

acs national meeting

Discovering Las Vegas

by Paul S. Cohen and Brenda H. Cohen

A new and different experience awaits ACS convention goers attending the Fall 1997 meeting in Las Vegas. The glitz and excitement of this playground city are in strong contrast to the stark, quiet beauty of the great southwestern Mojave Desert in which it resides.

Many historians believe that Francisco Garces explored parts of Nevada in 1775–1776; others think the first exploration was not until the early 1800s. In any case, Spanish explorers gave the land the Spanish name *Nevada* or “snow capped” in honor of its beautiful mountains. Three Native American tribes lived on the land before the arrival of the Europeans: the Shoshone, the Washoe, and the Southern and Northern Paiutes. Today there are 25 reservations in Nevada, a state that joined the Union in 1864.

Las Vegas, or “the meadow” in Spanish, began as a whistle stop on the Union Pacific railway line between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. A land auction in 1905 established the community as a town, incorporated in 1911. Two events caused dramatic growth in the 1930s. In 1931 Nevada legalized gambling in an effort to finance public education during the Great Depression. The second event was the construction of nearby Hoover dam, which created over 5,000 jobs and a surge in the city's economy while other parts of the nation faced economic hard times.

To accommodate the growing interest in the Las Vegas and its gambling facilities, hotels were built in the 1940s. De-

velopment continued after World War II. Manufacturing, Nells Air Force Base and other government agencies, warehousing, and trucking are industries of this city's current economy, but tourism and gaming are the major employers.

In downtown Las Vegas, along Fremont Street between Las Vegas Boulevard and Main Street, where many casinos stand, is the **Fremont Street Experience**. Here, once an hour after dark, a 90-foot high canopy that covers 4 acres, lights up in a 6-minute computer-driven show with wrap-around sound and music. This area provides a place for outdoor festivals, street performances, and holiday celebrations.

In addition to gambling, a new type of recreation has emerged in recent years: the theme mega-resort. A sampling of these recreational centers reveals that each one creates a different fantasy. The **Grand Slam Canyon** is a nongambling, 5-acre, climate-controlled indoor amusement park with roller coasters, dinosaurs, and replicas of waterfalls, which reflects the evolution of the Southwest's Canyon Country. The main feature of the pyramid-shaped **Luxor Hotel-Casino** is a full-scale reproduction of King Tutankhamen's Tomb. **Treasure Island** is a representation of the world of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel: a pirate village on the shores of the Caribbean Sea where there are periodic battles between the pirate ship *Hispaniola* and the British frigate *Britannia*. A 33-acre nongaming theme park, much like a Hollywood movie lot, makes up the **MGM Grand Hotel/Casino**. Visit lush gardens under a 90-foot-high glass-enclosed atrium filled with royal palms and tropical foliage of Polynesia at the **Mirage**. A giant volcano erupts each 15 minutes and a 20,000-gallon aquarium, filled with exotic sea life, covers a wall near the registration desk. A pool for dolphins and an enclosure for the rare white tigers used in the Siegfried and Roy show are also on display.

For those inclined to venture beyond *The Strip* there are museums, industrial tours, and beautiful parks to visit. A trip to the **Las Vegas Natural History Museum** provides an intimate view of the plant and animal life of the Mojave Desert. There is an international wildlife room, a shark exhibit with a 300-gallon tank complete with live sharks, exhibits on modern birds and animals, and animated dinosaurs. The **Nevada State Museum and Historical Society** has galleries with dioramas devoted to biology, earth science, and anthropology. The museum specializes in prehistoric animal life and has a display of Nevada mammoths. Of interest to chemists is the exhibit on the role of neon in Nevada history. The **Marjorie Barrick Museum of Natural History** at the University of Las Vegas exhibits such topics as the development of mining and minerals in the state and early human life.

The **Desert Demonstration Gardens** explore xeroscape horticulture—low-use water gardening, extremely important in the desert areas of southern Nevada. Las Vegas also has two small specialty zoos. The **Southern Nevada Zoological Park** features over 50 species of reptiles and small animals indigenous to the area as well as a few universal favorites—a tiger, a lion, and some monkeys. In addition to the white tiger habitat at the Mirage, the two performers have opened a 2.5-acre zoo call **The Secret**

Las Vegas Natural History Museum, 900 Las Vegas Blvd.; phone 384-3466.

Nevada State Museum and Historical Society, 700 Twin Lakes Dr.; phone 486-5205.

Marjorie Barrick Museum of Natural History, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway; phone 895-3381.

Desert Demonstration Gardens, 3701 W. Alta Dr.; phone 285-3205.

Southern Nevada Zoological Park, 1775 N. Rancho Dr.; phone 648-5955.

Hoover Dam, Bureau of Reclamation, P.O. Box 60400, Boulder City NV 89005-0400; phone 702/293-8367.

Alan Bible Visitor Center, 601 Nevada Highway, Boulder City NV 89005; phone 702/293-8906.

Ethel Mars Chocolate Factory and Cactus Garden, 2 Cactus garden Dr., Henderson NV 89109; phone 702/458-8864.

Cranberry World West, 1301 American Pacific Dr., Henderson NV 89014; phone 702/566-7160.

Kidd Marshmallow Factory, 1180 Marshmallow Lane, Henderson NV 89104; phone 702/564-3878.

Planetarium, 3300 E. Cheyenne Ave, North Las Vegas NV; phone 651-5059.

Valley of Fire State Park, Route 15 north and then 169 west; phone 702/397-2088.

Red Rock Canyon, Charleston Blvd. west bound for 15 miles; phone 702/363-1921.

Mount Charleston Peak, phone 702/873-8800.

Garden of Sigfried and Roy, where rare Royal white tigers, Bengal tigers, snow leopards, and Asian elephants are bred and are available for the public to see.

Sites within 50 Miles of Las Vegas

Just 30 miles outside Las Vegas is one of the greatest architectural feats of this century, **Hoover Dam**. This 726-foot high structure spans the Black Canyon. The visitors' center provides a multimedia program with background on why the dam was constructed and how it functions. Tickets for tours of the interior and exterior of the dam can be obtained at the center. Get to the dam early in the day, as the valley can get quite hot and uncomfortable in the afternoon.

Hoover Dam creates the 110-mile long **Lake Mead**. The lake is a fine recreational facility for fishing and boating. There is a Hoover Dam Museum in Boulder City, the Nevada town adjacent to the dam. About a mile from the dam, in Nevada, is the **Alan Bible Visitor Center**, which has a small natural history museum with displays and dioramas of local plants and animal life and a lovely botanical garden.

The town of Henderson, a few miles from Las Vegas, on the road to Boulder City, has several interesting places at which to stop. The **Ethel Mars Chocolate Factory and Cactus Garden** has a self-guided tour where you can watch candy production and enjoy Mrs. Mars's cactus gar-

den. Ethel Mars is the mother of the inventor of the *Mars Bar*. **Cranberry World West** has a self-guided tour of the Ocean Spray bottling plant. There are displays about the cranberry, which is not a local crop, and the variety of products the company produces. A visit to the **Kidd Marshmallow Factory** includes a tour. Not only do you learn how the product is made but you can sample it as well.

The Community College of Southern Nevada in North Las Vegas has a **Planetarium** with a regularly scheduled show and multimedia program about astronomy. The observatory is open after the evening show, weather permitting.

Sites 50-100 Miles from Las Vegas

Just 52 miles northeast of Las Vegas is the beautiful **Valley of Fire State Park**, featuring wind-carved red sandstone and native American petroglyphs. There are many parks 50 miles to the west. **Red Rock Canyon**, formed by a thrust fault, features dramatic red sandstone formations. Feral horses and burros, desert bighorn sheep, and antelope roam the canyon. The visitor center provides details on touring the park and region. **Mount Charleston Peak** of the Spring Mountain range, rising almost 12,000 feet, has fine hiking trails.

When Paul and Brenda Cohen aren't travelling, they can be found at Trenton State College, Trenton, NJ 08650.
