

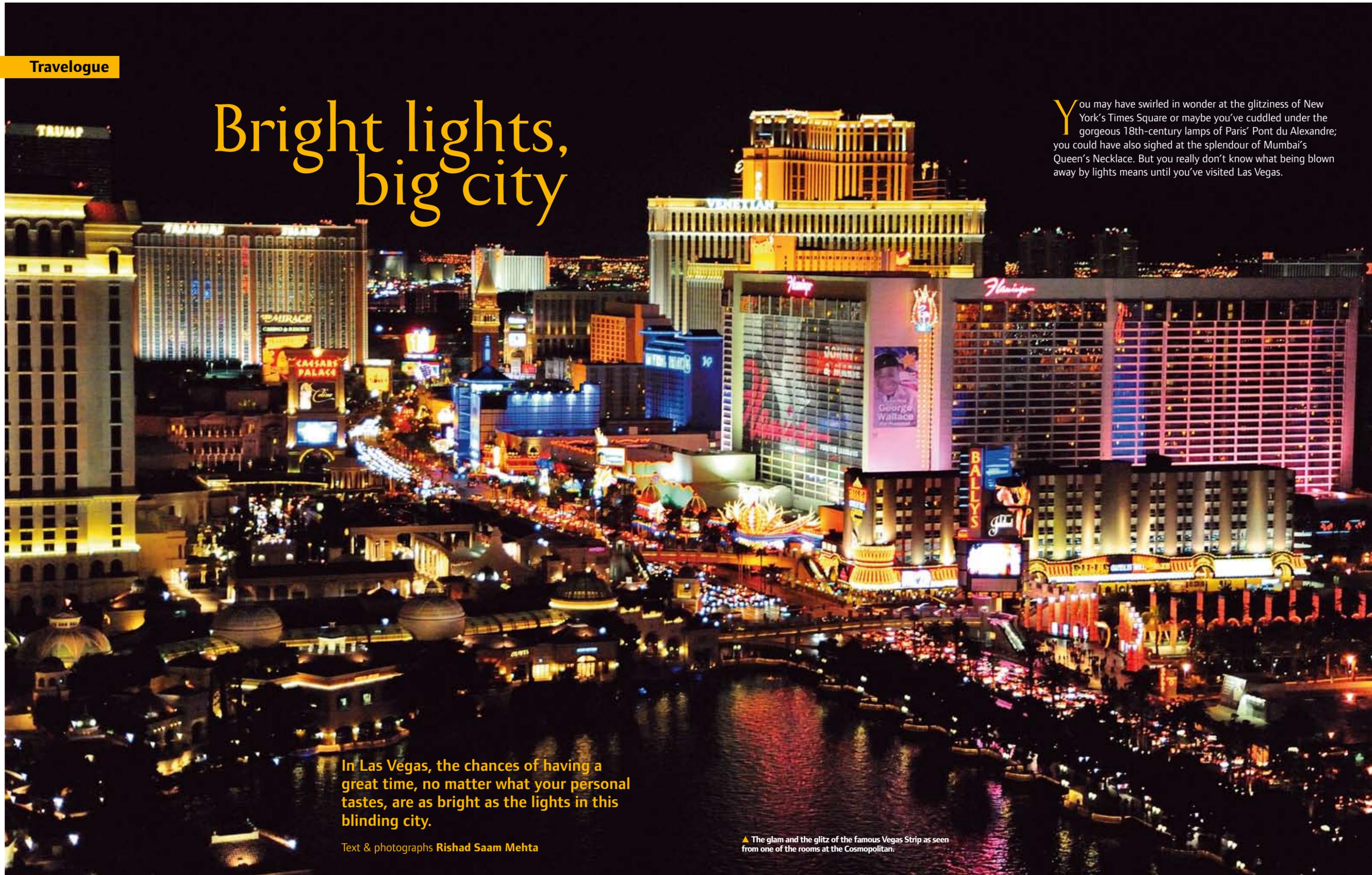
# Bright lights, big city

You may have swirled in wonder at the glitziness of New York's Times Square or maybe you've cuddled under the gorgeous 18th-century lamps of Paris' Pont du Alexandre; you could have also sighed at the splendour of Mumbai's Queen's Necklace. But you really don't know what being blown away by lights means until you've visited Las Vegas.

In Las Vegas, the chances of having a great time, no matter what your personal tastes, are as bright as the lights in this blinding city.

Text & photographs **Rishad Saam Mehta**

▲ The glam and the glitz of the famous Vegas Strip as seen from one of the rooms at the Cosmopolitan.





### Blaze of glory

To be honest, I was prepared for this wanton abundance of electric billboards and neon lights, thanks to movies like *Ocean's 11*, *Hangover*, etc. But, in spite of that, when I arrived in Las Vegas and stepped out of the taxi (after tipping the cabbie who seemed to consider it his birthright), I reeled under the wash of luminance that is the very heart and soul of Las Vegas.

Lending the heart and soul of this city a physical dimension is the 6.8 km stretch known as Las Vegas Boulevard or simply 'the Strip,' from Mandalay Bay in the south to Stratosphere in the north, which encompasses everything you can ever dream of to have a smashing good time. From sprawling casinos to superbly choreographed shows and crazy cocktails, Las Vegas will simply blow you away from the time you check in with a spring in your step to when you check out—sleep-deprived and partied out!

### Dancing waters

I arrived after sunset, which is a good time to arrive in this city that really comes alive when the neon lights are turned on. The Cosmopolitan, where I checked in, is located right in the heart of the action, next to the Bellagio. I remember that a few moments after I had checked in and was appreciating my fancy room with its cool cosmetics and integrated gadgetry, I heard the strains of Dean Martin's 'Let it Snow' and stepped out onto my balcony which looked right out at the Strip. In front of me was the famous Eiffel Tower of Las Vegas and next to it, the stunning fountains of the Bellagio. Every 30 minutes on the hour, music would strike up and the fountains would dance to the tune. It is one of the best choreographed scenes I have seen and the beauty is that, though they are the same fountains, they dance uniquely to different songs.



▲ Above: You could call Vegas a 'green' city, but in an unconventional way — the green of thousands of gaming tables.

Top: The fountains of the Bellagio are a Vegas landmark. They dance to the music like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

### The Vegas windfall

Once I had unpacked and changed, I rushed down to explore the Strip. Up until now, the only casinos I'd seen were those housed in one section of a hotel. In Vegas, though, it appears as if casinos have grudgingly relented space for the rest of the hotel. They are just endless. I saw more slot machines here than cars I have seen in a small town; more roulette tables than sunbathers on a crowded beach and more green of blackjack tables than grass on a golf course.



If you want to try your luck but are raw in matters of the dice, the slot machines are the easiest. A simple yank at the handle and the spin of the wheel and alignment of pictures could result in a gush of coins. Roulette tables are the next step and you could learn the lay of the game by hanging out by one. In fact, even watching is just fun. It's entertaining to see the ministrations enacted to appease lady luck before casting the dice or the tremors of thrill that run through people when the roll of dice results in a huge pile of chips being pushed to their side of the table. At an empty roulette table, the dealer will also gladly explain the game to you. Blackjack is a little more advanced and you really don't want to play that unless you understand it.

### Epicure in wonderland

But the abundance of casinos doesn't mean that you'd get bored in Vegas if you don't game. I don't and yet I loved walking through them just for the vibrancy they exude. Besides that, there are plenty of musical Broadway-style shows to be experienced and you'll see most of them advertised in neon lights.

And then there is the food, of course. It is simply impossible not to eat well in Las Vegas. The most popular, of course, are the buffets. The idea of a buffet was first implemented in the 1940s at Hotel El Rancho, Vegas' first Strip hotel. The idea behind it was to entice people to stay within the hotel. Since then 'the buffet' has become a Vegas institution with most major hotels offering one. Although, they tend to be noisy and crowded affairs, it is one of the things to try while in Vegas. They usually are lavish and indulgent affairs with mind-boggling variety from different cuisines and feature live cooking stations. Be warned that the popular ones like those at Bellagio and Rio have long queues. Since there is so much variety at each buffet, what you could do is take a walk around the counters and check out all that is on offer first to decide what you want to try.

For some quiet and fine dining I would recommend two restaurants. The first is Sensi at Bellagio. This contemporary restaurant serves four cuisines that complement each other, namely Italian, Asian, American and Seafood, and the four



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▲ Above: Slot machines are probably the very best for first-timers or 'economy' gamers.

Left: Flamingo is the oldest resort on the Strip still in operation today. The hotel contains a wildlife habitat that is home to a flock of Chilean Flamingos.

kitchens are placed in the centre of the restaurant. It's the kind of restaurant that you would at once want to visit again because there are so many delicious items on the menu. And, whatever you choose, it is sure to take your taste buds on such a joyride that you'll only wonder what the other items would be like. The chef seems to have guessed this response because there is also a tasting menu that you really should try.



The other restaurant is Rao's at Caesars Palace. The original Rao's restaurant in New York is so popular that you need to book two year's in advance to get a table. But it is easier to get into the Rao's at Las Vegas and the experience is much the same. The food is upscale Italian, cooked with a great deal of fuss by a chef who is very finicky about how each item pleases the eye and thrills the tongue. As a result, the diners are treated to a spectacular gourmet evening with impeccable service. Finally, if you really want to do a smashing breakfast then you should head to Serendipity 3, also at Caesars Palace. From all the ravishing dishes and indulgent deserts, the two that I recommend are the Crab Cake Benedict and the Apple Cobbler a la Mode. If you want something to chase it all down, go for the mixed berry smoothie.

### Join the joyride

After the decadent indulgences of the buffet, I set out to explore what you could do in Las Vegas if you had kids in tow. The place that will have them squealing with delight is the Dolphin Habitat at the Mirage, where playful dolphins can be seen cavorting in the pool and interacting with trained staff. Mirage also has the Secret Garden where kids can see white tigers, panthers and leopards.

For some more adrenaline-pumping thrills, you need to head to Stratosphere. This hotel has some insane rides and thrills like sky jump, which is a jump from the 108th floor harnessed by a line. Then there's Insanity, X-Scream and Big Shot. A word of advice though—avoid indulging in the buffet before coming here. There might be some very spontaneous gushing.

### A spirited end

Finally, to cap it all, as the evening winds down and you've tucked the kids in bed and are done with the wheels and deals, you

▼ Below: Kids love interacting with Bottlenose dolphins and gawking at the white lions, white tigers, panthers and leopards at Siegfried & Roy's Secret Garden and Dolphin Habitat at the Mirage.

Left: Las Vegas during the day is a different sight altogether. It's when you can truly appreciate (or dismiss) the medley of global architectural styles that the city sports.



should try some of Vegas' crazy cocktails. The city is known for the wild concoctions that bartenders create. In the Cosmopolitan, the Chandelier Bar is three-storied with the middle floor creating cocktails that involve liquid nitrogen and a flame torch. At the Mandalay Bay, there's Minus 5, which is an ice bar which specialises in vodka-based cocktails. Then there's Revolution at The Mirage, which is a Beatles-themed bar and lounge.

Las Vegas is often called the city of sin, but you don't have to be bad to have a good time here. Agreed that your wallet will take quite the beating but you would have spent it all on stuff that will not have you getting down on your knees and praying fervently for forgiveness afterwards.

## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to New York and Newark from Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Brussels. From there, you can take connecting flights to Las Vegas, via Chicago, with our codeshare partner United Airlines.

### Accommodation

The Cosmopolitan is bang in the heart of the action and it has excellent restaurants, a rollicking nightclub and a superb spa. For reservations, log onto [www.cosmopolitanlasvegas.com](http://www.cosmopolitanlasvegas.com)

### For more information:

Log on to [www.visitlasvegas.com](http://www.visitlasvegas.com).

This website has a good section called Vegas for first timers, a superb orientation if you feel you'll be overwhelmed by Vegas.