

Desert despatch

Tamara Hinson rounds up what's new in Las Vegas

Las Vegas is more accessible than ever, and travellers who set their sights on Sin City are in for a treat - whether it's a new virtual reality rollercoaster, a new zip line (or 10), or the world's first e-sports arena for competitive gaming.

Improved air access is a key factor. British Airways resumed its Gatwick service this summer, while from next March, Virgin Atlantic is shifting its Las Vegas route from Gatwick to Heathrow, and doubling the number of services from Manchester.

In a world where artificial

volcanoes spew real fire and hotels implode on a regular basis, it's hardly surprising that I arrive at the Strip's newest restaurant to be greeted by a virtual, foul-mouthed Gordon Ramsay. Okay, the profanities are bleeped out, but I get the gist. I encounter the famously fiery chef at Hell's Kitchen, which opened in January at Caesars Palace.

Unsurprisingly, the theming is fantastic. Pitchforks - the reality show's logo - are dotted around the restaurant, and in the open kitchen, chefs wear the blue and red uniforms sported

by contestants. The menu is a tribute to Ramsay's most famous dishes, including his legendary beef wellington (it's delicious).

Changes are afoot farther afield, too. When the SlotZilla zip line opened on downtown's Fremont Street, it was billed as a breath of fresh air for this often-overlooked neighbourhood. Although its transformation is a work in progress, other attractions are luring tourists to this part of town. At the nearby Las Vegas Premium Outlets North, new stores include Escada, Alex and Ani, and Shake Shack,

where I slurp what might just be the best milkshake of my life.

The independent boutique-filled Downtown Container Park continues to be one of the area's biggest draws. It's a short walk from the Mob Museum (£20) and the Neon Museum (£14).

At the latter, a new exhibit, Brilliant, brings signs to life with a night time sound and light show, while the daytime tours of the sign-filled bone yard remain as popular as ever. You'll see Las Vegas's most famous pieces of neon and hear the stories behind them. I learn that the



ASK THE EXPERTS



Ross Sinclair, senior product manager, USA, Caribbean and Canada, Travel 2

Last April, the Monte Carlo Hotel became Park MGM. I'd recommend making a beeline for its new restaurants: Primrose, Bavette's Steakhouse and Money Line Sports Bar & Book.



Malcolm Davies, product destination manager, Funway Holidays

These days, Las Vegas's gaming revenue is surpassed by spas, nightclubs and fantastic restaurants, while the hotel scene has experienced a major shift towards style and sophistication.



ABOVE: The Linq Promenade and High Roller

LEFT: Neon Museum

Welcome to Las Vegas sign was never copyrighted (hence its appearance on everything from magnets to mugs) and that many signs use subliminal messaging, such as the letter 'S' drawn to resemble a dollar sign, in the hope that visitors will spend more money.



At the Crime Lab you'll analyse fingerprints, learn how to examine firearms for evidence and conduct a (virtual) autopsy

casinos once disposed of unwanted chips by embedding them in cement blocks that were then dropped into Lake Mead, and there's a collection of homemade tools used to trick slot machines into paying out. The newest attraction is the Crime Lab, which offers an insight into techniques used by forensic scientists. You'll analyse fingerprints, learn how to examine firearms for evidence and can even conduct a (virtual) autopsy.

STRIP ADVISOR

It's hardly surprising that the growing popularity of this end of town has forced the Strip's tenants to up their game. There are plans to develop its northern end, with a 4,000-room Marriott property, The Drew Las Vegas, which is due to open in 2020.

In the same year, American football team Oakland Raiders will relocate to a \$750 million stadium, currently under construction at the Strip's southern end. It's a move guaranteed to appeal to sports fans who have been flocking here in growing numbers since ice hockey team Vegas Golden Knights joined the NHL in 2017, becoming the city's first major league sports team.

Back on the Strip's busiest section, the Luxor has added appeal for a different type of gamer. The Esports Arena comprises a competition stage, 50ft video wall and gaming stations. It's somewhat surreal, leaving the

chaos of the casino floor and entering a world where the only sound is the frantic bashing of keyboards.

On the weekend I visited, world-renowned gamer Ninja was due to take on amateurs for nine rounds of the hit survival game Fortnite. Little did I know professional gamers would fly in from around the world, and the showdown would see 667,000 people tune in online to watch the world's best try to strike it rich away from the slots.

FLYING HIGH

Should the gamers need to stretch their legs, I'd recommend the nearby Linq Promenade, a pedestrianised thoroughfare that connects the Strip with the High Roller observation wheel (£16 per person).

The team behind the High Roller is set to open the \$20 million Fly Linq before the end of this year, with 10 side-by-side ziplines capable of

launching all 10 riders at once. Despite its location just off the Strip, the Linq Promenade feels a million miles away. It's packed with some of Las Vegas's quirkiest vendors, including a Sprinkles cupcake shop (complete with cupcake ATM) and I Love Sugar, due to open in spring 2019.

Just a short walk takes me to the Big Apple rollercoaster (£11 per person), which passes through, and wraps around, the New York New York hotel. This too was recently given a high-tech makeover, with riders being offered 3D goggles that transform the experience into a high-speed, alien-chasing race over the Nevada desert.

And then there are the helicopter tours - these remain one of the most popular activities offered by suppliers such as Attraction World or Do Something Different, and it's now easier than ever to soar above the Strip (and beyond) in real life, thanks to the

wider range of excursions offered by leading operator Papillon. Sign up for the VIP Skywalk Express experience (from \$409) and you'll be whisked over by helicopter to the Grand Canyon's West Rim for a gravity-defying experience, on a glass-bottomed bridge, above the rocky outcrops.

I finish my exploration of the Strip with a visit to Monte Carlo, which recently underwent a complete renovation and has been renamed as Park MGM. The original MGM now has upscale Chinese restaurant China Tang, and there's more eastern promise on the horizon, as 2019 will see the unveiling of Kind Heaven at the Linq Promenade. Described as a southeast Asia-themed, immersive experience where guests can wander through Singaporean markets and Cambodian jungles, Kind Heaven will be brought to life with 600 role-playing actors, robots and holograms. Only in Las Vegas. TW



ABOVE: Big Apple Coaster



RIGHT: Grand Canyon Skywalk



Funway Holidays offers a five-night break to Las Vegas from £799 per person, based on two adults staying at Caesars Palace and including Delta Airlines flights from Gatwick, departing February 6, 2019. funwayagents.co.uk

North America Travel Service offers four nights at the Bellagio from £1,515 per person, including flights from Gatwick with Virgin Atlantic, and based on two adults sharing in May 2019. northamerica.travelservice.co.uk

Return fares from Gatwick to Las Vegas with Virgin Atlantic start from £312 on select dates until April 6, 2019. virginatlantic.com

