hoteliers were able to resist the mob bosses and maintain control of their holdings, in 1946 gangster Siegel and his friend and fellow mobster, Lansky, laundered money through a legitimate Mormon bank and built the Flamingo Hotel. (Regular readers of this column may recall that we visited Lansky's restored hotel in Havana. The guy really got around.)

For all the bad news associated with organized crime, Jewish mobsters were instrumental in desegregating Las Vegas nightclubs, on the model of Harlem's Cotton Club, owned by a New York Jew, Dutch Schultz.

In 1955, crime boss Will Max Schwartz was the principal investor in establishing the upscale and first racially integrated hotel and casino in Las Vegas. Until then, black performers were barred from staying at the hotels at which they performed, so the Moulin Rouge set an important precedent in the city.

The nightclub attracted the Strip's biggest stars for after-hours parties, including the famous "Rat Pack" – including Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Peter Lawford, and Shirley MacLaine – that performed there free to support their friend and fellow "rat-packer" Sammy Davis, Jr.

The Moulin Rouge closed shortly after opening when the Sands hotel's mob owners decided that they had better integrate or risk losing their money-makers.

Jewish Mayor Oran Gragson also figured prominently in the move to racial integration in Las Vegas by promoting black workers, working with the NAACP, and developing black neighborhoods.

Today, Las Vegas is home to over 60,000 Jews, according to the Jewish Federation of Las Vegas. The city has an active Jewish life, including ten synagogues of all stripes, every major Jewish organization, two day schools, a Jewish film festival, a cultural center, and five kosher restaurants. Several area hotels and casinos are owned by Jews, including the Wynn, Bellagio, Encore, Venetian, and Palazzo.

In the hopes of cultivating future leadership, the Jewish Federations of North America recently sponsored a convention in Las Vegas they called "TribeFest." More than 1,200 young adults attended the event whose aim was "to engage Jewish young adults culturally and spiritually."

Las Vegas hotels offer much more than rooms and gambling: although I must say that my room at the Palazzo was so large and well-appointed I was tempted to sleep in.

Their theaters offer world class entertainment, from Celine Dion to the Broadway show "Jersey Boys" to ventriloquist Terry Fator, and one can find everything from boutiques featuring haute couture to the famous Canyon Ranch. One never need leave the building.

Nevada has much to do and see outside of casinos and shopping. For the history buffs among this column's readers, or simply lovers of old western movies, Nevada offers a host of places to explore the Old West's past, including over five-hun-



The Israeli Cultural Center – Bamidbar Synagogue, one of ten sites for Jewish worship in the city



Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Frank Sinatra, the core of the "rat pack"



Celine Dion, among the world class stars that frequently perform in Las Vegas



"Phantom of the Opera" on stage at the Palazzo

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Southwest Cactus Salad

The prickly pear cactus, native to Mexico, grows in the Nevada desert. Called "tuna" in Spanish, and known to MOTs ("members of the tribe") as a "sabro," this sweet and juicy fruit can be eaten alone or incorporated into a variety of recipes. This colorful salad is one of wonderful contrasts among the sweet fruit, the pungent scallions, and tart lime juice, and the smooth and crunchy textures.



- Ingredients:**
- 2 cups prickly pear, diced into one-half inch pieces*
 - 4 scallions, sliced
 - 1/2 lb. tomatoes, peeled and chopped
 - 1/4 cup lime juice
 - 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped fine
 - 1 green pepper, chopped
 - Salt

Directions: Combine prickly pears, scallions, tomatoes, peppers, lime juice and parsley. Mix and season with salt. Cover and chill.

* Available fresh, canned, or frozen in Latino markets. These fruits can be very seedy, so you may do better with the canned or frozen variety.

Serves 6-8

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dred ghost towns and old mining camps. The most photographed ghost town in Nevada is Rhyolite, founded in 1905 following the Bullfrog gold strike in 1904.

Originally a spread of tents, it became a fully established town of almost 10,000 residents during the boom years, and was served by the Las Vegas & Tonapah railroad.

But, by 1919 the town was deserted. Visitors today can see the spectral remains of the bank, school, jail, and general store, among other buildings.

Hoover Dam, about twenty-five miles from Las Vegas on the border with Arizona, is a major tourist attraction, with nearly one million people visiting the dam each year.

During the Great Depression, the dam's construction provided employment for thousands of workers, hundreds of whom died during the process. The dam, impounding Lake Mead, controls floods,



Plaque at the Flamingo Hotel honors co-founder, mobster Bugsy Siegel



Statue Honoring Las Vegas' founder at the Rafael Rivera Community Center

provides irrigation water, and produces hydroelectric power for Nevada, Arizona, and California.

Although I was there in oven-like July, the word Nevada actually means "snow covered" in Spanish. With an average annual snowfall in the mountains topping 33 feet, it is certainly an apt name.

The state offers eighteen ski resorts that attract skiers from around the world. Also during the winter months, golfers from all points of the globe converge on twenty world-class golf courses.

It may be in the middle of the desert, but Las Vegas area offers the visitor recreation, entertainment, cuisine, couture, and even culture.

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Carol Goodman Kaufman, an organizational psychologist and writer, is the author of Sins of Omission: The Jewish Community's Reaction to Domestic Violence (Westview Press, 2003). She serves on the National Board of Hadassah and chairs the Jewish Community Relations Council of Central Massachusetts. Kaufman divides her time between Worcester, West Stockbridge, and the world.



The general store at the Rhyolite ghost town



"Cirque du Soleil" at the Bellagio



Gambling is the main attraction in Las Vegas and slot machines are everywhere

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of same and a book signing.

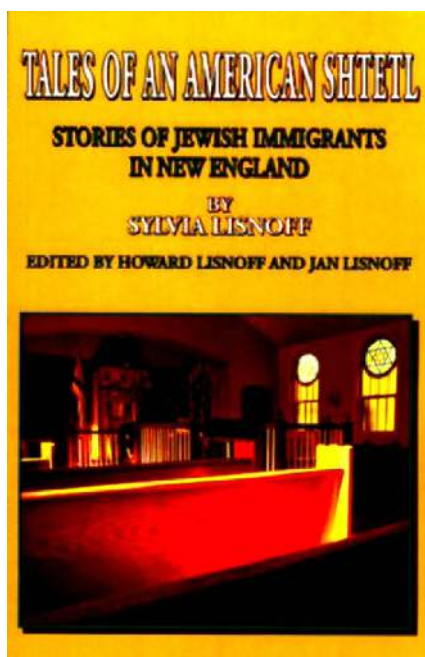
Sylvia Geller Lisnoff, whose well-woven fictional narratives were drawn from biographical sources, was born in Philadelphia in 1921 but grew up in West Warwick, Rhode Island.

Developing a commitment to social causes and political action, Lisnoff's resolve to make the world a more habitable place took the form of activism seeking to change society primarily through the support of liberal political candidates.

In Rhode Island, Lisnoff served in leadership roles during both Senator Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign of 1968 and that of Senator George McGovern in 1972. A tireless fighter for peace, Lisnoff became known for her feisty and controversial letters and essays in local and state newspapers.

For further information regarding Howard Lisnoff's program, please call Nancy Maurice Rogers, Program Director, at (413) 442-4360, ext. 15.

Information concerning the "Older Adult Kosher Hot Meal Program" is available only by calling Cindy Bell-Deane, Director of Food Services, at (413) 442-2200.




Jewish Federations of North America's 'TribeFest'

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