

The Next BIG THING



By William R. Newcott

"This is a nice little place," said the host, sliding a keycard into the hotel suite door.. Hey, I told myself. This is Las Vegas. I'm ready for anything. I was not.

We stood in the living room of Villa Verona, a 15,400-square-foot palazzo perched atop the Las Vegas Hilton. Gilded domes, frescoed with sweeping clouds and hanging gardens, framed chandeliers of 24-carat gold and crystal. Their opulence was reflected in the marble floors,

polished to mirror perfection. A broad arch opened to a garden with a private pool. Goldfish cruised lazily in a rock-rimmed pond. In one of the two bedrooms, painted cherubs smiled down on a massive raised bed and a 60-channel projection TV screen dropped from the ceiling. Hanging in the bathrooms of Italian

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The big lights
of Vegas
above:
Vegas' Strips
which contains
the largest hotels
of the world.

All photos by Steve
Largent / National
Geographic.

from the ceiling. Hanging in the bathrooms of Italian marble and French onyx were Egyptian-cotton towels, robes and slippers.

"Let's see," muttered Gary Gregg, the hotel president, "there's a control for the drapes around here somewhere."

A gentle whir, and red satin draperies parted. Squinting into the harsh desert light, my eyes rose past thousands of new homes to the snowcapped mountains

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that surround Las Vegas Valley.

Three miles to the north were the tall hotels of downtown Las Vegas, where at night Fremont Street erupts into a strobing flash of neon. This is the home of the Golden Nugget, Binion's Horseshoe, and Vegas Vic, the 60-foot-high neon cowboy.

To the south lay the Strip—officially Las Vegas Boulevard—where neighboring casinos take keeping up with the Joneses to nuclear-arms-race extremes. Gleaming green in the sunlight was the massive glass-and girder block of the MGM Grand Hotel, at 5,005 rooms the second largest hotel in the known universe, a mere 195 rooms behind Thailand's Ambassador City Jomtien. In fact, 11 of the world's 12 largest hotels were within eyesight.

"I'll take it," I told my host. "How much?"

Gregg smiled. "I couldn't rent you this place," he said. "It's a complimentary accommodation for our very special visitors." Translation: If you're one of the handful of people who have the wherewithal and inclination to drop a few million dollars at the Hilton's baccarat table, you can use this penthouse.

The Hilton spent 40 million dollars to build this and two adjacent villas. Across town, Caesars Palace recently laid down millions for its own pair of penthouse suites.

"And as lavish as this suite is," Gregg observed, "as we speak, there's someone, somewhere, bent over a set of blueprints trying to create something even more extravagant."

Some would call it excess or one-upmanship. But wandering the casinos and neighborhoods of Las Vegas, I began to see that the quest for the Next Big Thing is shared by virtually everyone here, from the casino owners to the politicians and small businessmen, even to the churches. As people, industry and investment dollars pour into the valley, the chips are piling up on the table.

Without a doubt casinos pay the bills in Las Vegas and always will: Thirty percent of all jobs are in hotels, gaming and recreation, and those businesses in turn support other service and construction workers. But three



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