

# What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas

(Except when it happens to me)

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I'm still not sure whether visiting Las Vegas should be on anyone's "bucket list". If so, maybe for the people who have travelled and seen a lot already. The resort was designed by extremely smart people with a great vision and business sense, understanding that "kitschy" poor taste sells very well if marketed properly. Kitsch is still King and a fabulous money maker at the expense of people who never acquired any good taste. It's hard to tell who is having more fun. Is it the people who really believe that visiting Las Vegas is a one stop trip that saves the high expense and trouble of seeing the world, when Venice, Paris, New-York, Luxor, medieval castles are all in one place, a short walk from one to another? Or is it the people who are laughing at the ones who think they saw, felt and smelled the real thing?

Vegas came along amazingly well in offering family and non-gamblers entertainment, for whom going away from Vegas and visiting major natural attractions in the area is more attractive than staying in Vegas. This is not to say that there is no good entertainment in Vegas proper, as well.

Still, Las Vegas is and will always be the quintessential gambling place. It is very difficult to reach any hotel's reception area without passing through gigantic gambling halls, where one can see hundreds of people engaged in playing hundreds of gambling machines of all sorts. The most popular are naturally the ones that require no brains at all, just two hands. These are called the Slot Machines. With one hand you insert the coins, and with the other one you pull the handle, while staring with excitement at the infinite array of numbers, fruits, hearts etc., hoping that the spinning wheels will stop in a winning combination. With the advance of technology and human laziness, the pulling handles have mostly disappeared, and have been replaced with a touch button. The annoying and labor intensive coin dropping has also been replaced by the extremely convenient insertion of your credit card, so you can play until a "beep" signals that you run out of all the credit on that card and it's time to insert a new credit card, and so on.

Winnings at the Slot Machines are rewarded with special acoustics, consisting of high pitched, cheerful electronic sounds, along with the artificially amplified sound of the coins dropping on a metal tray. The rate of dropping is also rather slow, to extend the duration of the "pay-out".

There is an inexplicable omission in the whole process, in that the overwhelmingly high instances of invalid combinations for winning are not signalled in any way and remain silent. But the smart players, who may have been sitting there for 14 hours, strongly believe that inserting more coins with more determination will eventually bring about the big winnings.

Since only the winning makes noise, with hundreds, sometimes thousands of slot machines played concurrently, the halls are noisy all the time, filled with the cheerful sound of getting wealthy. The message for the people who just watch is clear: "Sit down and play, you will be rich, too".

The American Casino designers are very pragmatic and practical people. There is no dress code, extremely cheap restaurants are right on the premises, drinks are free, and hostesses are friendly and sexy. How can you go wrong? Still, walking around and watching the gamblers is quite entertaining, and you can see there some of the most unsavoury characters on earth.

And here is the paradox. The whole atmosphere is very conducive to gambling, even if a little, for fun, with a self imposed spending limit that you can afford to lose. It is indeed, very contagious.

The competition between the casinos is fierce, and every gambling establishment is heavily advertising its history of their best and biggest winnings. This is particularly true of the Old Vegas downtown, the Fremont, that lost its glamour for a while compared to the newer, bigger, more sophisticated "Strip", where investments of billions of dollars created mega hotels with world class facilities and entertainment. They are as much amazing as they can be tiring, so after a few days of touristy overdrive we decided to visit something else, maybe different, so we headed towards Fremont, the Old Vegas.

Fremont with its "Glitter Gulch" hit back, quite successfully, playing the "old times charm" card and promising an unforgettable, mind boggling experience. They first built the visible attractions, like the "Viva Vision Canopy", a true marvel for visual and sound effects. It's about 500m long, 28m high, 30m wide, with 12.5 million LED lights on the ceiling and walls, 220 speakers blasting with 550,000 Watts. If you walk through it, you need some time to unburden yourself from the sensory overload, to be ready to notice other things. And we did.

It started getting dark, and that's when the true spirit of Vegas kicked in, and the dense strolling crowds from the pedestrian walks, got quickly thinner. The public walked into the casinos. In Fremont, most gambling establishments blend nicely with the eateries and shops lining the sidewalks.

We noticed an important distinction of the Fremont casinos from the ones of "The Strip". Many are really small and cosy, projecting an air of almost "family entertainment". The large windows are colorfully lit and a prominent electronic Marquee is displaying customer luring messages of super high odds of very large winnings. In front of the entrance, you'll see well-dressed, sexy but not vulgar ladies and equally classy-looking well-trained men, who would shrewdly usher the hesitant wannabe gamblers inside.

We found ourselves smoothly sucked into a nice-looking, no pressure small-gambling casino, and were allowed to look and walk around until feeling guilty of not playing. There are people who watch the facial expressions of the guests very skillfully, from a distance, and when they feel someone is "ready", they go for the kill.

I saw a casino staffer approaching us and asking with a friendly tone what games we would like to play tonight. I quickly replied that we would like to start for a warm-up with "Slot Machines". He turned half way, stretching his left arm, pointing towards one particular gambling stand, and adding with a smile "Why don't you try that one, it's free now and Grace will take care of you". All the slot machines were tended and both the coin exchange and pay-outs were handled right there.

As we were approaching Grace, I took a closer look at her extremely vivid and smiling eyes, lips fully stretched into a professionally greeting grin, impossible not to return, because it was so direct and personal. It also looked awfully fake, but that adds amusement and helps the customers feel entertained. She raised her short arms and said: "Welcome to the best Casino you've ever seen. My name is Grace, and we'll have a good time and lots of fun because I will make you very happy tonight".

Grace was Chinese, short and quite heavy, with richly ornate almond shaped glasses and lots of jewelry. There was something cartoonish about her white blouse with a tiny round collar and perforated edges. Like a Chinese Betty Boop. Her golden looking chains were resting on her busty short torso and were rattling with each movement... Her English was fluent, but frequent high pitched sounds in both her talking and constant laughter were quite annoying.

Grace asked how much we wanted to play, and I exchanged US\$ 200 for 800 quarters.

We started playing and were taking turns in this fun game for mentally retarded people. The first eight drops did not yield anything. This gets any player slightly nervous, because the expectation is instant gratification, no matter how small.

At the 9th coin insertion, to our total disbelief, Grace tilted the slot machine slightly forward and gave it a few fist punches in the back. The Machine ended-up with a line-up of a winning combination for \$ 60, and for the next two minutes, we were listening to the friendly coin drops into the collecting jar, at a rate of two quarters per second. While watching our happy faces, Grace was yelling ecstatically: "Enough losing, time for winning, you see how I'm taking care of you?"

I got the hint, scooped out probably ten dollars worth of coins from the jar, and handed it over to Grace. Her eyes lit up, her grin got wider, her small head was nodding quickly in approval, but she did not thank us. Instead she said: "You scratch my back, I scratch your back!"

The rules were set. We continued playing with increased passion, madness and greed, as the money was piling up. Grace was doing her never seen before dirty magic, was shaking and punching the hell out of the slot machine, and money kept pouring out into the collecting bucket like a charm. With every windfall, following her

tricks, she was yelling "you scratch my back, I scratch your back!" And with each win, we were scooping out two, three or four handfuls of coins as a reward for Grace, depending how big the win was.

The dynamic of mutual madness and greed continued until we reached about \$1,500. It is hard to describe what is happening in the brains of otherwise normal people, but it's easy to get hooked and act like a fool. At that mark, I recomposed myself and suggested to my wife to stop playing and leave. She appeared to agree, but asked to continue just a little bit more.

We continued playing with smaller and smaller winnings and increasingly bigger losses. The carved-in-stone laws of gambling like "If you play long enough, eventually you'll lose everything" made no exception for us, and after a few hours of "fun" we lost everything. Could have been a \$ 1,000 gain, and now it was a \$500 loss. It may be small potatoes for real gamblers, but a very unpleasant feeling to us.

We left the establishment angry and disappointed, even engaging in a highly damaging and unwinnable dispute as to whose idea it was, who should have been more forceful to stop while still winning....Blah...blah...blah... Then suddenly we stopped, hugged each other and continued enjoying the walk, back to our hotel.

There is nothing new, unique or special about what happened to us. It happens to millions of people world-wide and that is how casinos make money.

What happened next day is quite unusual. I did not mind losing, because if one gambles, one should be prepared to lose. I was furious because I was made a fool of, an easy thing to do with a fool, like I was. I rejected the label of "sore loser" because I decided it does not apply to me. I was looking for some form of intelligent revenge, or justice, because I simply could not accept what happened to us.

During breakfast, I was not talkative at all, and my wife noticed that I was particularly upset, clearly more than she was. She asked me if I was still upset about last night. I told her that I was, and that I was going back to the Casino to get things straight. She asked me if I really wanted trouble or do something stupid that I might regret later. I said that I was planning to use my brains, not my guns, so she should not worry. But my wife worried and I said she did not need to accompany me, and I was going anyway.

Eventually she joined me up to the Casino, but I insisted to go inside alone, so she waited for me in the front.

I was greeted promptly by a very slick and well dressed man who asked me if I'd been there before and if I'd like a little tour of the establishment. I said, I had been there before and I liked it so much that I needed to talk directly to the manager, because I am a travel and entertainment journalist, and out of professional courtesy I would like to share with the management the things I plan to publish.

The host looked at me, slowly drilling virtual holes in my brain, trying to smell some trouble. Miraculously he did not, and agreed to bring the manager, and he did so, quite promptly. I introduced myself to the manager as travel and entertainment journalist from Toronto, Canada. I also told him that I knew for a fact that tens of thousands of people like, and avidly read my articles. This time I was planning to write about my amazing experience gambling in the Queen of Casinos from Fremont, and I would much appreciate a few minutes of consultation, privately, if possible.

The manager did not ask for any credentials and invited me into his office.

While keeping himself occupied being busy by offering me a drink, he asked: "What can I do for you sir?"

I replied with: "Well, I stopped here as a courtesy, to ask for your help in solving a serious dilemma I'm facing". "What dilemma are you facing, sir?" he asked, already showing a slight irritation in his voice and suspicion in his looks.

Then I told him that there is a planned financial defrauding of both the establishment and the gambling customer that I witnessed being done by one employee. I added that I thought if this is a case of one "bad apple" that is operating on his own, maybe the establishment should find out about it and fix it very quickly and forget about it. On the other hand, if this is somehow encouraged or condoned by the management, I would feel much better publishing an article about it.

"This is my dilemma, sir", I said.

"Can you be more specific about your outrageous allegations, sir?" "Yes, I can", I said.

I told him about last night, about Grace, shaking and kicking the slot machine to dispense more coins, about soliciting money from us and promising more staged winnings. I told him about Grace helping herself with scoops of coins from our winnings and stuffing her pockets, while yelling words of praise and encouragement with her annoyingly loud and shrieky voice. I had a feeling that what I was seeing would be hard to believe, so I recorded on my phone a few seconds with Grace tilting the machine and yelling hysterically. I also apologized for taking the footage, risking to be ushered out of the Casino, less than gently or even worse.

The Manager got red and sweaty in his face and told me that the risk of me being kicked out is still not over, then looked at me again and asked me very straight: "How much personal money did you lose in yesterday's gambling?" I said: "About \$500 sir, but as a gambler I have to be prepared to lose, so I'm not here for the money. I just think you should know who is working for you".

The Manager pulled open a drawer, handed me US \$ 500 and said: "Here is the deal, sir. I will investigate what you said and take appropriate measures. There is no

condoning here of any of that, so no need to write about it. Please leave now, and no need for you to ever come back here either. If anybody committed fraud it's you by taking pictures in a Casino. Don't forget to erase them. Good day, sir."

My wife was waiting outside quiet nervously and could not believe what I just pulled off. I showed her the money, and for a while she thought it was mine, as a prop to tell my story that by any standards was a "mission impossible".

The last compliment I got that day from my wife was: "Maybe after all you should be a journalist, not an engineer. And that picture taking with the phone, that was a lie too, wasn't it?" "Yes, it was", I said.