

Beer and Loafing in Las Vegas

My first visit to Las Vegas was in August of 1988. I was helping my sister move from Bullhead City, Arizona to St. George, Utah (god knows why) and we stopped in Las Vegas for the night, at some small, funky motel near the Hacienda. This was before the Excalibur or the Mirage had been built, and that was about as far as one could be away from Las Vegas and still be considered the strip.

Anyway, I was in a serious funk over some girl, and coming down off a brief speed jag, so I really didn't feel like sleeping. I crept out of the room, walked to the next convenience store and bought fresh batteries for my walkman, upon which I had been listening obsessively to this mixed tape of Black Flag, Blondie, B-52s, and assorted thrash metal.

Thus fortified, I hiked up the strip to Caesar's Palace. Las Vegas was a little different then. The first time I went into Caesar's Palace was the first and last time I ever felt under-dressed in a casino. The place was elegant; no, opulent, in a way I had never encountered in a casino before. There is no casino left in town, save perhaps the Desert Inn, where one can go dressed up and not be out of place. It seems like the only people in ties are the dealers and the only people in suits are pit bosses. I don't know if it's a function of me changing or Las Vegas changing, but none of the casinos have that feel anymore.

Two years later I was living in Las Vegas. Having lost the lucrative job I moved here for, I was working in the food court of a mall on the strip. One of my co-workers came into a huge cache of Flamingo Hilton fun-book coupons (full of freebies for tourists); he probably stole them. This is where I discovered the free drink gravy train. Since the coupons were good for any kind of drink, we would go to the Rik - Sha lounge and order huge, multiple-alcohol, tourist drinks; two a piece, from the poor cocktail waitresses. We never had any money, so couldn't tip the girls. Fortunately, the coupons said "gratuity included" so my conscience never overwhelmed me, and they never ratted on us for being there every night.

When those drinks were gone, we went next door, to O'shea's Casino, which was owned by Hilton. In the Flamingo fun book, there was a coupon for a free drink and funbook from O'shea's. On the street in front of O'shea's, they had cute girls handing out little scratch-off contest cards. Every card was a winner and the most common prize was -you guessed it- a free drink. So we would go in, get our O'shea's funbooks, which naturally

JoHn re

contained one coupon for a free drink, and head to the bar, where we would soak up six or seven of the strongest drinks they would serve us.

Eventually the bartenders grew to recognize us, and most were cool about it, even though these coupons were supposed to be for tourists, and not grievously abused by penniless boozers. It was cheap entertainment..

Casinos are entertaining places, if you're desperate enough. I used to walk through the casinos, behind the ranks of people stuffing money (which I didn't have) into slot machines, and proclaim "gambling is an addiction," just loud enough to be heard over the din of the casino. It was subliminal warfare to me at the time, but looking back on it, it



seems more like sour grapes cause I didn't have any money to play with.

I also silver mined aggressively. This had nothing to do with panning and everything to do with dipping my fingers into the coin return of every slot machine I encountered. Some of those machines leaked like sieves, and it wasn't too uncommon to get seven or eight bucks out of the coin return of a machine which someone had played for a few hours. Small change, but in the land of the \$1.99 all-you-can-eat buffet, eight dollars goes a long way. Unfortunately, casinos frown on this kind of behavior. It's not technically illegal, but the casinos will permanently 86 those they catch. I was only caught once, and it wasn't in Las Vegas.

My roommate and I used to traipse from casino to casino, silver mining, scouring the floors for dropped coins or bills, looking for credits on machines, hoping to find enough money to eat. That we always did was not so much a testament to our perseverance, but the unbelievable way money could be found in a casino, if one knew where to look.

I'm glad that my life as a scavenger in the casino ecology is over. I still tend to automatically check machines for credits, and I scan the floors for the occasional dropped dollar token, and my hands have an unfortunate tendency to involuntarily explore the coin returns of video poker machines, but these things are just vestiges; survival schemes living on in the form of bad habits.....uh, and that's what Las Vegas means to me. : }

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