

Ormand Family Activity

November 2010: Las Vegas

Charity's nineteenth birthday was on Wednesday 3rd. Since this will probably be her last big blowout birthday, and since she's all hung up on *The Phantom of the Opera*, and since Flagstaff is halfway to Las Vegas from Tucson, and since we've never visited one of the major attractions of the West, we decide to "blow-out" in a Big Way.



Plus, since we would cross the Colorado River at the Hoover Dam to get there, we can check out the new bridge!

We leave Tucson in the afternoon after collecting one of Charity's closest friends, Rachael (that's the idea of the birthday bash - to enjoy Las Vegas with the Three Amigas). It takes five hours to get to Flagstaff, where we collect Charity and her other friend, Emily, at NAU. It then takes about four hours to get to Las Vegas. Of course, it's dark by the time we get to Hoover Dam. "That's okay", I think, "this way we can see it lit up at night!" Except that there's road construction on this side of the Colorado, no "scenic overlooks", and... well, we *think* we cross the bridge, but there are high concrete barriers on either side, so we can't *see* anything. Bummer. Hopefully on the return trip, when we plan to do the dam tour.

Anyways, right over the border we run into neon-trimmed casinos on both sides of Boulder City, which came into existence to house the dam construction workers. Continuing on, we come through the mountain pass above the city and see all the city lights spread across the valley. Beautiful. We continue on, get off Highway 93 onto Highway 215, and then to Las Vegas Boulevard. So we drive up the strip. Pretty hard to

get photos at night from the car, but it looks a lot like this (only from the street, not from the air):



Our hotel is just a bit north of Downtown. Driving past, we catch a glimpse of the Fremont Street Experience lightshow, which we hope to see for real tomorrow night after the show. The next morning, after a nice breakfast at the hotel restaurant (*not* complimentary), we proceed on our adventure. I have learned that pretty much all the major resort hotels have large parking garages that are (mostly) free to all comers. My intent is to park at Harrah's, where I plan to have our buffet dinner before the show, but I can't quite find the back-side entrance to the garage. So we end up parking at Bill's Gambling Hall, and proceed outside for our stroll down the Strip!



Most of the intersections have these large footbridges all ways. Some of the bridges seem to be under at least nominal control of the associated hotel, which discourage panhandlers, but usually we run into people

selling bottled water out of ice-chests, or tables with sunglasses, or street musicians. Down on the sidewalk we encounter Elvis (or several of them! No wonder people think he's still alive!) and Iron Man and the Mad Hatter. But mostly, and more frequently as the day progresses, hordes of hispanic men *and* women "card-slappers", trying to hand out pornographic cards to passers-by. Most of whom avoid even noticing them.

First stop: Paris! Of course, the Eiffel Tower is the most arresting landmark on this part of the Strip. The actual building is styled to look like the Paris Opera House, which of course makes us all wonder why *The Phantom of the Opera* is at the Venetian instead of here. There are some open-air restaurants on the Strip, and of course the Parisian Cafe is one of them.





The casino is the central feature of all the Las Vegas resort hotels, and they each have a "flavour". The Paris casino has a strong "French" style. The other three legs of the Tower come down inside the casino here, and this bridge runs from the gift shop where we buy tickets (\$10 per person!) to the Tower

elevator.

The elevator has glass walls and door, so we can see the structure of the Tower slide by as we ascend. Mommy has to keep her eyes closed! At the top we get a tremendous view of the strip on one side and the actual Paris hotel building on the other side. Here are the Three Amigas - Charity, Rachael, and Emily.



View of the south part of the Strip from the Eiffel Tower. This is in November; I'd been here during the summer a few years ago, and it was *smokin' hot!*. Today is entirely pleasant. Even now, there are people in those rooftop swimming pools that we can look down upon.

Planet Hollywood next door is promoting their *Striptease* show with suggestive video loops on their huge curbside jumbotrons.



After dark, the Bellagio puts on an amazing fountain musical show every fifteen minutes. We can see the works from above; I'll bet the show would be interesting from up here. Another triumph of computerized mechatronics!

The Strip to the north, including the expansive Caesar's Palace resort. The road bends to the right just out of sight here, so it looks like it ends at the "volcano" at Treasure Island. After dark, we can see flames erupting from it, but we don't have any time to explore that resort.



We descend from the Tower and continue our trek to the south. The lobby driveway to the Paris hotel encircles the Arch de Triomphe.

Just past Planet Hollywood is a series of stores. The Outback Steakhouse is in a very narrow structure that does not conform to their usual pattern. (Neither does the Walgreen's. Neither does the MacDonal'd's, for that matter, but their Golden Arches takes on a neon-trimmed Las Vegas flair at night.) We step into the Coca Cola store - two floors of Coke shirts, cups, pajamas, bottle openers, even a photo-op with the Coke polar bear. Across an atrium (where you can look down into a video game arcade in the basement) is the M&M store. *Four* floors of shirts, toys, towels, pajamas, videos... a mind-numbing array of M&M overload.



Including M&M artwork. With local relevance!

Next door is the MGM Grand Hotel, featuring the largest bronze statue in the world. Calls to mind the lion roaring from the "Ars Gratia Artis" logo at the beginning of old MGM movies.



We step inside the lobby and casino of the MGM for a look at their attraction - in this case, two lion cubs. There was a little terrarium or habitat inside with two grown lionesses in addition to the nursery, and a lion or jungle animal theme gift shop. Very interesting.

There were little globular monkey stuffed animal toys. Charity the monkey-hater wasn't interested.

It seems most of the hotels have some sort of attraction to draw people, in the hope that some will throw their money away in the casino. As a result, the main floors almost certainly have more visitors than hotel guests. This is

interesting merely because I don't believe hotels anywhere else would be favorably inclined to non-guests just wandering in and out.

The next step south is the Tropicana. That's a famous hotel, don't know what their draw is, probably big-name entertainer shows. We don't have time for that, so we cross the Boulevard to Luxor and Mandalay Bay.

Note the clear apex of the pyramid. A powerful beam of light is projected upward at night.



The Three Amigas enjoy the Egyptian-theme statuary outside Luxor. In the background is visible the track for a monorail or train that joins Mandalay Bay, Luxor, and Excalibur. The station for Luxor is right in front of the Sphinx. There is another monorail on the other side, behind the hotels; if it had gone downtown, or even as far as the Stratosphere hotel, I might have swallowed the \$14 per person all-day ticket. If we were staying at one of these hotels for more than a day, I most certainly would have.



Which brings up a point: The big-name hotels have big-name prices for their rooms. Some of them are around the \$1,000 per night range. But most of them have a broad range of prices, getting down to the \$60 per night. So it turns out that we could have gotten rooms in a fun resort hotel (with swimming pool and other amenities) for the same price as our off-the-strip Best Western! *If we had planned ahead.*



Emily and a jackal. She's a dog person. We cat people were looking around for a Bast or something. Didn't see any. We also didn't see any Imhotep zombies (thankfully).

The interior of the Luxor pyramid. The hotel rooms are arranged in overlapping tiers on the inside walls. There are elevators that move on the slope to reach the floors. This is where the usual tolerance of the hotels ends. When we came in, a floorwalker overheard Rachael's plans to ride the sloping elevator, came over, and informed us that the elevators were for guests only. He then asked what we would like to see, and suggested we go up to the level above the casino and visit the mall between Luxor and Mandalay Bay.



Pretty impressive. If we hadn't been directed by a staff person, I would have liked to have visited the casino to see if it had an Egyptian "flavour", and what the interior looked from the center. I'm not quite sure what the little African-looking city was all about, but it fits *in the corner* of the interior space! It's big!

Most of the shopping malls in or between the resorts seem to be targeted at the moneyed class - Versace, Gucci, that sort of thing. But here, and at the Stratosphere, there were different kinds of shops. Like one that specialized in *socks*. Never seen that before!

Mandalay Bay is pretty much the southernmost part of the Strip. It seems to be a nice place with an Ankor Wat, southeast Asia theme. We don't really look around, but leave to go back up the Strip, past Luxor, past Excalibur, and up to New York New York. We go inside, but we don't really look around, not even at the roller coaster which is the big attraction here!



Past New York New York is Aria, which has an art gallery. No time for that. Instead, Charity wants to walk around in the snooty shopping mall for a bit. While they walk around, we explore a bit. Like the restaurant that looks (appropriately) like a stomach. Or this little garden of plastic tubes with water vortices spinning inside them. Cool!



And this "fountain" of ice columns slowly melting into the pool. Literally "cool"! This is unique in that, for the vortex garden, they can just flip a switch and turn it on for the day; here, new sculpted ice columns must be brought out from the freezer and set up.

Behind is the Prada store, which Charity

and her buddies wanted to inspect. However, upon approaching the entrance, they noticed the store clerks standing near the door eyeing them with an air of "we know you aren't going to buy our overpriced stuff so you're not welcome". They didn't go in.

It is now five o'clock. The *Phantom* show starts at 7:00. For us to pick up our tickets at the will-call desk and get to our seats with margin, we need to be at the Venetian by six thirty. The choice is to just go to the buffet dinner now and show up at the theatre as we are, or go back to the hotel to change, attend the show, and find dinner afterwards. The

young females vote for the latter.

Coming back from the hotel, we stay off the Boulevard because we know traffic will be bad. We drive down Industrial Rd, west of the Strip, looking for Sands Rd. We discover too late that Sands changes its name west of the Boulevard! We end up parking in Caesar's Palace garage and threading through the endless casino to finally emerge at the street. Walking as fast as we can (for girls with heels), we cross the street and go up to the Venetian and try to figure out how to get inside. Once inside, it is a new maze to find the theatre.

But we finally arrive in plenty of time to get the tickets, grab a snack for Mommy, and find our seats. The show is very good (which doesn't stop our resident drama critics from analyzing singing or acting styles). Afterwards, the Three Amigas pose under the theatre sign.





And then the family. Actually I wanted to get a picture of everyone standing near the "No Photography" sign at the theatre door, but I couldn't get any takers.

When we leave the Venetian, we ascend the very escalator that we came down in our search through the casino! It was right there! Outside, the lights are gleaming, and the Venetian looks even more like a fairy-tale Doge's Palace.



We retrace our steps to Harrah's. Outside in the neon-lit night, there are many other young women in party clothes, and many young men checking them out. Rachael, Charity, and Emily draw their share of unwanted attention. There are lines of card-slappers we have to pass, and the sidewalks are littered with discarded pornographic pictures. (Those amounts of cards weren't there earlier in the day, so it seems the city does a good job of sweeping the trash off the streets every morning.) The advertising trucks showing what the "Hot Babes" who "Want to Meet You" look like are driving past in the choked traffic. Inside Harrah's we walk past the Twenty-One tables (where there are elevated platforms with girls dancing in brief underwear) to the buffet.

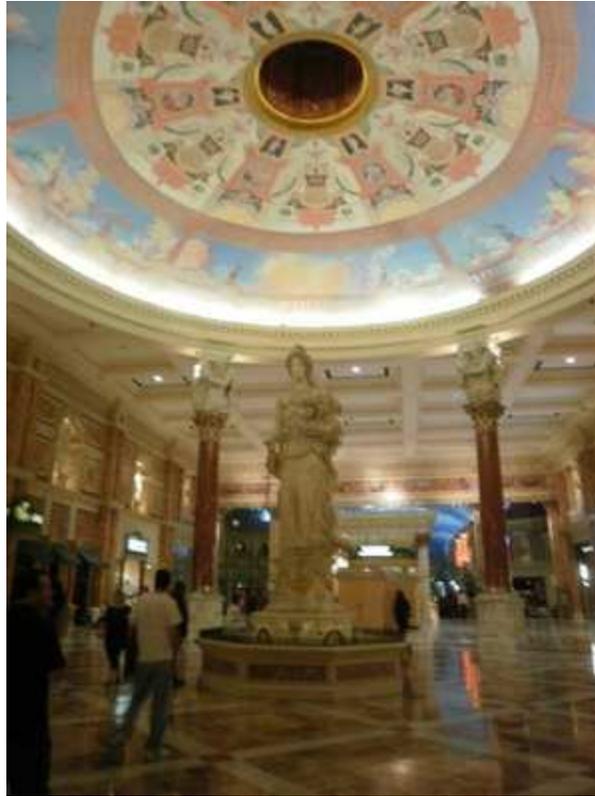
It was different than Golden Corral or Hometown Buffet in that, after paying (a lot) at the counter, we waited for a hostess to take us to a table. After that, it was pretty much like Golden Corral or Hometown Buffet, including the quality or nature of the food. Apparently there are worse buffets (Excalibur, so I've heard) and better ones (Caesar's Palace is pretty good, I'm told). All the same, I eat too much.

Outside again, we cross over to the Bellagio and watch the amazing musical water show. The way the slender nozzles can fire a great deal of water several dozen feet in the air very fast is most impressive. A different musical show every fifteen minutes. But it's midnight, and it's time to go back.



Now that we're not rushing to get to the show in time, we have the leisure of noticing the ornate lobby at Caesar's Palace.

I wanted Mommy to have a crack at getting a "Caesar's Palace Las Vegas" shirt, and since the Forum Shoppes mall is right near the parking garage elevator, we take a detour. The scale and grandeur of the interior is breathtaking. Here, Minerva greets the shoppers.



And the rest of the Pantheon awaits at this fountain. Note the ceiling; it's midnight outside, but you wouldn't know it in here. Unfortunately, the Forum Shoppes is another snooty upscale mall, so Jerri isn't going to find a theme tee-shirt in here.





While we wait, three nymphs cool their heels.

Well, we didn't get Downtown before midnight, when the "Fremont Street Experience" ends. This morning, at least, we will start with Downtown and see what the original Las Vegas looked like. However, the face of the city has changed; Fremont Street is no longer a narrow affair with heavy traffic creeping by the low dens of iniquity. Now the street has been blocked off for pedestrians and vendor kiosks, and the "Experience" canopy stretches overhead. Apparently some purists and tradition buffs decry the change. For me, everything changes, and an *improvement* like this is better than the *abandonment* I'm used to in Tucson.



The iconic "Vegas Vic" sign is still up and running. Someday we will have to see it at night. At least some of the arm joints are articulated; I don't know if they still move. Vic used to stand over a gambling parlour, but the Pioneer has been transformed into a series of tourist shops. That's fine; there are still plenty of casinos here. And "gentleman's clubs", with suggestive video loops playing from large screens over the doors.





Next to the "Golden Gate", the "Golden Nugget" is part of where it all started. It is now more than just a gambling hall, but an up-and-coming resort hotel in its own right, with a swimming pool that sports a water slide that passes via a tube through a shark-filled aquarium! Again, Vegas purists decry the trend for Downtown establishments like the Golden Nugget trying to turn into Strip-style resort hotels. For my part, if we ever come back for another visit, I intend to stay at a mid-range room at the Nugget!

The buffet at the Golden Nugget was our destination

for breakfast. I thought it was very good! Once again, I ate too much.

Also downtown is the "Neon Museum". As legendary (or at least historic) buildings are demolished or renovated, some of the characteristic signs or ornaments are preserved here, like this lamp from the "Aladdin" hotel.



After seeing the Downtown area (which is a quick visit), we get back in the car and go down the strip. Just after Main Street intersects Los Vegas Blvd., the Stratosphere Hotel juts the tallest free-standing tower in the area into the air. Up we go. At the top, we can see the downtown area just to the north.



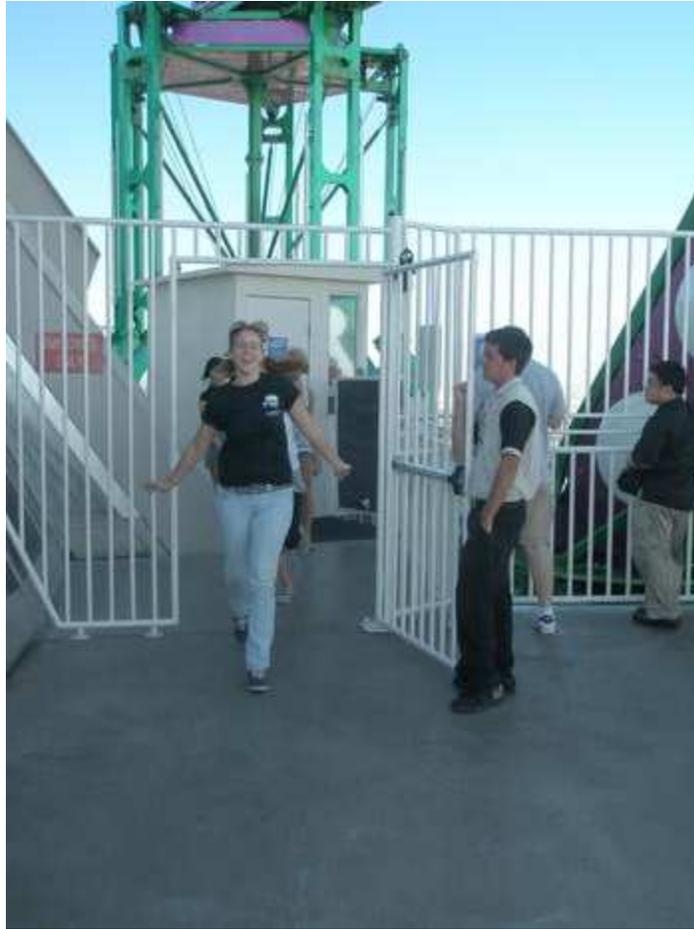
Of course, just going up in a 108-story tower and leaning over the glass observation windows or the rail outside isn't good enough. There are three thrill rides on the top. The "Insanity" ride twirls people out beyond the edge over the city. Yes, it's \$15 a pop, but you get a break if you get the ride tickets with your elevator ticket, and you can re-ride for \$7. Here's Emily and Charity being brave (more than Rachael and Faith). What, who, me? Someone has to stay behind and take pictures!



I think they're enjoying the experience.

Afterwards, two windswept and exhilarated girls stagger through the exit gate.

I will note that, similar to the observation tower at Hot Springs, while there were placards at the windows in the observation level describing interesting facts and features of the area, there was no attempt to identify what you're looking at.





Faith sends her dad on a one-way ride!

After seeing as much as we intend from the tower, we descend and collect our car for the quick hop from Stratosphere to The Mirage. One of Jerri's friends has recommended the little zoo at The Mirage, so that makes it a "must see". Turns out The Mirage was the home to Siegfried and Roy, the famous magic and animal act, up to when Roy got mauled by one of his famous white tigers and retired from show biz. Not that he retired impoverished, as we noted. The hotel continues to host the menagerie that Siegfried and Roy settled their animals in.

Which is more than just tigers. There were three large dolphin pools, one (this one) with an underwater viewing gallery. We kept thinking that (like most zoos) there would be a dolphin acrobatic show, but there wasn't really. Once the trainer set three of the animals on a synchronized "loop out of the water" maneuver, but that was about the extent of it.



Something else we saw was part of "The Urban Challenge" - teams of two or three young people would dash in to accomplish a "mission" at certain places, including The Mirage. In this case, the "mission" was to get the dolphins to perform a behaviour. Here's two Urban Challengers trying to convince a wet friend to do something unusual within their three-minute time limit.



Beyond the dolphin pools was "the enchanted garden" with the ground animals: Lions, tigers, a leopard, and some llamas. The tigers were indeed white, but since we had been to Arizona's "Out Of Africa" park, we knew that wasn't as special a thing as this little zoo was trying to make it out

to be. Here are some of their "white" lions, who weren't really *white*, but an unusual *pale yellow*. They were also bored out of their minds, and just kept pacing back and forth on a twenty-foot stretch of their much larger enclosure.

By now it is pushing seven o'clock. I knew the last tour of Hoover Dam started at 5:30, but made the decision to choose looking at this Las Vegas attraction over the dam tour. So once again, by the time we leave Las Vegas and get through Boulder City to the river canyon, it is too dark to see anything! The dam and the bridge will have to wait for a future visit. Which we are thinking *will happen*. There's just too much Las Vegas to see in two days. We didn't see the lightshow of the Fremont Street Experience. We didn't see the flashing lights of "Glitter Gulch" and the Neon Museum. We didn't explore the Palazzo or Treasure Island or Sahara, the resorts at the north end of the strip. So sometime in the future, we will *plan ahead* and line up a moderately priced room at a hotel, probably the Golden Nugget, maybe tickets for Donny and Marie or the Blue Man Group, find where the high-end buffets are... and set aside time to go see Hoover Dam and the Colorado River Bridge!