

Outside Bets

To hit a Vegas jackpot, hike the trails

By Matt Villano



GreatEscapes

Lone Ranger, eat my dust.

I think this as I sit back in the saddle and ascend Fossil Ridge, a sharp, desolate spine of land less than 15 miles from the Las Vegas Strip. I'm riding Chief, the Appaloosa version of Silver, and he's moving at a speed somewhere between a walk and a trot. With every step, his hooves kick up clouds of dirt and sand that linger in the air.

The ochre mountains of Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area spread out around us like a Martian landscape. As we climb, some of the reds on the horizon get redder, while others turn orange and brown.

Finally, at the top of a precipitous canyon, the 11,918-foot peak of Mount Charleston to the northwest comes into view, and I *yeehaw* in amazement.

"Pretty spectacular, isn't it?" asks Tom Flagg, the white-bearded cowboy who, atop a horse named Susie, has led Chief and me to this secret spot. Flagg works for Cowboy Trail Rides, the outfitter I've paid to take me here. Like every cowboy, the guy has an uncanny knack for an economy of words.

"Most people come to this city and never experience desert like this," Flagg says.

Until that moment, I was one of those people.

For years, my trips to Vegas revolved around that man-made, mile-long stretch of pavement that starts with Mandalay Bay and ends with the Wynn. This spring, however, after learning that much of the state is undeveloped—67 percent of Nevada is public land—a friend suggested exploring some of the nature beyond the Strip.

The idea seemed absurd at first—Vegas? Without martinis? And poker? Nevertheless, I agreed to give it a try.

A hiker traverses a stony ridge in Sandstone Quarry in Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area.

By Foot

My adventure begins on foot, in a part of the park called Icebox Canyon. The canyon walls rise dramatically, creating a giant natural hallway of fire-red rock. Walking out here is challenging—tiny stones give way to slick slabs of grayish sandstone, forcing me to concentrate on every step. Little lizards dart to and fro, complicating the course even more. They are my only company on the hike.

At the back of the canyon, near a dried-up waterfall, I stop for a moment to retie my sneakers and am captivated by the silence. No slot machines. No clinking poker chips. Only the occasional calls of a red-tailed hawk.

The next morning, in the lobby of the Red Rock Casino Resort & Spa, I meet up with David Bert, adventure activities manager and a volunteer naturalist with the Red Rock Canyon Interpretive Association who leads guided hikes.

Bert, 57, is a rotund and jovial fellow—not exactly the kind of person you expect to scurry nimbly over sandstone. He addresses this observation immediately.

"There are points during this hike when I'm going to be breathing real heavy ... " he warns. "Let me assure you: I am not going to die. I just breathe heavily. I'll

be fine."

I'm not sure if I'm more frightened or amused, but I, and a handful of others, follow Bert anyway. Our destination: Sandstone Quarry, where large blocks of stone evince the activity here around the turn of the century.

Rocks in this area seem to explode from the landscape. On a bald rockface in the distance, we spot climbers dangling in midair.

As we walk, Bert launches into a lesson in rock scrambling. His syllabus includes how to navigate rock ledges, how to leap across crevasses and how to scamper up steep inclines. I've hiked in Utah and written for magazines such as *Backpacker*. Even still, the guy teaches me a thing or two.

In the afternoon, we shimmy down into a natural cave where Native Americans have drawn pictographs of tiny black figures on the walls. The images stretch horizontally like a comic strip, and judging from the square hats on some of the figures, Bert supposes they tell the story of the Mormons' journey through the area in the 1800s.

"Think about it—these images were here before Bugsy [Siegel] ever thought about gambling in Las Vegas," he comments. "Some of those new casinos might be beautiful, but this is breathtaking."

By Bike

Talk about breathtaking—later in the week, pedaling up a dirt trail on a rented mountain bike, I'm huffing and puffing so hard it's embarrassing.

I'm biking in the south side of the park, along the rim of an area that locals call the Cottonwood Valley. A 26-year-old guide named Carlos Sebastian leads the way. I met Sebastian after breakfast at McGhie's Bike Outpost in the tiny mining village of Blue Diamond. By lunchtime, after spending the morning with him on the trails, I know him by the back of his head.

An uphill here, a downhill there—the terrain in these parts is what most accomplished mountain bikers likely would call "rolling." But the trails are not without their obstacles.

First come the boulders, strewn across



COURTESY: RED ROCK CASINO RESORT & SPA

Staying Off-Strip

The best spot to stay if you're looking for an off-Strip experience in Las Vegas may well be **Red Rock Casino Resort & Spa**. Located out in Summerlin, the property is a five-minute drive from Red Rock National Conservation Area. It's so new, construction crews were still working on the facility this summer.

The hotel mixes old Vegas and new Vegas for a classy appeal. In the casino, giant chandeliers pay homage to the glitz and glamour of Sin City in the 1950s. The property has something like 3.1 million crystals in its chandeliers. Everywhere something glistens.

One finds this same attention to

detail in the rooms, which boast floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Strip. The king-size beds are firm yet comfortable, with high-thread-count sheets and seven pillows. Modern amenities such as flat-screen televisions, wireless Internet, and an MP3 dock make it feel like home.

The centerpiece of the property is undoubtedly the pool, an oasis around which everything else revolves. In addition to traditional lounge chairs, there are curved chairs on platforms that rise from a shallow ledge inside the pool. One afternoon, I grab a book and curl up on one of these, a foot dangling in the water. It is, in a word, bliss. —M.V.

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entire stretches of trail like dirty laundry. Then comes the sand—beaches-full of it!—making pedaling difficult at best. Perhaps the most expletive-inducing of all are those darn Joshua trees, posts of biomass with pricklers that might as well be knives the way they slice into my quads.

Still, I persevere.

At the bottom of a precipitous drop, I find Sebastian resting on the side of the trail, staring at the red and jagged Spring Mountains that face us to the north. In between sips of Gatorade, he tells me that he moved here from Spain in 2005 after a near-fatal bike accident, and that he had never seen the desert until he arrived.

"Now, this desert and these mountains keep me alive," he says wistfully. "It's amazing how something like this can get stuck in your head and just change the way you look at the world."

We ride on, following a dry creek bed south past squat manzanita bushes bulging with bright red berries. I can't see Mojave sage, but I can smell it—a sweet, pungent scent somewhere between lavender and verbena. Another red-tailed hawk calls from above.

At the crest of the last hill, I come upon Sebastian admiring yet another vista: the Las Vegas Strip. From here, at least 25 miles away, the stretch looks like nothing more than a freeway rest stop. We linger for a while in silence, and just as we're ready to hit the bikes, a big-eared jackrabbit hops by, gives us the once-over, and slowly bounds away.

By Horse

I spend my last day outside Vegas exploring the wilderness with Chief.

From the vista of Mount Charleston, Flag and Susie lead the way past disfigured Joshuas and barrel cactuses that look like prickly fire hydrants. We pass a huge patch of red brome grass, and Chief stops for a quick snack.

"Giddyup!" I yell, proud of the fact that I have an occasion to utter this word in the context of the Old West. Instantaneously, the mighty creature speeds ahead, kicking up clouds of dust in true "Hi-Yo Silver" fashion. I feel tough. I feel rugged. And after about 10 seconds, I wish I hadn't

gone for macho.

I am still smarting when Flag helps me out of my saddle for a midday rest. He ties the horses to a nearby cactus and offers me a turkey sandwich with a side of wisdom, waxing philosophical about his former life as a public information officer for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. When I kneel to sit, Flag issues a stern warning:

"Careful where you park your backside," he says. "Remember, this is rattlesnake country."

Lucky for me, the rattlesnakes must be elsewhere, and Flag and I eat our lunches in peace.

We descend past a corral teeming with horses. Bailey, the lead mare, is drinking gracefully from a trough until we waltz by, at which point she looks up with her big, black eyes and stares us down. Susie and Chief stop short and wait for Bailey to resume drinking. When she does, we move on without a whinny.

The homestretch is right into the blazing sun, and I can't see a thing. Instead, I listen. The wind howls gently. *Clomp, clomp* go Susie's hooves. Chief's tail sounds like a whip as it whaps back and forth. The cacophony comprises a whole new Vegas—simple, subtle and subdued.

In the middle of the Red Rock desert, I have hit the jackpot. **M**

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Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area is about 30 minutes northeast of the airport; nv.blm.gov/redrockcanyon or 702-515-5350. David Bert offers free tours via Red Rock Conservation Interpretive Association; 702-797-7878. **Cowboy Trail Rides** offers horseback rides for \$45 to \$289/pp; cowboy-trailrides.com, 702-387-2457. **McGhie's Bike Outpost** rentals start at \$35/day; tours are \$109/pp; bikeoutpost.com or 702-875-4820.