



TOP TIP

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State of play

Sarah Bridge find adventures aplenty in Nevada, the home of the old wild west

It's a scorching hot day in Virginia City, Nevada, and the Bucket of Blood saloon is beginning to fill up. Barmen swiftly pour drinks for thirsty customers waiting for the dancing to start, and the pianist is already playing some chords, but there's no time to wait.

I dash past the offices of the *Territorial Enterprise* - the newspaper that first employed *Huckleberry Finn* creator Mark Twain - and cross the road next to a gun-toting cowboy who will shortly be shot in a duel. In fact, so far he's been shot every hour, on the hour, and that looks set to continue all afternoon.

Not surprisingly the traffic stops as he crosses the road, spurs jangling and his Winchester rifle gleaming in the sun.

Virginia City, just a few miles south of Reno, is pure Nevada: a real-life town with real inhabitants, but also a living historical record of what Nevada was like in the days of the gold rush and the wild west.

My visit coincided with the Taste of the Comstock festival, where visitors can sample everything from cocktails and local beers to home-made fudge, cookies and Johnnycakes (a pancake-like Native American dish that was eaten by soldiers in the Civil war).

Wandering into traditional saloons complete with swing doors and long, mirrored bars stacked with every conceivable spirit is just like going back in time - and to a wilder time, if the presence of legendary artefacts



I cross the road next to a spurs-jangling, gun-toting cowboy who will shortly be shot in a duel

such as the 'suicide table' that bankrupted several gamblers is anything to go by.

Virginia City was once home to more millionaires than anywhere else in the world (which, at the turn of the last century, was a pretty big deal). However, Nevada isn't just about historic America, it also boasts everything from prehistoric underground

cave systems to the ultra-modern Tesla electric car factory just outside Reno.

As the seventh-largest state in the US, Nevada isn't short on space, so it's frustrating that a vast proportion of visitors to the Silver State never get further than the Las Vegas Strip. While it's certainly a big draw (see *box, page 53*), there is more to Nevada than Sin City.

With more ghost towns than actual towns, thriving Native American tribes and huge mineral reserves that triggered a silver rush in the 1860s, Nevada is part of America's rich history, but its appeal is bang up to date.

While cars and trucks thunder past on the very modern freeways, a still-visible white letter on the hills outside each

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ASK THE EXPERTS



Susannah Patoki,
personal holiday
adviser, Virgin
Holidays

“My favourite activity was Comstock in Virginia City, mingling with the locals and trying homemade apple pie—we even watched a shoot-out. My biggest selling point is the diversity of Lake Tahoe—from mountain bike trails to paddle-boarding, kayaking and water-skiing, while in the winter you can ski and stay at mountain lodges while making s’mores by the fire.”



Mike Coombs, sales executive, North America Travel Service

“This was my first visit to Nevada, so other than Vegas, I wasn’t sure what to expect. It surpassed all my expectations and showed it has something for everyone, from the beauty of Lake Tahoe to the wilderness of the Ruby Mountains and America’s loneliest road.”



LEFT:
Virginia City’s
Bucket of
Blood saloon



RIGHT:
Lehman
Caves

➔ town harks back to the days when the mail would be dropped by plane (the letter would show which town’s post to drop on which hill). Herds of cattle still roam free but are GPS-tracked by farmers, and the isolation of many parts of the state means that subspecies of fish and birds have evolved here which do not exist anywhere else in the world.

Its unique geological structure – Nevada has more mountains than any other US state – makes it the perfect place for hiking, camping, sky-watching and nature-spotting. There are plenty of campsites and rest areas where you can enjoy a traditional Dutch oven cookout – a one-pot legacy from the pioneering days that is miles away, both literally

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Cathedral Gorge is known for its dramatic carved cliffs, narrow canyons and cathedral-like spires, eroded from volcanic rock

and figuratively, from the one-armed bandits in Vegas.

▶ **BACK TO NATURE**

Every year around 100,000 visitors make the trip to Cathedral Gorge, the national park located 165 miles northeast of Las Vegas and known

for its dramatic carved cliffs, narrow canyons and cathedral-like spires. They were created by the erosion of the rock formed from compressed ash deposited tens of millions of years ago by explosive volcanic activity.

Visitors can hike the scenic trails through the park, with a good starting point being Miller Point, which offers great views of the canyon ahead. There is a campsite, picnic spot and year-round events including the annual Dutch Oven Cook-Off in autumn.

▶ **GOING UNDERGROUND**

How to escape the blazing desert heat? By going underground, of course. The Lehman Caves in the Great Basin National Park date back more than two million years. Around 30,000 visitors every year follow Ranger Ben and his colleagues on guided tours through the myriad of cool, connected limestone chambers, which are full of stalactites, stalagmites, fossils and rare rock formations.

▶ **LUXURY RESORTS**

One of North America’s natural wonders, Lake Tahoe’s cool, clear water is famed for its clarity and purity. More than 1,600 feet deep and 22 by 12 miles in area, the lake’s huge volume of water is supplied by 19 different rivers flowing into its depths. It is so enormous it has 72 miles of hiking trails around the banks, which extend into California. The freshwater lake never freezes and is surrounded by nothing but verdant woodland and the occasional luxury resort or golf course.

With jet skis banned from the lake, it is a perfect place for kayaking, ➔



LEFT:
The Cowboy
Arts and Gear
Museum



→ paddle-boarding, windsurfing or just good old-fashioned swimming. The pine forests surrounding its shores give the air its clean, fresh quality and provide an ideal setting for cool walks in the sweltering summers.

Premier Holidays offers a six-night Nevada fly-drive from £1,099, staying at Las Vegas, Ely, Elko, Reno and Lake Tahoe. The price includes car hire and Heathrow flights, for travel in November. **trade.premierholidays.co.uk**

Funway Holidays has an eight-day Nevada road trip including return flights from London to Las Vegas, stopping in Elko, Ruby Mountains, Reno, Carson City, Virginia City and Lake Tahoe, and taking in the Loneliest Road, Great Basin National Park and the Lehman Caves. The price starts at £1,199 per person, based on two sharing. **funwayagents.co.uk**

▶ **SPIRIT OF THE WILD WEST**
If you've ever wanted to be a modern-day cowboy, then Elko in the heart of the Ruby Mountains is your kind of town. Alongside coffee shops and small-town casinos, you can buy authentic cowboy hats, leather chaps, lassos and saddles from JM Capriola, or enjoy a spot of cowboy poetry from the Cowboy Arts and Gear museum across the road. The annual Cowboy Expo is held here and even the tables at nearby Ogi's cafe are stamped with local cattle brands.

▶ **THE LONELIEST ROAD**
When *Life* magazine described the 287-mile stretch of Nevada's Highway 50, from Ely to Fernley, as the loneliest road in America, it was not supposed to be a compliment. However, the state has embraced the name with enthusiasm, and visitors can collect stamps along the way in exchange for an official certificate signed by the state governor to prove that you survived your journey.
Historical attractions along the centuries-old pathway - Pony Express riders used to gallop along the route before the telegraph rendered the service obsolete - include the Nevada Northern Railway museum in Ely, and the Great Basin National Park, which has the darkest night skies in the US as well as the Great Basin Observatory to search them. Most visitors, though, will be drawn here for the exceptionally

RIGHT:
The 'loneliest road in America'

BELOW:
Ruby Mountains, near Elko



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK

good off-road hiking and the pursuit of the classic 'vanishing point' road trip picture.

▶ **SKIING AND PUTTING**
Nevada might be best known for its deserts but with abundant mountains and temperatures hitting minus 40C in winter, it's the perfect setting for skiing. Mount Rose ski resort is just 30 minutes from Reno, meaning you can load up on the casino buffet in the morning, hit the slopes, and then finish off with a round of golf back in town in the afternoon.
On the other side of the state, the Ruby Mountains - known locally as the Rubies - rise to 11,387 feet and have everything from ghost towns, cattle ranches and heli-skiing to natural lakes, waterfalls and even its own beer (from the Ruby Mountain Brewing Company). If you're keen to soak up the view from your balcony, then head for a night at Ruby 360 Lodge, an enormous 10-bedroom luxury lodge. **tw**

Lights of Las Vegas

Built on gambling but trying hard to prove it's not just about slot machines, cocktails and craps tables, Las Vegas is a place like no other. It has a reputation as a party town but the food, entertainment, hotels and shopping are first class, so you can have fun without going near a roulette wheel. First-timers should head for the Bellagio dancing fountain on the Strip before finding a spot for some serious people-watching and planning the next indulgence. That might be Cirque du Soleil's aquatic spectacle O, a 16-course tasting menu at Joel Robuchon, some retail therapy at Caesars Palace or sun-worshipping by the pool. And with the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam and racing supercars in the desert as well, who needs the blackjack table?

