

## TRAVEL

## Kids, just say no to a vacation in Las Vegas

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If you're considering a family trip to Las Vegas, because you've heard that it's now a place for kids as well as adults, you may want to reconsider. Take them to Disney World, the Grand Canyon, the San Diego Zoo, on a family cruise, or any other destination. We opted to take our winter break week in Las Vegas, with the same family of four we traveled with last year. Our friends' two girls (ages 8 and 10) got along fabulously with our two daughters (ages 2 and 6).

They take them under their wings like little mothers and keep them occupied for hours, usually at restaurants as well as on family trips. Since our last winter break trip went well to Disney World in 1996, we thought we'd try Las Vegas with a one-week stay at the Excalibur, one of several hotels claiming kid friendliness.

Not that we were eager to gamble, but a trip to Las Vegas was tempting because it has more activities for kids than ever before and is relatively inexpensive to visit with great room rates, bargain round trip air fares and hotel packages as well

as inexpensive food. Unfortunately, we found several minor and some major problems with our stay that you can avoid by not visiting Las Vegas with your kids, despite the latest travel advisories that "it's a family place."

### The kids side of Las Vegas

True, Las Vegas is more family friendly than ever before with theme hotels like the Excalibur, its exterior a medieval castle, and the Luxor, a replica of an Egyptian pyramid with the Sphinx at its entrance. They are sights to see. Circus Circus, owner of the Luxor and Excalibur, is the original hotel built some 20 years ago with kids in mind. It's at the north end of the Strip with circus acts daily and a midway one floor above the casino. The kids can win stuffed animals and toys, or lose dollars playing carnival games while their parents are gambling their day away at the casino below.

Circus Circus has a five-acre theme park called Grand Slam Canyon with a roller coaster that winds its way around the enclosed park and activities for kids of all ages. It features a dinosaur exhibit as well as restaurants and stores to patronize. There are even free kid shows (we saw the clown act twice) and a play area for

younger kids with a sandbox and climbing gyms.

The Excalibur (opened in 1990) has a kids activity area (similar to the Circus Circus midway) called the Fantasy Faire with medieval theme carnival games one floor below the casino and kids shows above, near the restaurants and shops. MGM Grand Hotel also offers some fun for kids, besides their Grand Adventure theme park (which was a disappointment), they offer an arcade and the King Looney activity center (a baby-sitting place) for kids ages 3 to 12. MGM Grand Adventures only had a total of eight rides that we counted, and only two were acceptable for kids under 42 inches. They were mainly water-type roller coasters and we saw bungee jumping, not suitable for our kids. And the MGM back lot tour (we had hoped to take) was no longer available. We were also disappointed at the Luxor because the King Tut's Tomb tour (with a boat ride on the Nile River) was closed for reconstruction. A guard said that they had structural problems and it was no longer safe to ride.

Las Vegas has its share of museums to keep kids entertained as well as two malls on the Strip, an Omnimax large screen theater and a Wet 'N' Wild water park.

### Life in the casinos and on the strip

If you plan to stay at a hotel with a casino and walk up and down the Strip with your family to see the lights and sights, you'll notice a different side of Las Vegas, one you may not want your kids to see. We ended up exposing our kids to some of the unappealing sides of Las Vegas.

Actually, our first bad experience was at the airport. If you haven't been to Las Vegas, you'll be surprised to find slot machines at the airport, not too far from the arrival and departure gates. The kids were excited to see the machines because they look like video games and they make a lot of noise. Sarah, my 5-year-old, immediately ran toward one and stopped to look.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOWARD BERENBON

So, without thinking, I got out a nickel and inserted it. Before I had a chance to pull the lever, Sarah beat me to it. Immediately, a security guard approached us yelling, "Get away, get away. It's against the law for anyone under 21 to be within 10 feet of a slot machine." Sarah is still talking about the incident, saying, "I said I was sorry."

With this incident in mind, we thought we may have a problem at our hotel, especially when we saw the layout. There was almost no way to avoid the casino to get to your hotel room or the restaurants. There were even slot machines in the hallway leading to the towers. You could avoid the casino by walking a block around the outside of the hotel to the front and take the elevator to the restaurant level, but that's inconvenient. With the exception of the Luxor, the other nine or 10 hotels we visited required a stroll through the casino to get to the restaurants. Also, once inside the hotels, we had to search for the handicap access ramps (for the strollers) that were not usually near the steps down to the casino. And one other unbelievable note: The Excalibur's rooms only had showers: no bathtubs. Kids don't usually take showers.

The problem with walking through the casino for breakfast, or at night, on the way to our rooms, was that it was usually crowded, smoke filled and we had that problem with the slot machines calling the kids. At the Excalibur, though, security was more polite and they just asked us to keep the kids away from the slots. Unfortunately, as a small casino we had another bad experience. The security guard yelled at my friend's 10-year-old daughter just for stopping at a machine. The slot machines were right outside the seating area and at the entrance to Burger King. Kind of hard for kids to avoid.

Probably the worst display Las Vegas has to offer was right on the street near the hotels. They were the street beggars and questionable charity solicitors asking for money with whatever lines that came to mind. One man, obviously a vagrant, said as we walked past him near the New York New York hotel, "You have cute little girls. Can you spare some money for poor kids?" And to make matters worse, all up and down the Strip there were men and women posing out the prostitute papers with pictures and descriptions of what's available for the potential

Vegas at night: The Excalibur is just one of the many Las Vegas hotels and casinos that light up the sky at night.

customer. Fortunately, they never handed them to our group, but some of the papers ended up on the sidewalk in full view for all to see.

Now I may be a bit touchy, or over sensitive when it comes to my kids, but getting scolded by security guards in casinos for kids getting attracted to those enticingly fun-looking machines is just ridiculous. The solution is to move the restaurants away from the casinos. Also, street beggars and prostitute promoters have to disappear before I return to Las Vegas with my family. Las Vegas is a fun place for adults who like to gamble, eat inexpensively and enjoy some great entertainment, but despite the vacation promotions I've seen, it's not the family fun spot for me.

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Luxor: The family gathers beneath the imposing sculptures at the Luxor in Las Vegas. Left to right, Irving Berenbon, Becky Berenbon, Leah Klein, Sarah Berenbon and Howard Berenbon.

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