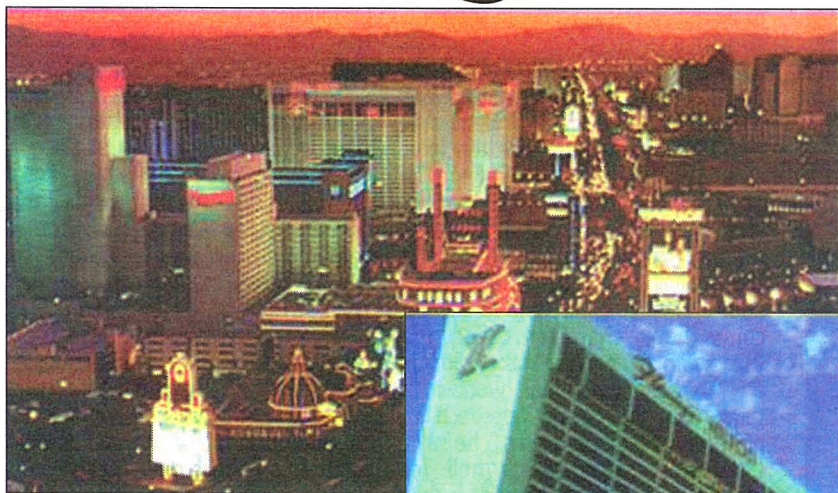


# Leaving Las Vegas



**MENNA VAN PRAAG**

visits the capital of gambling and manages to leave with her sanity and bank balance intact...

Las Vegas has to be the most surreal of American destinations. It is so well documented in movies, so well known that, in a way, everyone feels as though they've already been there. So, when I set out to explore the states of America, I didn't really think I needed to see Vegas. How wrong I was.

It wasn't that everybody I spoke to loved Vegas – far from it. Most thought it gaudy and ridiculous to the extreme, not a place you would want to spend more than a couple of days in. But somewhere you had to see once. Apparently a city dedicated to hedonism, superficiality and deception was a city I had to experience. So I did. I arrived in the oasis of the Nevada desert at midnight. I was meeting some friends from L.A. who were in town for a couple of days of gambling, and who'd promised to show me a good time before they lost too much of their money.

As we drove into Vegas the first thing I noticed were the lights, then the hotels, then the casinos, though in Vegas hotels and casinos are more or less the same thing. The beds, the bars, the restaurants and the tables are all housed under one roof so that it's possible for the gamblers to have every little need met in one single location without ever having to step out of its doors. Everything is also arranged in strict order of priority: gambling first, then drinking, then eating, then sleeping. Everything is carefully designed to ensure that the honey bees see as little of their hotel rooms and the light of day as possible.

Las Vegas, you see, is the city of the



night. Forget the romance of Paris, the lights of London, the craziness of New York – Vegas is the only city that is truly vampiresque. It wakes at sunset, its lights flashing, brightening the way for the first eager seekers of financial destitution, dazzling their senses and pulling them into its dens of iniquity. Only a few die-hard aficionados continue to throw their dice

already lost \$700. I imagined that by the end of the first week he wouldn't have enough money left to buy breakfast. I told Frank I hoped he'd paid for his hotel room in advance.

Then there was Chris, a young kid in the navy, who came with his parents and \$3000. I sat next to him in the \$5 tables at the Barbary Coast when he was down to his last \$50.

he promised himself he'd spend, and proceeded to play. We left him, still \$50 up, at the craps table. Since I met him I'd been trying to persuade him of the virtues of quitting while you're ahead (or at least getting out before you lose everything).

## Forget the romance of Paris, the lights of London, the craziness of New York – Vegas is the only city that is vampiresque

and play their cards in daylight hours.

Of course I met many such people in my Vegas excursion. There was the chap from Leeds who'd saved up \$15,000 to spend a solid two weeks at the tables, eat, sleep and breathe the blackjack. I met him on his first night there, five hours into his trip and he'd

After watching him lose that my friends and I treated him to breakfast (he tipped the waitress his last dollar) and bid him adieu. Ten minutes later Chris was back, having just been to a cash machine and overdrawn on his account. He sat down at the table with a fresh \$300, \$300 more than

My last attempt at pulling him away from the craps table was a perfectly executed example of the power, and almost inevitable tragedy, of addiction. I turned to him as he was about to lay down his last \$50 chip and said, "Chris, this is your defining moment. Take the money and come dancing with us. Show yourself that you are in control. That you don't have to spend the last of your cash. That you can walk away, without having given it all up." Chris didn't even reply. He put down his chip, picked up his dice, and played on.

Then was my own opportunity to let go and not succumb to my own addiction. With great difficulty I left Chris to lose the rest of his cash and no doubt clean out the rest of his bank account in the process.

I didn't spend my entire time in Vegas sitting amongst gamblers and preaching the puritanical virtue of self-restraint. I too, much to my chagrin, fell prey to the seductions of the city. Of course, I didn't make a profit. The house always wins. But at least I only lost \$100 and at least I got out while the going was good. And at least I had fun while I was there.

Vegas is certainly a hell of a place to visit, but you should go there with the philosophy of Frank. Spend your money with the intention of losing it. And try to experience your heaviest losses vicariously. Sit next to someone like Chris and let him make you feel better about yourself.

