

Lake Las Vegas is an island of serenity in that sea of glitz

By Spud Hilton
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Oddly enough, there really is a lake at Lake Las Vegas.

Odd not because a 320-acre body of water that didn't exist 15 years ago now sits in the middle of the Nevada desert. It's odd because Las Vegas has a way of playing fast and loose with names: There's no bay at Mandalay Bay, the Mirage is real, the Stratosphere is clearly in the troposphere and, really, what are the chances you'll win at Wynn?

Maybe the rules are different – more sane, more reality-based – because Lake Las Vegas isn't really part of Las Vegas.

During the past decade, this resort zone and man-made lake 20 miles east of the perpetually flashing, bustling Strip has gone from “Tonight Show” punch line to powerhouse luxury destination, mostly on the strength of a Ritz-Carlton hotel and spa, a Loews (formerly Hyatt) convention resort, three golf courses (with a fourth on the way), 10 miles of private shoreline and a sprawling upscale condo-resort and outdoor mall built to resemble a quaint Italian village.

Part golf-spa retreat, part gated community and part theme park (Tuscanyland?), it seems to be an antidote for Las Vegas itself: as much serenity as luxury; sparkle without glitz; scenery without showgirls; and access to a light outdoor experience never farther than an amble around – or a kayak on – the namesake lake.

Add to it the launch of several other high-profile off-Strip resorts in the past few years, and I had to wonder: Are some people coming to Vegas to escape Vegas?

For decades, the off-off-Strip attractions of Las Vegas were limited to Hoover Dam, the Grand Canyon and a cheesy shopping mall in Laughlin. But in the late '80s, as casino planners were scheming new ways to make the city wilder and weirder, Lake Las Vegas developers saw a future in putting some hills and some distance – geographically and philosophically – between their project and Sin City's chaos.

One 150-foot dam and 3.25 billion gallons of water later, crews started laying foundations on the new shoreline for what eventually would be the links, the upscale vacation rentals, the Hyatt Regency (now the Loews) and, in 2003, the focal point of the lake, the Mediterranean-themed Ritz-Carlton and Montelago Village Resort.

Once described as “Scottsdale meets Lake Como,” the two heavily intertwined properties – with a minivillage of chic restaurants and upscale boutiques, a marina, an ultraluxury spa and a bridgelike hotel wing made to resemble Florence's Ponte Vecchio – share some personality traits with their counterparts in the big, bad city. The audacity of manufacturing a lake solely to put hotels around it is definitely born of Vegas DNA.

The atmosphere, however, is a world away. There is a gondola water taxi here, but no crushing throng of camcorder-toting yahoos and no “O Sole Mio” on continuous loop. And gambling is a distant afterthought. There is a modest casino

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The 3,592-acre Lake Las Vegas, located 20 miles east of the Strip, was inspired by the beauty of Tuscany.

at Montelago Village, but when Loews took over the Hyatt property earlier this year, it tore out its gambling facilities, presumably because the high rollers it wants to attract are more interested in sinking putts than feeding slot machines. The secluded setting with easy big-city access hasn't escaped the notice of celebrities: Celine Dion owns a south shore home, and when Liz Taylor marked her 75th birthday in March, she did it with an A-list soiree at the Ritz-Carlton's Medici Cafe and Terrace.

Since the lake was created, other resorts west and south of town have found success with the leaving-Las-Vegas formula, and the expansion at Lake Las Vegas is far from done. Hilton announced recently it's planning lakeside Hilton time-shares and fractional ownership homes under the ultraluxury Waldorf-Astoria name, expected in 2009.

Seeing is believing

During a recent stay at the Ritz-Carlton, I spent an afternoon exploring the Montelago Village to see if it's possible to take the resorts out of Vegas and take the Vegas out of the resorts. Strolling from the Ritz's central courtyard (because that's what you do in Italian villages, you stroll), I found a handful of bistros – some more casual than others – and a dozen shops selling trinkets and objets d'art for “the discerning buyer” (read: filthy rich), as well as shops with jewelry, gourmet chocolate and just about anything that's “hand-crafted.” It was Carmel without the fog or the tourists searching for parking.

Not ready for dinner, I picked up by-the-slice pizza and a bottle of Acqua Panna from Pizza Mania. The water was imported from Tuscany, but the pizza was only a step above the Domino's in Reno. (The Tutti Gelati shop a few doors down made up for it with a Euro-worthy chocolate.)

The European illusion is maintained with fountains, faux cobblestone streets and several random alleyways that seem solely for the purpose of confusing guests – which, oddly, is the most authentic part of this Italian village. (Getting lost isn't really an issue: It's not that big, and continued walking, er, strolling in any direction eventually will put you at a hotel or in the lake.) Sure, the idea smacks of the same theme-parkism of New York-New York, the Venetian and Paris Las Vegas, but it comes across as a modern version “in the style of” rather than a “cheesy imitation.”

Most of the year, gondola-style water taxis provide transport between the Loews and Montelago Village. It's also easy (even in this golf-cart culture) to walk it – at least when it's not 113 degrees out. There was a time when guests could “rough it” by hiking into the surrounding hills and cliffs, but when I asked the Ritz-Carlton concierge about trails, he said much of the land above the lake is roped off or under construction.

Ambling (because that's what you do in the Italian countryside) along Montelago Boulevard, the closest thing to a main strip, I couldn't help but notice the balance of nature and development that, while unlikely to win any awards from the Sierra Club, is far from urban. There's not a single obnoxious electronic billboard touting tickets for Penn & Teller or the Thunder From Down Under. There are no high-rises, and even the taller buildings are easily dwarfed by the horseshoe of hills. The colors and the profile of the Ritz and the sprawling village blend with the stark, red-orange hills.

Unlike in Vegas, a walk down this strip (and the 3 1/2 miles of walking/jogging paths along the lake) provides great vistas, semi-fresh air and a refreshing lack of guys handing out escort trading cards every 20 yards. Even better, you're never farther than a mile or so from the Ritz-Carlton's Spa Vita di Lago and its “Healing Waters” ritual chamber, including steam room, sauna, whirlpool, cool plunge pool and massage shower. Best of all is the knowledge you can maintain the post-treatment serenity beyond the exit doors because the spa isn't in the middle of a chaotic, 3,000-room casino-hotel.

Walking back past the golf course, I watched a flock of coots (the feathered kind) pecking at the green around the bunkers, occasionally looking up en masse. A woman at the marina told me about the community's universal hatred of the coots (poor bathroom habits, apparently). I offered that maybe the lake needs a few alligators, although after thinning one population of coots they might go after the other. That might be a little too Vegas.

Easing into a kayak at the marina, I noted that the shocking yellow hull may be the closest thing to neon around Lake Las Vegas. Had I been 20 miles west, this would have been considered a ride, it would have cost twice as much and there would be a bar to lock me into the seat. But here, it was just me, a kayak, sunshine and a glassy lake – and less screaming.

Most of the fingerlike Lake Las Vegas is about two football fields wide, so plotting a course doesn't require advanced navigation skills. I pushed off from the dock and steered toward the opposite end two miles away.

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The resorts here are well buffered from the noise and lights of Sin City, but at the center of the lake, even the memory of the Las Vegas soundtrack – beeping, booping and the endless stream of sales pitches for shows, restaurants, nightclubs and showgirls – is silent. There are amazing features built into Las Vegas' hotels – the Bellagio's fountain, the Venetian's canals, the 99-cent shrimp cocktails at the Golden Gate – but none that offers the chance to appreciate it by yourself, just you and your thoughts.

No one would mistake this for Tahoe's icy blue waters and curtain of Sierra peaks. Then again, thanks to rules that prohibit noisy gas-powered watercraft (the pontoon boats and gondolas are electric), there were no Jet Ski riders to shred a peaceful morning on the lake, a common blight at Tahoe.

Because of its shape and hills that rise above it, Lake Las Vegas feels like an exclusive cove off a much larger lake. (Because the lake's water is imported – uphill – from Lake Mead, it is, technically, an adjunct.)

After paddling north to the mouth of the Southshore Yacht and Beach Club and into the marsh south of the Loews property, I glided close enough to a foursome on a palm-lined peninsula of the Reflection Bay Golf Club to hear a putt (and the subsequent cry of anguish). I then backed away when I realized I was floating on one of the world's largest man-made water hazards, which struck me as like pedaling a tricycle across a driving range.

That probably isn't a problem on Mandalay's imaginary bay, but here it's worth the risk.

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