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Introduction

HOW DO YOU TURN A BROAD VALLEY IN ONE OF THE HOTTEST, driest, and most unlivable terrains on the continent into a cool, moist oasis that's accessible, hospitable, and profitable?

That was the question facing a handful of gamblers who stood, in different eras and various places, and surveyed a small, green valley surrounded by a godforsaken patch of desert and foresaw, somehow, a booming metropolis. Their collective answer, over the years, was first to reach the oasis with transcontinental railroad track and establish a service stop. Later, to erect a monster dam on a nearby mighty river to provide unlimited power and water. Next, to build dozens of skyscraping pleasure palaces, with opulent rooms, bountiful food, free drinks, round-the-clock entertainment, and legal casino gambling, and to illuminate it with a spotlight so bright that it could be seen from everywhere in the world. Then, to lay down long highways and wide landing strips to handle the hordes drawn to its rare diversions.

Railroad magnates, water czars, and never-say-die boosters kept the settlement on life support in the early surly days. The young Bureau of Reclamation dammed the river and blessed the town. Casino pioneers from southern California set up tables and shop, into which racketeers from all over the country moved with money, management, and muscle. Sign engineers dressed the town in neon and theatrical producers undressed the showgirls. Government regulators got rid of the mob and paved the way for today's corporate control.

A mere 90 years of history have created a city that ranks as the biggest boomtown this country has even seen (and the first 40 years don't really even count). The place now attracts more than 30 million visitors annually, who have one thing in mind: letting loose. Doing it, they leave behind nearly 15 billion dollars. Gambling, sex, free booze, cheap meals, show-going, cruising, loungingÑthe pastimes are legendary and legion, the choices enough to stagger even the most fast-lane hedonist or been-there done-that cynic.

The average out-of-towner, however, stays only three nights. How is that person to understand this place, to put the experience into perspective, to get even a glimpse of the big picture?

A good guide.