

Life in Las Vegas

It was in August 1998 that I arrived at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas. I had never heard of the place until a few weeks before when I learnt that my old friend lived in this town.

He met me at the airport and soon got to asking around how to reach his car in the parking lot.

“Las Vegas is not a small town after all,” I thought.

Well, it was, and it wasn't. It is comprised of one big street about four miles long, along which are built many hotels and casinos. There was nothing beyond that except residential apartments, but that was enough to attract thousands of tourists every year (45 million per year). Each visitor spends a minimum of \$2,000 per visit with the high rollers gambling as much as \$3 million on a 10-day visit.

Residents don't pay state tax. The casino owners support the city council to meet its budget costs.

Now, to continue with the story of my life and the process of adapting to Las Vegas culture, I started looking for a job in order to make money, which I sorely needed to cover living costs and to reach for the urgent needs of my family back home.

There was a vacancy for a radiation protection officer at UNLV (University of Nevada Las Vegas), but they needed only citizens. I enquired to teach in high school, but the pay started low and took fifteen years to reach an acceptable level. I didn't have time for that, so I decided to join my friends as a cab driver, but I did not know the town. I went to a security company (called Worldwide Security) and was accepted on the spot. My first assignment was at the Albertson's store on Maryland Parkway. It was called “Lucky Store” in those days.

I dressed up in the appropriate uniform of a security guard and showed up at the store. My instruction was primarily to guard the liquor room. At some intervals, I toured the aisles to show my presence and then went back to my station at the liquor room. The reason for paying attention to this room was to prevent 'backpack customers' from walking in, then picking one or more bottles of high-priced liquor like whiskey, and shoving it in their backpack and walk out of the store.

I guess that the thieves were quick to sense that I was a novice at the job. One guy with a backpack ran to me and said that a guy just pulled out a shopping cart from the gate and was carrying it away! I immediately rushed out to catch the thief, but there was no one around. I ran around to the back of the store, but there was no one there either. I came back to my station, but the guy with the backpack was no longer there. I realized that I was duped. I don't know how many bottles he carried off.

A few hours later, a girl was struggling to zip her overcoat. She asked me to help. Dutifully, I approached and managed to force the zipper closed and then saw her out the door. A few minutes later, during my break time, I went to the lounge area. The girl was sitting there after being arrested by the police. She had taken packaged, frozen meat and hid it inside her overcoat. That was why the zipper wouldn't close! The security camera had been watching her actions covertly and the police had arrested her red-handed.

Looking back, it turned out that instead of working to prevent theft, I was assisting as an accomplice in the theft. Better to have no security at all than having me there. The problem is that I didn't know the culture here so that I could look out for thieves that can come in any form.

Taxi Business

I took to studying the town and the layout of the casinos. I studied the map and then I took bus rides to correlate the map with the actual physical buildings. It was only two weeks after arriving in Vegas that I sat for the exam at the taxi authority. I passed it and was behind the wheel a week later.

I soon realized that knowing the locations of the hotels was not enough. I had to know the entrances and exit gates too. Some had both gates in the same area, others had them in different locations and still others had two entrances on different sides of the hotel.

I soon ran into trouble. I had picked up a passenger from Harrah's to the Flamingo. I went down Audrie Road (the street behind the Flamingo), took a right turn on Flamingo Road and entered the hotel drive on the strip side. On arrival, I announced we have reached our destination. The passenger made no move to get out. He just sat motionless. I looked back and he was staring at me. His face was red with anger and he was fuming.

"Why did you take me around when you could have entered here?" he asked. He pointed to Audrie Street.

I realized I had passed that way down.

"I did not know there was an entrance here," I said.

"What? When did you start driving a taxi?! he roared.

"Yesterday," I replied.

He couldn't believe it. He leaned forward, adjusted his glasses and examined my driver's license.

"I am sorry, I am sorry!" he said. "I thought you were intentionally long-hauling me. Here is six dollars for the ride and here is twenty dollars for your tip. You will learn quick enough. Don't worry. Keep at it." He tapped me on the shoulder as he stepped out.

Twenty-dollar tip?! Americans are really generous at heart, I thought. I was deeply moved by his graciousness.

Another day (maybe the third day) another incident took place. I was directed to go to a rent-a-car company (I still remember the name of it). After dropping the passenger, I headed for the exit. There was a car in front of me, and the security officer (a very elderly, gray-haired man) took his time to inspect its interior. He then let it through the gate; seeing that I was only a taxi, he had no need to inspect me and waived me on to pass. I dashed forward to clear the gate/pole before it came down, but it was too late. Only one car could pass at a time. The pole came crashing down on my bonnet. The guard realized his error and told me to back-up, so he could raise the pole. I did as he ordered but the sharp pikes had popped out from the ground! My front tires shredded on the spot. The security officer called his office and I called the taxi company. In a few minutes, two very elderly women showed up from the office and waited for the police to arrive.

"The cab driver wouldn't listen to our security officer when he told him to wait. Again, when the pole came down, he told him to wait before pulling back. It is the driver's fault. We were here when it happened."

I was dumbfounded. How could that be? I wondered.

Another time, I waited in the taxi line for my turn to load. When my turn came it was a group of girls heading for the airport. I jumped out of the taxi to help load their luggage. When done, I jumped back in and headed for the airport. We arrived at the airport and I got out and opened the door for them to get out. A guy in a brown shirt was standing by idly. One by one the girls got out and pulled around the guy.

“Why did you load six people?” he demanded of me.

He was the inspector/supervisor of the airport and I didn’t know him. He abruptly pulled out his book and gave me a citation ticket. I was aggrieved beyond repair. My friend had warned me in very strong terms to avoid the police giving me a ticket.

“They could take away your permit; they could even handcuff you and take you to jail. Be very careful in their presence,” he had said.

I felt it was all over. I was so dejected I couldn’t work. I decided to take a break and go home to recover. Fortunately, on arrival, I found my friend at home. I slumped on the sofa and blurted, “The police gave me a citation.”

He was alarmed. “What did you do? Let me see the citation.”

After looking at it, he threw it aside. “This is not the police. It is the TA authority!”

“What do they do?” I asked.

“They want your twenty-dollar payment. That is all.”

It was an enormous relief for me.

I had all sorts of varied experiences those first two weeks on the job. Once, when directed to go to the airport, I had an ill-tempered passenger who demanded I get him directly

and quickly to the passenger arrival parking lot. I didn't suspect that was forbidden so I drove as directed. When he jumped out and walked off, I was lost as to how to get out of there. I raised my voice and called to someone for help. He looked surprised as he set eyes on me and said, "Wait! I will talk to you."

I countered, "No, No! I am in a hurry!"

He was even more surprised at my reply.

"Wait!" he said. "I am the police!"

I shrank into my seat.

"What the hell brought you here? Don't you know taxis are not allowed here?" He pulled out my driver's permit and inspected it. "Look! If I find you here again, you will be in serious trouble. Get the hell out of here!"

Mercy to God, I beat it out in a hurry.

Later, rather than sooner, I studied the types of uniforms the police and the security officers wore, the drop-off areas in the hotels and the airport, and the way to handle passengers for better tips.

Strip Joints

Las Vegas is famous for its cabarets but the way I was introduced to them was like suddenly getting dropped into the water.

A passenger led me the way to his destination. It was called "Cheetah's." I thought it was just a hotel or restaurant. On arrival, I collected my fare and then asked the doorman where the bathroom was.

"Go straight through to the end, but keep to your right," he advised.

When I walked in, I was startled! The lights were dim, but I could see naked girls. They had nothing on except pants. The menfolk were well dressed and sat back in their seats. The girls would come over and sit astride them. They put their hands on the men's shoulders and swayed side-to-side, back and forth, up and down. Shocking! Shocking! On stage was a girl pole dancing. Other girls moved around with drinks at hand. I was the only one self-ashamed. This was entirely a different world than what I knew. That was a strip joint.

Over the succeeding days and weeks, I got familiar with many of them. It was in fact good business to bring customers to strip joints. A driver gets commission for every customer he drops at the joint. The doorman counts how many were dropped off and gives a receipt to the driver. The driver then walks in and presents the receipt to the cashier to get paid promptly.

On a given swing shift, a driver can get five or six trips (or more) to strip joints thus making more money than what he earns on his regular job. That was what enabled taxi drivers to be homeowners very quickly. It appeared to be the best job in town.

Of all the incidents that occurred while serving the strip joints, one incident remains unforgettable in my memory. The place was the very popular "Crazy Horse" cabaret. As I dropped a customer at the gate, the doorman approached and suggested to give me a receipt for three people.

"Take two and give me one," he said.

That had never happened before, so I considered and declined. Later, I regretted that I didn't take the offer. The cashier inside would pay me according to the receipt and I would give him his share. The next day when I dropped a passenger, I suggested that if he wrote for three customers I would give him one. He was taken aback! He raised his eyebrows in surprise and

stared at me. He was a different person! He was the son of the owner! In the dim light that night I had thought it was the doorman from the previous night. I was now considered a thief.

“So that is how these taxi drivers are in collusion with the doormen and swindling money from the business,” the guy seemed to think.

The other guy was working his last shift before his termination and had wanted to make some extra money. His ploy did not work for either of us. My captor pointed me out to the owner and I was not sure if I would be banned or maybe even prosecuted. It was very worrisome to me.

Gambling

Gambling is the life-blood of the town. That is what jump-started the growth of the town. The story begins with the laying of railway track that was intended to span the country east to west. In those days, trains ran on steam-engines, so they needed to replenish water in route and they found water springs in this valley. The railway was diverted to pass through this place. Then slowly, ranches came to settle around here and Mormons banned from the East Coast moved west to Salt Lake City and some moved on to this valley and built a fort. In 1905, land was partitioned into parcels and sold on auction to potential settlers.

What must have been a shrewd mind, legalized gambling here so west coast gamblers (especially from Los Angeles) sneaked here to gamble. This place, being out-of-reach of the police was an ideal place to gamble. The businesses grew and drew more gamblers from around the country. The mafia took over the control and built more and more casinos and hotels to meet the demands of the visitors.

With Hoover Dam guaranteeing electric supply, and bold, imaginative entrepreneurs like Steve Wynn, the town flourished in leaps and bounds. Wynn moved to persuade bankers to avail money to build Treasure Island, Mirage and Bellagio.

The “Mirage” they say, is the eye-opener for east coast tourists. It emulated an oasis in the desert. The total maintenance cost for the casino/hotel ran to a million dollars a day, and no other entrepreneurs but Steve Wynn would dare take-up this project to attain enough revenue to make a profit. But it worked, and tourists rushed in to see this miracle hotel.

Another bold investor was Kirk Kerkorian; he built Bally’s Hotel as MGM Grand. The hotel caught fire and people died. He then sold it to a slot machine manufacturer (Bally’s) and built a huge hotel/casino down the road, the present MGM Grand. That hotel, with 5,025 rooms, was the biggest in town until Sheldon Adelson came to demolish his Sands Hotel and build the Venetian; he later added the Palazzo and combined there are 6,000 rooms.

When I arrived in town, the Venetian was under construction. Bellagio was suiting up for a formal inauguration and grand opening. The Mandalay Bay was completed but stood empty. It is said that they discovered the foundation was sinking. Everyone had “tongue in cheek” but a solution was found. They pumped concrete into the base at high pressure and that stabilized it! Relief!

Most of these hotels have themes specific to them. New York, New York has a façade of the most recognized buildings in New York City, i.e., the Empire State Building, the Ford and Chrysler buildings, etc. There’s even a Statue of Liberty towering high above the front of the hotel.

Excalibur simulates the castles of King Arthur in ancient England as well as 'knight and horse jousting' shows.

Luxor has an Egyptian theme with the pharaohs and hieroglyphics carved in stone. Paris Hotel has the Eiffel Tower and the Venetian has the canal boats to simulate Venice in Italy. The expectation is that tourists will be drawn out of curiosity to peep inside their respective places of attachment or interest.

The strip casinos alone harvest a revenue of over \$10 billion a year! That is about half the total for all the state of Nevada and downtown Las Vegas.

Gamblers, once addicted, can't help playing on and on until they lost more than they intended. The staff pampers them with free drinks at the slot machines and tables. There are no clocks to be seen on the walls – no need to caution people to leave! Oxygen is pumped into the hall to keep players fresh, so they continue to play. Other more benefits are offered for high-rollers who could easily afford to spend thousands of dollars.

I was once told of a case of a professional gambler from Rome, invited to come and stay for free and play games. He was flown in on a company plane and installed at the Venetian. He gambled and got off with five million dollars. He asked to be taken back home to Rome. Obediently, they got him on the plane, but the pilot reported mechanical trouble and returned to the tarmac. The guest was told to stay back in the hotel for the few hours needed to repair the plane. He came back and started playing. He lost the five million he had won and another five million from his own account. He was then told the plane was ready and he could leave! That was a smart business trick. The rule of thumb being, the longer you played, the more certain that they will get your money.

Shows

One of the major sources of entertainment is shows. I think we have Shows of the highest standard here. Entertainment is the specialty of Las Vegas as it is the primary support of life. I have seen very few shows myself. The famous Canadian singer, Celine Dion, plays at Caesars Palace. Her voice is a gift of nature; she sings so sublimely one easily gets enthralled. I didn't like the supporting crew however; they ran around jumping, somersaulting, dancing and rolling about. I remember simply closing my eyes and absorbing the music of her voice.

The All-American Star show in the Stratosphere depicted former musicians. The audience roared at some points, but I did not see anything amusing. Later I realized people were appreciating how well the actors were able to emulate the original stars, but since I had not known them myself, I couldn't judge the degree of authenticity of the show.

Michael Jackson's depiction/show at Mandalay Bay did not have the star actor but instead the band played his songs. That was smart because it avoids the problem of having a star falling sick or being absent for some reason.

There are shows of almost every kind: acrobatics, singing, magic, hypnosis, sexy, pantomime, etc. but unfortunately for me they are too expensive.

The "Mystere" show in Treasure Island involves swinging, jumping and somersaulting in mid-air, high above ground level and is so breathtaking. The first time I had seen this sort of acrobatics was in Moscow, Russia. Then I was so worried that disaster would befall some actor and he/she would miss the rod or rope as they swung so high up and fall to their death. I closed my eyes and prayed for it to end quickly. This time in Las Vegas, I felt familiar with it and stayed calm.

I choose to go to hypnotic shows and magic shows when I can. Hypnotizing people and controlling their minds and getting them to do anything just amazes me. One volunteer woman, coming under the influence, simulated a sex act and a blow job with a life-size toy all while her husband was sitting in the audience. That was both embarrassing and annoying to me.

Internationally known singers like Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez dominate the stage at Planet Hollywood. Wayne Newton ruled at the former Stardust casino for many years. He has been performing since he was 17 and still performs on occasion at Bally's at 76 years of age. Elvis Presley worked at the International Hotel, later renamed the Hilton. Frank Sinatra performed at the Desert Inn. These were just a few of the giants who drew crowds to Las Vegas in the early days. Magician Lance Burton was at the Monte Carlo and the duo Siegfried and Roy were at the Mirage. They were the envy of the show world. Burton retired quietly but the Mirage show was halted, without advance warning, because of an accident. Roy Horn had a tamed tiger who came on stage during the show. At one point in the show, Roy dropped the string which connected him to the tiger. He bent around the tiger's neck to pick it up, but the tiger was not ready for this because it had never occurred before. The tiger grabbed Roy's arm. Trying to extricate his hand, Horn beat the tiger on the head. The tiger was furious and stood up; he grabbed Roy by the neck and dragged him away. Horn was rushed to the hospital and the show never returned.

Free Shows

A tourist can just walk down the street watching free shows without having to spend a penny. Of course, the shows cost the hotels thousands of dollars to execute but it is worth it in that good entertainment will draw more tourists in the long run.

My most favorite show was called “The Pirate Show” at Treasure Island. The storyline is as follows:- a British merchant ship on the High Seas spots a pirate ship and fires a warning shot. The pirate ship responds by defiantly returning fire. The British commander orders his crew to hit the pirate ship. The tall mast of the pirate ship is hit and subsequently breaks. Their retaliation is equally powerful. The British commander, surprised at this daring, orders a punishing attack, setting fire on board the pirate ship. To the commander’s chagrin, there comes a barrage of cannon shots and explosions that destroy his ship and sink it down. The crew scrambles for life, diving into the cold water and giving themselves up to the pirate ship.

That outdoor show was so enthralling that large crowds of people waited to see it. It repeated every ninety minutes (six times) up until midnight. The show is now closed; but people joke that the British got tired of losing to pirates every night and so asked to get it stopped. The boats are still visible at anchor.

The volcano at the Mirage is still running every hour. It shoots up colored water and a series of fire balls of combustible gas to simulate volcanic eruption. The accompanying sound is ground- shaking and it all looks real – a commendable show.

The Dancing Fountains at Bellagio cannot be missed. It is a network of pipes with nozzles – about a thousand of them. The water jets propel water into the sky with such force, they soar to over 450 feet high. The water dances as the nozzles swing side to side and around, choreographed with music from famous singers and musicians.

There are songs from Frank Sinatra (Luck Be a Lady), Elvis Presley (Viva Las Vegas), Whitney Houston (Star Spangled Banner), and foreign singers like Andrea Bocelli, Celine Dion, Elton John and the Beatles. One never tires of watching the dancing fountains accompanied by one of many talented songs (every 20-30 minutes until midnight).

Downtown Las Vegas offers its own free show every hour. The canopy running down Fremont Street between the casinos/hotels is about 1,500 feet long and was fitted with a million lamps that switch on and off under computer control to make images which are synchronized with appropriate music. The original lamps have been replaced with diode (LED) lamps – 12.5 million of them! This gives a high resolution of imagery and is very impressive to watch.

Night Clubs

Night clubs are another major draw for tourists. This may even be a higher draw than other venues. People like to party, drink and dance the night away. In my student days, a drive to a nightclub had been limited to Friday nights. It is the start of the weekend and no amount of assignments held us back as students. But in Las Vegas, every night is party night! People come to relax. After all, they have been working and toiling for months, so when they get a break for a vacation they need to relax and enjoy. They are entitled. So they come -- 40-45 million of them every year. They don't all come at the same time, of course. It is spread out over the weeks of the year. So the night life goes on every day. There are always tourists enough to fill the venues and dance, dance, and dance the whole night.

There are also after-hour clubs that open at one a.m. to last until ten a.m.

Recently, day parties and pool parties have also sprung up. Apparently, one does not have to wait until evening for a party to start.

I think nightclubs are the main causes for committing crimes. Men clash over women and take it out to the parking lot (which could turn into a shooting rampage). In some cases, there are failed drug deals involved as well.

A few weeks after I arrived here, I watched a handful of people sitting at the corner of Flamingo and Koval streets. They were praying, surrounded by candles. I asked one of the bystanders what it was about. "Tupac was killed here," he said.

It did not make sense to me then, but Tupac was a famous rapper who was shot dead while in a car waiting for the light to change. The killer has never been apprehended but is rumored that this was a showdown between east coast and west coast gang members.

Another recent incident involved a man pursuing his target and shooting at him in front of the Flamingo Hotel. The victim, fighting back, swerved his car and collided with a taxi, whose fuel tank (propane) exploded killing an innocent passenger. Many other similar incidents have occurred on a routine basis.

But much more than that is broken relationships and broken marriages resulting from illicit deals on the dance floor in the presence of a spouse:

"Why did you tolerate when that guy was holding you around the waist?"

"Where did you disappear to for a full hour with that guy?"

"Why is your hair disheveled?"

Mostly there is no answer. The guy then stomps away, leaving his mate in the club or taxi. True, there is no physical attack, but I am sure of many breakups. I once drove a guy to the

airport. He was taking a flight back home to Texas, leaving his wife behind. “I will clear out my things by the time she arrives,” he said.

Now many married people come here in groups, leaving their respective spouses at home to tend to the children and dogs back home?

“What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” is the dictum for the city, thus crossing the red line is quietly tolerated.

It is probably for such adventures that most bachelors choose to come to Las Vegas.

Boxing

MGM Grand reigned as the biggest hotel (5,025 rooms) in Las Vegas for many years. To fill the rooms, it has banked (besides the shops, shows and gambling) on the Grand Arena behind the main building. This is known as MGM Grand Arena and has a sitting capacity of over 15,000! This is where championship boxing takes place.

I grew up adoring Muhammad Ali – the greatest of the heavyweight fighters. Before him was Sonny Liston, whose calm stare alone was enough to send shivers down your spine. I remember when they met for the first time and second time. Muhammad Ali – previously known as Cassius Clay – floored him and floated around him. “Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee,” became a famous dictum of his.

He dominated the boxing world for many years and promoted the game like nobody ever did before him.

I stood at the gate at the MGM Grand Arena with awe as I realized this was the place where most of these fights were being held. This was the center of the boxing world! This was

where Mike Tyson would, sensing that he was losing to Evander Holyfield, bit off Evander's ear. He literally bit off a piece of the ear, and as he later admitted, spit it out of his mouth.

This was where George Forman trampled and knocked around the terrible Joe Fraser.

This was where Floyd Mayweather, who won fifty fights straight, and lost more, fought the famous Filipino, Manny Pacquiao.

The whole town flooded with Filipinos from around the country to watch their fellow countryman every time he showed up here. It was the same thing with African Americans and Mexicans when their own fighters show up in town. All these fighters have their own histories, of course.

Sonny Liston came to settle down in Las Vegas, but because boxers were not making much money in those days, he ended up poor and died unnoticed in his single-room apartment.

Mayweather moved here from Michigan and is living a lavish lifestyle. He owns two private jets and several high-priced automobiles mostly just parked idle in garages.

Muhammad Ali succumbed to Parkinson's disease but before he died he volunteered to work with Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health which studies these diseases. Ali's brain is believed to be bequeathed and is in Las Vegas now. The building, by the way, has its roof so convoluted to mimic the brain. It has been called "the ugliest building in the world."

Mike Tyson lives here and continues to do shows, again at the MGM.

I remember watching in excitement his last encounter with the British heavyweight champion, Lennox Lewis, who managed to keep him at bay and boxed at a distance thus avoiding the famous, devastating punches and finally delivering his own punch to the chin which floored Tyson for good.

I never thought I would see that day, but I did. This was all at the MGM Grand Arena. This was where the trucks mounted with satellite dishes came to park and broadcast to the world. I had watched some of these fights from my house in Ethiopia. Now I am here in Las Vegas – the center of the heart-stopping encounters of boxing titans of the world. What a place I have come to!

Marriages and Divorces

I used to wonder why people travel from Europe to Las Vegas to get married. It looks as if they have no churches in their countries. There are not that many churches here either, but there are a couple of good reasons. One is easiness. All it takes is two hours from start to finish. They go to the marriage bureau at the courthouse, collect the forms, and take them to chapels to get filled out and it is done. No need for formal dress or bouquets of flowers or gowns and tuxedos; but if needed, all are available for rent--even shoes and neckties!

So a couple can fly in from anywhere, get the certificate of marriage, and be done without the need for a retinue of guests or dinner parties. There is no need to go somewhere else for a honeymoon either as Las Vegas provides all the fun and glamour needed to enjoy it.

Another reason is the alimony matter. A partner must stay married for seven years to claim alimony. So a crafty girl cannot scheme to get hitched to a rich guy then get divorced the next day and go to claim alimony for the rest of her life. That layer of protection leads rich guys to do it in Las Vegas if they choose to get married.

Some marriages are performed on impulse. A case in point is the marriage of singer Britney Spears at “Little White Wedding Chapel.” The marriage lasted a mere 24 hours (or was

it 20); she divorced him the next day. But the chapel has become famous for hosting such high-profile weddings/marriages.

I was once involved in this process. I drove a couple who intended to get married. It was a drive-through ceremony at this same chapel.

We parked at a window on the driveway. An official showed up and asked for the form and ID's. He then notified them that they each need a witness to co-sign on the certificate of marriage. The girl found someone who was in the vicinity. The man had to get one too, so he looked at me and said, "Sir, can you please be my witness?"

I agreed. We sat in the car while the 'minister' mumbled a few words by way of officiating the ceremony. The bride kept munching on her potato chips. The process was over in a couple of minutes and off we went with the certificate. It was that easy.

Divorce is easy too. In many other places the courts delay the case to allow for a cooling off period. That could be six months to a year. In Las Vegas there is no need for such obstacles. Once, a lady in a gown with a bouquet of flowers was escorted to my taxi. The man ushered her in and left. I thought he was the husband, but he was the doorman for the Venetian Hotel. I politely asked her why she was crying and if I could help. She told me she had gotten married twenty minutes earlier at the chapel, but her husband quarreled with her and went back to annul the marriage.

"Why was that?" I asked.

"He asked me to kiss him, but I refused to save my makeup and he got mad!"

That was all that was required to break up a marriage. I have witnessed probably the shortest marriage on record.

Foreigners can come and rent a room in a ranch house outside of town and thus get identification card for the duration of their stay. That entitles them to be considered residents and they get a divorce certificate as rapidly as any resident.

Even total strangers can get married on the lam. I had a couple headed for the marriage bureau to collect the form to take to the chapel. After a few minutes of casual talk in route to the court, the girl got curious.

“We are getting married; you haven’t even done sex with me yet?”

She actually used the “F” word. He kept silent.

“Take me to your room first,” she demanded.

“There is someone inside,” he replied.

“What?! Another girl in your room?”

“No, a man.”

“A man in your bed?” She mused for a while and asked, “Are you gay?”

He kept quiet. She told me to stop; she stepped out of the car and walked off in disgust.

That is how casual some people get with marriage. No wonder some marriages last just a few days.

I need to stress that there are genuine marriages taking place all the time. People do come back to celebrate their wedding anniversary of 10, 15 or 20 years ago and come back to the same or nearby chapel to tickle their memory.

There are also “Vow Renewal” ceremonies. They get married again with the flowers, gowns and tuxedos and an Elvis impersonator (or the like) to officiate the ceremony. Package

deals include photo ops, limousine tours, helicopter rides, and dinner receptions. They bring their children and friends. This is fun and, I think, enjoyable.

Conventions

It is said that Las Vegas has the biggest single-level convention hall in the world. It can accommodate up to a million people at the same time. People gather here for various reasons.

A guy coming in from the airport told me that he came to attend the convention just to see what is new and innovative that he can invest in. He wants to put his money where he believes is the best prospect to make money in new product development. In the early days of my arrival, there was the Comdex convention. It consists of computer and related things created mostly in the “Silicon Valley” and presented to the public. Microsoft’s Bill Gates and Apple’s Steve Job were spearheading the developments and came on stage as key speakers.

Later, Comdex was assimilated into another big convention, Consumer Electronics Show (CES). Participants reached 150,000 or more at times. This was the place where you came and introduced your new gadgets and electronics to investors, manufacturers and wholesalers.

When the above-mentioned investor believed that the gadget is useful and has a good prospect in the future, he offers to buy stock in it. With enough people interested, the company can be formed, and a manufacturer chosen. That is how creative individuals can rise to become billionaires in a few years. Bill Gates of Microsoft, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Larry Page of Google, Steve Jobs of Apple, etc. are examples of this feat.

Another passenger I met on arrival at the airport told me she was a humble shopkeeper in some town. She came to see what is new on the market because she needed to stock her shop with new innovations. She needed to keep abreast with development, so she could stay

one step ahead of her fellow shopkeepers to draw customers. She had come to the “Magic” convention (Men’s Apparel and Garment Institute of California) which has over 100,000 participants at the convention. The “Women’s apparel” is usually at the “Sands Expo” adjoining the Venetian Hotel.

There are several other product demonstrations being held during the year, i.e. medical equipment, sports and gym equipment, automobile parts (SEMA), pharmaceutical products, beauty and salon products, etc.

By far, the biggest Expo by sheer size, is the Con Expo (construction equipment). There are excavators, cranes and loaders as big as high-rise towers and they are computerized!

There are all sorts of professional associations (dentists, eye doctors, surgeons, broadcasters, physicians, teachers, car dealers, etc.) and various companies (Apple, Microsoft, Oracle, etc.) who come to town for meetings and conventions.

Among educational seminar attendants that I met was one from Canada. He told me he is poor and didn’t know where to turn to in order to make a living. He saw an advertisement for a seminar in Las Vegas training how to grow marijuana plants indoors (greenhouse). He came to take the training hoping that when the drug got legalized sometime soon, he would be ready to open a dispensary. That day came sooner than he expected (July 2017?). The first few entrepreneurs who opened shop in Las Vegas are already millionaires, so I’m told. I am convinced he too will become one soon.

Another important side benefit of these conventions is the networking opportunity that comes with it. This is where clients meet in person with their suppliers; where competitors gauge each other’s strengths weaknesses, prospects, and secrets of success. This is where one

looks for suppliers, clients and new ideas. They fly in from all corners of the country (and the world) to attend a one-day meeting and fly out again.

I have met groups coming out of meetings and witnessed how they draw their lessons from it. The way they pose questions to each other sometimes reaches my ear.

“Do you think they can achieve their goal?”

“Is that guy dependable?” “I doubt it.”

“I appreciate the way they do it! I think we should adopt that method for our company.”

“That guy is bluffing! Don’t you think so?”

“Now here is what we need to do...”

It is amazing how they dissect people, remarks and events. Then they sit back and strategize on their future approach. Face-to-face discussion (or as politicians call it “personal diplomacy”) is more telling in some respects as what I witnessed once.

A guy told me he flew here last night from the east coast and was going back today. He was staying at the Venetian Hotel where a big convention was in progress.

“Didn’t you like the convention?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t come for that. I came to meet a lady attending it.”

“Is she beautiful?” I asked with bemusement.

“No! No! That is not the situation. She is my client for several years, but I had never met her in person.”

“Do you live very far apart?”

“No, actually we work across the river from each other in the city, but she has no time. She is very busy.”

“Did you meet her here then?”

“Yes, for about two minutes.”

“Why only two, if you came all the way to meet her?”

“She is very busy.”

“Is she as rich as she is busy?”

“No. She works for the government, in the Defense Department.”

“Why don’t you invite her out for dinner, so you could converse to your heart’s content?”

“No! No! That would be misconstrued as bribery if her colleagues got wind of it.”

“So, is this two-minute meeting worth all the costs due to airplane tickets, hotel expenses and taxi fares?”

“Yes!” was the emphatic reply.

I was bemused, but for good or bad, that is how they value face-to-face meetings.

These conventions and meetings are, of course, typical of all places. Las Vegas conventions are not any different from those of other places. Why people choose Las Vegas more than other venues is because of the side benefits (amenities) it offers. One of these is the weather. When most places are cold, freezing, or even snow-covered in winter, Las Vegas serves as the perfect get away from bad weather. It is bathed in sunshine, warmth, and offers a less-humid atmosphere; that makes the stay here more enjoyable.

Equally, if not more important is the entertainment it offers to visitors. There are world-class shows in the theaters: magic, hypnosis, acrobatics, musical, pantomime, sexy shows and other types so that everyone can find something of their choosing. Nightclubs and pool parties

draw the young to the city. Gambling is another major draw because people want to take their chances and try for the jackpot, which is very rare.

The revenue a single, big convention brings to town is in the millions. The hotel rooms alone can increase their daily rate from \$150 at slow times to \$300, \$600 and up to \$1300 depending on demand. That is why the Las Vegas Convention Center is steadily expanding in size. When I arrived, there was only one hall. Three years later the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) has built another hall on a parcel of land across Desert Inn Road and connected it with four bridges over the street. We now have the North Hall and the South Hall. Yet again, another historic hotel (Riviera) was demolished and a large swath of area secured to build more halls. That gains them the advantage of fronting Las Vegas Boulevard (famously known as “The Strip”).

That will make it more accessible to the hotels and other venues thus enticing even more visitors from around the world to come to Las Vegas.

I have witnessed a lot of changes in Las Vegas. I remember the stretch of strip between New York, New York Hotel and the Bellagio. The Boardwalk Casino was next to the Monte Carlo and it had a real boardwalk for the pedestrians along the strip. Next to that was a helicopter pad where tourists could take off for a half-hour aerial survey of Las Vegas. Next to it was a row of shops selling drinks, gift articles and various paraphernalia. All that was swept away to clear the space for new development. This is where City Center stands now: Aria, Vdara, Cosmopolitan and Mandarin Oriental hotels, Crystal Shops, and Veer Tower. Included in this block of buildings was also the Harmon Tower. It was planned to be forty-two stories high, but it suddenly stopped at the twenty-sixth level when they discovered that an I-beam at the base

of the building was mislaid from the designed position. That meant the building coming up had no proper support at the bottom. They couldn't leave it as is since it was deemed very dangerous if an earthquake of significant magnitude occurred. To live with the prospect of calamity was intolerable, and the building couldn't be imploded as it stood in the middle of attached buildings. They had to dismantle it piece by piece. Millions of dollars to build it and millions more to dismantle it, all because of a small oversight of a construction worker who misplaced the I-beam; that was a deadly cost.

Another high-rise that met with bad fate was the Fountainblue. It was planned to complete it for \$3 billion and \$2 billion had already been spent when the Great Recession arrived. The banks refused to give the last billion. The ghost building stood idle for years and was given away to Carl Icahn (former owner of Stratosphere Hotel/Casino) for just \$150 million. He waited until prices went up and then sold it for \$600 million or so. At this time of writing, it is still not moving forward (though it was renamed The Drew Las Vegas). Someday it will be completed and start service.

The Stardust Hotel (where Wayne Newton performed) was demolished to give way to Resort International. The Frontier Hotel also was demolished, and the empty parcel sold to Steve Wynn. This imaginative investor is set to revive the north side of the strip like never before. With the Las Vegas Convention Center fronting the strip, this area will definitely flourish.

All in all, Las Vegas is assured to be the most shining city of entertainment in the world.

Las Vegas Vices

By using the word vices, I am not talking about the major occupations that have people referring to Las Vegas as “Sin City” – the extensive gambling, the loose marriage and divorce arrangements, the nightclubs, the strip joints, etc. I have memories of little events that touch at the base of human nature. I will narrate three incidents, one each from a circle of friends, fiancées, and parents.

Two girls set out to find love in a nightclub. A guy approaches one of them and asks for a dance. Then he expresses his desire to take her out. She comes back to her friend and consults her. The other girl trashes him and tells her not to accept his offer. When the guy calls again, the girl declines the offer. He then approaches the other girl and offers to take her out. She accepted and ran off with him.

The betrayed girl was so mad she asked me to drive her to any good nightclub. Fire was shooting out of her eyes; she reminded me of Shakespeare’s quote, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” Her voice was quivering in anger when she said, “She didn’t even look back for a second when she ran out hand-in-hand with him!”

A friend’s betrayal hurts to the bone, as I have my own personal experience.

Another case I remember is of a girl engaged to a Japanese guy. She came into the taxi at the Rio Hotel and sat quietly.

“Where do we go?” I asked.

“Just drive,” she ordered.

On reaching the crossroad at Flamingo, I did not know which direction to take.

“Where do we go from here?” I asked.

“Just go!” she ordered again.

As I turned to the busy part of the town, she said, "Take me to a cheap motel."

As I contemplated, she said, "What do you do when your boyfriend leaves you in a club and walks away? My fiancée, a Japanese, brought me to Voodoo Lounge, but he doesn't dance, so I danced with other people. He then said, 'dance as much as you like. I feel sleepy, so I go back to our room. You come when you wish,' and he walked away! We are staying at Bally's, but I am not going to see him ever again. Take me to any motel."

I considered for a while and said gently, "Madam, I know the Japanese culture. He loved you and wanted you to enjoy. An American boyfriend would have dragged you out by the hand, but this one wanted you to enjoy."

"Oh! Is that it? Thank you. Take me back to Bally's then."

"We are here already" I said and opened the door for her. She got out and sprinted away.

That diverted a big mess in their relationship.

The last story is about a family who came into my taxi. The elderly couple sat behind me and their son was seated on the last row behind them. The mother had a difference of opinion with the boy and she kept explaining why it shouldn't be. The boy was adamant and wouldn't budge from his position.

"No, Mom, I don't take that."

The father sat quietly, and I indulged in listening. The boy finally went intemperate and cursed his mother, "Fuck you!"

I jumped in my seat. I couldn't control my anger. I swiveled around and glared at him. They all froze. I returned to driving position and kept the car on track. Nobody spoke. At the

destination I leaned over and pushed the door open for them. They stumbled out. I didn't care to apologize to any of them. They hadn't brought him up right; he is a spoilt child.

But is that a clash of culture? I was never brought up to insult my mother.

Killings in Las Vegas

Crime is aplenty in Las Vegas. That should be no wonder where partying goes on day and night every day. Alcoholic drinks of all types in the world are served non-stop and so people get drunk. Crimes then follow.

I remember when very many deaths occurred due to drunk people running across busy streets quite oblivious of on-coming traffic. They have since built walk-way overpasses (between hotels) to prevent jaywalkers crossing streets where they shouldn't.

Domestic fights sometimes end in stabbing or shooting incidents in off-strip residences.

Failed drug deals (as mentioned earlier) often end in shooting. That is because such deals are not legal in the first place and so cannot be settled in the courts.

Of shooting crimes committed, the most blood-curdling mass shooting is the one that occurred October 1, 2017 near the Mandalay Bay Hotel. The shots were aimed from the 32nd floor of the hotel, down to a gathering of people attending an open-air concert across the street. The culprit, Stephen Paddock, rented two suites and hauled in forty-seven guns (concealed of course) to use for this purpose. It was fifty-eight people dead and 851 injured, all in a few minutes. The police, scared for their own lives, huddled on the 31st floor below him, until he stopped shooting, and all was quiet. Fatalities would have been higher, but he stopped shooting and committed suicide instead. It was only then that the police reached the door and broke it open. I don't blame them.

Relatively minor cases occur at times. One case I remember was when a guy on a crowded street used a big, black man as a sign pole to locate his lost friend.

“I am behind him, look out for him!” he shouted into his phone.

The big man got angry and told him to stop, then moved away to distance himself. The other guy responded in defiant tones and kept tailing him. The big man lost his temper, turned around and landed a punch on the guy’s forehead. The guy fell on his back and hit the concrete. He was dead on the spot! An unexpected, unforeseen and unintentional mess that befell the individuals and their associates, relatives and friends here and in their hometowns in Florida and Michigan. A trivial matter gone nasty.

Another incident etched in my memory was the case where a fellow countryman shot and killed his own wife and her workmate at Treasure Island Casino and finally committed suicide. His wife had befriended this mate to the detriment of their love life. When asked to stop it, she refused. The husband went to the mate (a Nigerian) and begs him to stop it. The man categorically refused and said he loves her. It was at that stage the husband took this drastic action.

Similar problems do occur in families every now and then, but mostly they are tolerated by the husbands and in many cases are settled in divorce.

An acquaintance of mine met the same fate and divorced his wife. She had been enticed by his close friend who then married her. She took her daughter with her and she brought a claim to the property settlement which forced him to sell their residence; he had to move to a rental apartment and settle into a solitary life. That is a bitter pill to swallow, but his ‘so-called friend’ had no qualms about it.

Another one under the same circumstance is quietly babysitting his small baby daughter and spoon-feeding her in his single-room apartment.

There prevails a pervading problem of maintaining a married life in Las Vegas. I was told a true story of a guy who went and married in his hometown. When he had gone through the immigration process lasting more than a year, she arrived only to be enticed to another person. Undeterred, he went back and married again. When she arrived, she too was taken away. This time he solemnly confessed to his friend that he wouldn't bring a wife anymore. The friend got alarmed and exclaimed, "Why do you stop when it gets to be my turn?!"

The guy who told me this story was widowed and hesitated to go home to marry. I beseeched him to reconsider his decision and give it a try. He did go and marry, more for his mother's insistent demand than my advice. He made sure that his bride conceived his child before he applied to bring her, but it didn't help. She arrived with the child, but when he got her a job at Excalibur Hotel, someone there persuaded her to switch to him and that was that. My friend, now lonely and frustrated, fell victim to high-blood pressure, got incapacitated, and died an untimely death.

That situation was what prompted another friend to fly back home every year without interruption.

"Why don't you bring your wife here and get done?" I asked.

"Because, if I bring her, they will seduce her and take her!" he replied.

I can't blame the poor guy.

The root cause of the problem is the shortage of ethnic women in Las Vegas. The boys had fled over the border into Sudan and Kenya during the "Red Terror" civil war that massacred

thousands upon thousands of the opposing party youth members. They found their way to America with the help of charity organizations and many settled in Las Vegas. Now, there are not enough girls to be mates. As time passed, the boys grew into adulthood but remained lonely. It is this scarcity and frustration that brought forth the desperate move to snatch others' wives.

True, if one goes to a church of his own congregation in Las Vegas, one will find many more women than men worshipping there. These women were brought to America by their own sons and daughters to help babysit children and more importantly to apply to Immigration to bring the other offsprings still waiting to come to American. They are thus here to create a life for their children. This desperation leads to desperate measures to build a family.

There is also another important reason why girls are readily available for marriage in the home country. They want a future for their lives. They want to come to America to escape the misery there and in addition, to be able to help their parents, kids and relatives to ease the burdens of life. When a girl is offered the chance to marry and come to America, she will jump at the opportunity to do so. They will take the chance, and no one should blame them for that. Once they have arrived here, they earn the right to work and live, and are not obligated to remain married to someone they have never developed love with in the first place. The courts of law are there to protect their rights to divorce as they wanted; the husbands can do nothing about it.

This situation is not unique to my home country. I have friends from Iran and India who live solitary lives for years and years for the same reason. They, in turn, know guys from several other countries in the same situation here.

We all know that the divorce rate in American society is probably the highest in the world. This is because women cannot be subjugated or dominated since they have the status of equality assured. Immigrants' problems then pile up on top of this rate and so increase the odds to make a stable family life very difficult to sustain.

Memorable Occasions

In Las Vegas, I have seen death come in various forms. These are some of the many that left their marks on me.

One common way of committing suicide was by jumping off the Stratosphere Tower (before appropriate restraints were installed). The tower is 1,030 feet high and has a revolving restaurant and three different types of rollercoasters/rides at the top. One attraction called 'Extreme' is, I think, the scariest in the world. Now there are high fees for these services that draw large numbers of adventurous tourists. But there is no charge for jumping off to the ground since no one comes back to pay. That should be why people take advantage of this "free service."

I happened to be there some moments after a suicide jump. The 'landing site' was cordoned off and the police were standing by. I saw one bag sitting there and thought at first it was a sandbag, but looking at it again, I noticed it was odd in that it was a clean, white piece of clothing. Sandbags don't come that clean.

"What is that?" I asked the security guard.

"The remains of the body," he replied.

"What?! Where is the rest of the body?"

“That is it,” he said. He then reminded me of a biology lesson I had years ago. “You see, our body is 70% water, so when you plunge down from that height, the body smashes and the water splashes away. What remains is what they scraped together of the crushed bone pieces.”

It was small enough for me to pick it up with just two fingers. That deflated my self-esteem. I took myself to be an armful of a hefty person, 182 pounds heavy, but that is all water. So where is the ‘me’ part? It was a humbling feeling.

Another incident was when I was standing behind a sedan car at a traffic light about eleven p.m. After waiting for a while after the light turned green, I honked at the driver in front of me, but he wouldn’t move. I almost missed the light when I squeaked past just in time. When I came back the same way some thirty minutes later, I realized the driver was dead at the wheel! Police cars were parked around the car, lights flashing. Some medical crew members were transporting a body fully wrapped in white linen on a stretcher. Imagine! The guy was well enough to drive the car there and duly stop at the red light. Then he dies in the time the light changes back to green!

“Good Lord! I too could face the same fate at the next stop light!” I was startled. “Then, I shouldn’t stop at red lights?” I considered for a fleeting moment. But seriously, I felt I should prepare for all eventualities including this.

There were times when I light up at some incidents. One such case that really cracked me up was when I picked up a guy who came in and slumped in the seat.

“You look exhausted! But it is only morning yet,” I said.

“I haven’t slept the whole night!” he replied.

“Aha! Partying heavily?” I enquired appreciatively.

“No! No! This is different,” he said. “I was sitting by my myself at the bar counter when three girls showed up around me and chatted me up. Then they invited me to see their room. I walked along nonchalantly. When we got there, they offered me a drink. I just drank it. I didn’t know what it was. Then I got warm inside and fuzzy. They laid me down on the bed and pulled down my pants. Then they came over me, one by one, turn by turn, again and again. I just laid there, erect.”

I burst out laughing and could not stop.

“I just watched helplessly,” he said.

He seemed to be asking for my sympathy, but instead, I laughed my heart out. It was the laughter of the week.

Just what doesn't happen in Las Vegas?