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UP CLOSE & PERSONAL.....30
with Dana Buchman

SPRING'S HEADY DAYS.....45
Reveling in the season's latest
hair trend accessories



BACK TO THE FUTURE.....49
Spring's new looks arrive from a time machine

THREE COINS IN
THE FOUNTAIN.....66
Dramatic spring fashions you'll wish were yours

STEPPING INTO STYLE.....77
A fashion primer for men

IT'S MURSE TIME.....80
'Man purses' for the executive with flair



BEYOND SAUVIGNON BLANC....90
Discovering New Zealand wines

THE INAUGURAL BALL.....99
Las Vegas celebrates a new chapter
in Nevada history

A SPECTACLE CITY'S EVOLUTION
TO LUXURY.....106
Las Vegas celebrates the 75th anniversary
of gaming

LUXURY LAS VEGAS MARCH 2007

LAS VEGAS CELEBRATES THE 75TH

ANNIVERSARY OF GAMING

a spectacle city's evolution to luxury

BY CYNTHIA VESPIA

LAS VEGAS HAS ALWAYS BEEN TOUTED AS SOMEWHAT OF A SPECTACLE CITY, PROVEN TRUE BY THE 38 MILLION TOURISTS WHO ARE ESTIMATED TO VISIT THIS YEAR DRAWN BY VISIONS OF NEON ADVENTURES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF UNTOLD RICHES. WITH THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LEGALIZATION OF GAMBLING IN NEVADA LOOMING ON THE HORIZON, THE PIVOTAL ROLE THE CASINO INDUSTRY HAS PLAYED IN THE EVOLUTION OF LAS VEGAS FROM TINY DESERT TOWN TO AN INTERNATIONAL DESTINATION HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN ONE OF EXCESSIVE LUXURY THAT WE HAVE COME TO KNOW TODAY.

Red Rock Resort's spa, at more than 35,000 square feet, is a sleek, ultra-modern retreat complete with a state-of-the-art fitness center and salon.

EVOLUTION TO LUXURY

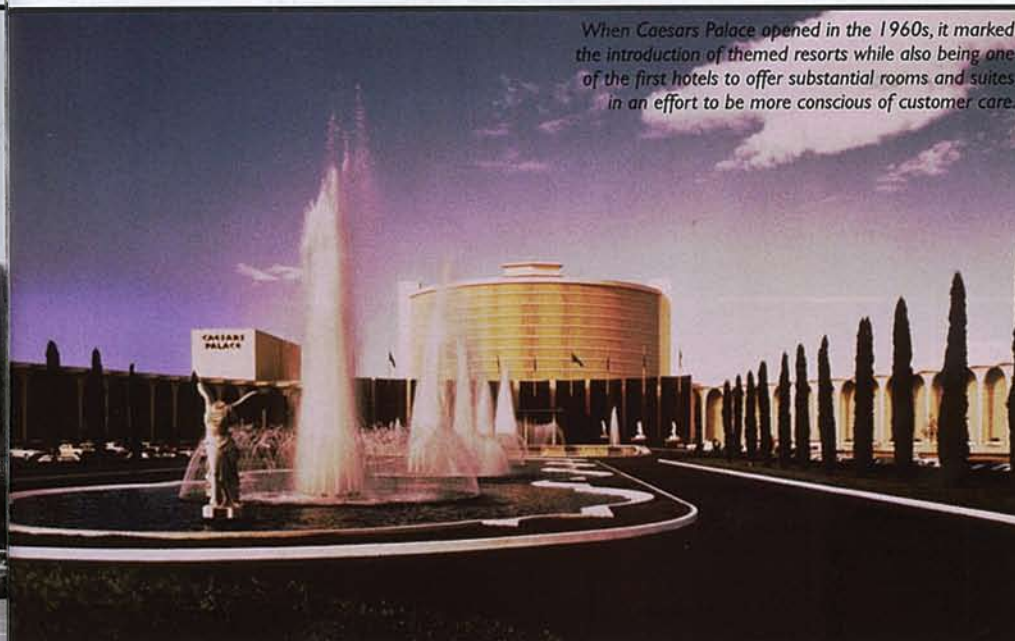
Back in Las Vegas's early days of gaming most of the casinos, such as the Binion's Horseshoe (now known as the New Binions), were centered on western themes.



When mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel opened The Flamingo on New Year's Eve in 1946, the designs of new hotel stood out from the pack by introducing a somewhat more lavish, Miami-style influence to the Strip.



LUXURY LAS VEGAS MARCH 2007



When Caesars Palace opened in the 1960s, it marked the introduction of themed resorts while also being one of the first hotels to offer substantial rooms and suites in an effort to be more conscious of customer care.



Casinos have always been at the forefront of the jewel in the desert. Back in 1931 Las Vegas was still in its infancy with only a handful of casinos located downtown, on Boulder Highway, and what is now the world famous Strip. These were small casinos that were gambling halls hosting a few slot machines and a bar. Today they would probably be considered little more than a motel.

Changes were introduced with the construction of one of the most celebrated early resorts when mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel opened The Flamingo on New Year's Eve in 1946. Back in those days most of the casinos, such as the Hotel Apache (now known as the New Binions), were centered on western themes. The designs of The Flamingo

stood out from the pack by introducing a somewhat more lavish, Miami-style influence to the Strip. The Flamingo was considered a cut above the rest, offering up a bit more in terms of attractions and more comfortable rooms, but nothing as flamboyant as today's standards. The idea was that people weren't coming there for the accommodations, they were there to gamble.

With most of the guests spending the majority of their time on the casino floor, luxury was not considered a premium influence. Over time other options slowly started to trickle in. Las Vegas hotels began to bring in headline acts to appear during their dinner shows.

(Continued on page 118)

LUXURY LAS VEGAS MARCH 2007

EVOLUTION TO LUXURY

(Continued from page 109)

"The headliners were a much cheaper ticket in the '50s and they didn't have the same lavish stages as compared to today," explains David Schwartz, coordinator of the Gaming Studies Research Center at UNLV and the author of "Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond" (Routledge 2003). The differences are almost night and day, so much so that back in the day you could enjoy an evening of dinner, drinks, a comedy opener, and old blue eyes Frank Sinatra in an intimate setting all for one low price.

Jump forward to today where the evolution is evident in stage productions such as "The Phantom of the Opera" at The Venetian which is housed in a custom built \$40-million-dollar theater. Then there is one of the latest offerings from Cirque du Soleil, "KA" inside the MGM Grand that had \$160 million dollars behind the development and creation, making it one of the most elaborate and high-end luxury tickets in town.

It was in the 1960s that Jay Sarno introduced the premiere of themed resorts with the creation of Caesars Palace and Circus Circus. He stepped things up a notch by concentrating on the development of substantial rooms and suites in an effort to be more conscious of customer care. It was at this time that the "megaresort" came to life and it would only grow from there.

In 1976 as Las Vegas began to lose its drawing power, another era was ushered in for the Strip. With more and more casinos springing up, through Native American owners and in places like Atlantic City, Las Vegas was no longer able to claim exclusivity to gambling. It was necessary to offer up a taste of something different that would lure the tourists back towards Sin City. As a result hotel-casinos were transformed into full-blown destination resorts with entertainment and amenities that would please vacationers, gamblers, conventioners, and business professionals. Focus was also placed on offering additional attractions that would be 'family-friendly'. But the overall theme seemed to be "Go Big or Go Home!"

"The idea of luxury became hotel rooms that could swallow a 2,300-square-foot house, and bathrooms featured on the Travel Channel as some of the most lavish in the world," explains Mike Green, a historian at the Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN).

At the MGM Grand they've taken comfort and the luxurious to the very tip-top...literally. Skylofts are a rare and private sanctuary of two-story accommodations offering modern furniture, art, electronics and accessories from some of the world's top designers and manufacturers

LUXURY LAS VEGAS MARCH 2007

instantly recognizable to anyone in the targeted market. While enjoying an expansive view of the Las Vegas Strip through floor to ceiling windows, guests can revel in amenities such as an in-loft espresso machine, a custom bar, and 24-hour specialty butler services. Trained Spa Butlers prepare treatments designed to enhance sensory experience with a selection of unique therapies which even includes a "pillow menu" that allows guests to choose from a variety of pillows to assist their individual needs and help them to relax and re-energize.

With relaxation being one of the newer reasons for getting away to Sin City, you'll find that each and every hotel now offers spa services in lieu of the old-time steam rooms. Add to that full-scale gyms for the health and fitness minded and the myriad of choices becomes seemingly endless for travelers.

The evolution would also affect the way casino guests dined and shopped. Whereas ten years ago the choices were limited to one steak house or a dinner theater, these days you walk off the casino floor into award-winning restaurants featuring some of the world's biggest names in the culinary world. Now the steakhouses are high-end meat emporiums such as celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse's Delmonico Steakhouse inside The Venetian which features both full-service fine dining and a more casual seafood bar. And Las Vegas' very first celebrity chef import Wolfgang Puck offers up everything from upscale Chinese dishes at Chinois in Caesars Palace to Italian splendor in both Trattoria del Lupo inside Mandalay Bay and a branch off of one his popular L.A. restaurants Spago which began the trend of world-class dining in Vegas when it opened inside the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace.

Shopping choices have also become higher end. From the Grand Canal Shoppes in The Venetian to Caesar's Forum Shops, brand-name designers line the store front windows to please the eye and tempt the purse strings.

The time tested wisdom for a winning formula used to be based on the belief that people came to Vegas to gamble and drink, with little or no interest in shopping, gourmet eating, or hitting the spa. With times ever changing you get a lot of sophisticated and varied palates that venture to Las Vegas every day. Presented with that knowledge there isn't a casino hotel project around today that doesn't incorporate some fashion of luxury retail into its plans.

"When you think of Las Vegas you should first think 'wow' and then you should be purring like a putty tat knowing that you have been pampered," says Mike Green. "That's the basic evolution." □

LUXURY LAS VEGAS MARCH 2007