



More than 300 vintage photographs and postcards tell the story of the fabulous desert oasis from its birth in 1905 through the swinging '60s and beyond. Experience early Fremont Street, the birth of the Strip, Glitter Gulch, the Rat Pack, Vegas After Dark, and so much more.

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GREETINGS FROM
Las Vegas
MORUZZI
GIBBS SMITH

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Las Vegas

PETER MORUZZI





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above: Louis Prima and Keely Smith. Icons of the Vegas lounge act.

An unexpected tourist attraction first appeared in the desert sky in 1951: the detonation of an atomic bomb at the Nevada Test Site, seventy-five miles northwest of Las Vegas. Fremont Street hotels promoted the regularly scheduled explosions over the next eleven years with viewing parties and atomic-themed cocktails. The aboveground nuclear tests continued until 1962.

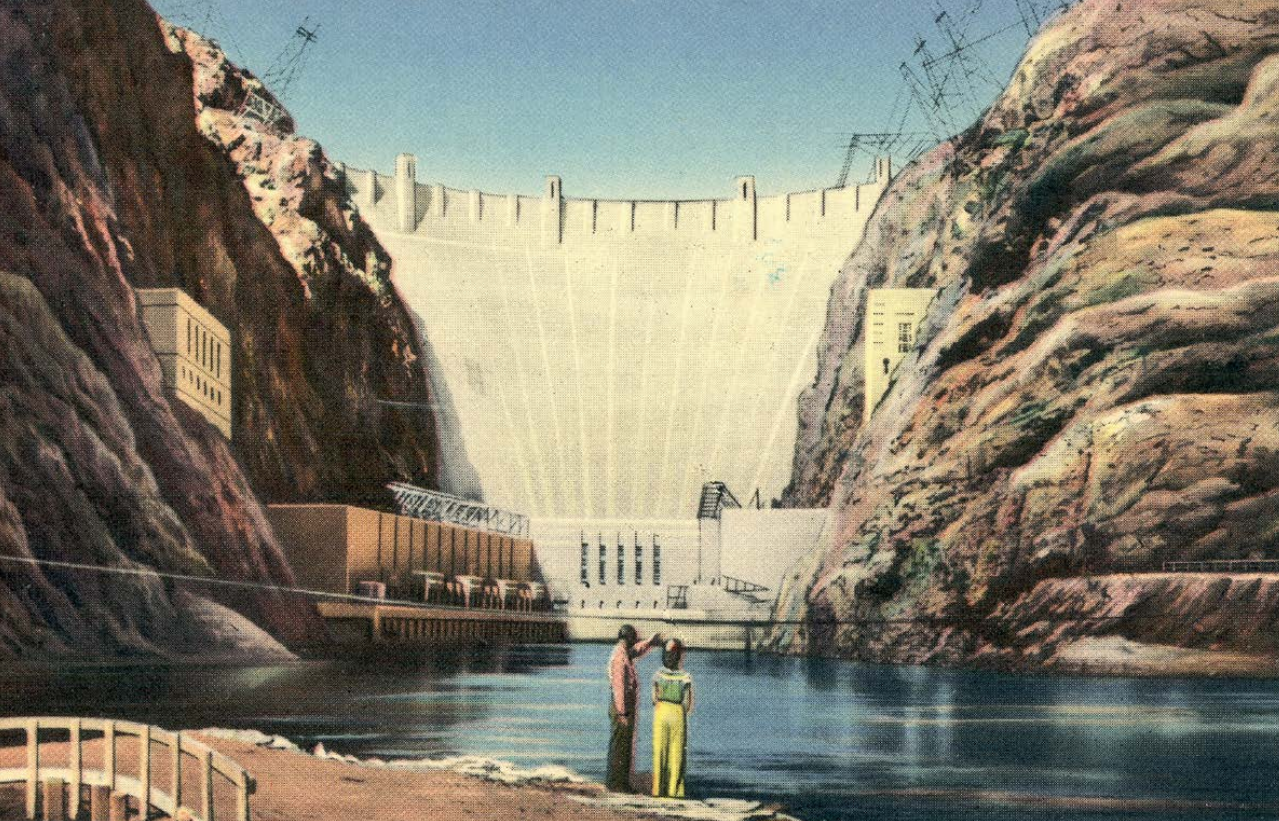


facing: The "Up and Atom" city beckons. "Wish you were here!"

above: Benny Binion presents the many moods of the atom bomb.

right: Miss Atomic Bomb, Lee Merlin (Sands Copa Room showgirl), explodes with joy in 1957. What fun!



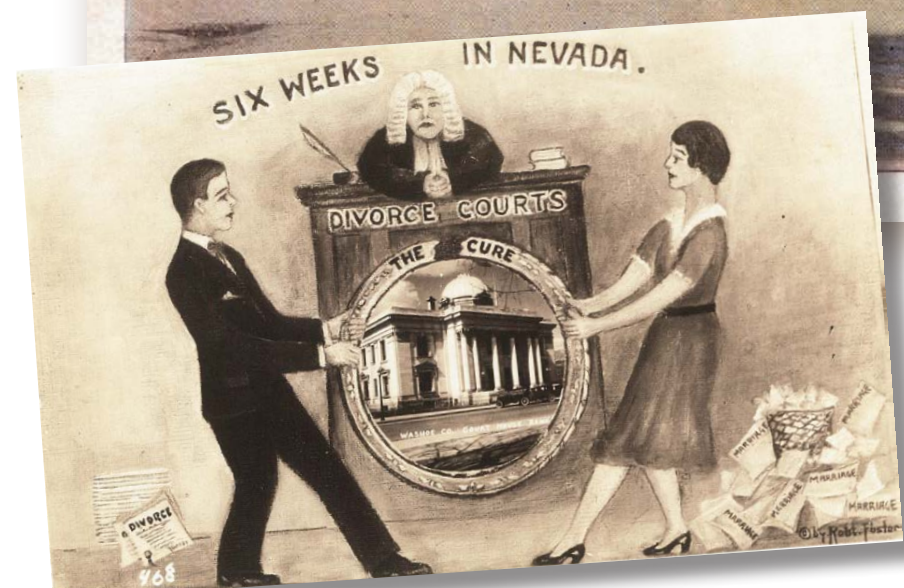


In 1931, as the Great Depression deepened, the federal government began one of the most ambitious engineering projects ever conceived, the Boulder (later Hoover) Dam at the Arizona/ Nevada border. To house the thousands of workers building the dam, a completely planned model city—Boulder City—was constructed nearby.

On March 19, 1931, desperate to stimulate its moribund economy, the Nevada legislature simultaneously legalized gambling and shortened the residency requirements for obtaining a divorce from three months to six weeks. As a result, up north, Reno became the “divorce capital of the world,” with the city’s casinos and showrooms entertaining divorcées-in-waiting to the benefit of the local economy. Unlike Reno, Nevada’s largest city at the time, Las Vegas instead would focus on catering to the thousands of construction workers and their families living in Boulder City.

above: Construction began on the massive Boulder (later Hoover) Dam in 1931. It was completed in 1936.

left: The federal government built the sprawling Boulder City to house the dam’s workers and families.



left: The “divorce trade” became an economic engine in Nevada, especially Reno, when residency requirements were reduced to only six weeks in 1931.

above: Fremont Street in the 1920s, before legalized gambling.



The Birth of the Strip

EL RANCHO VEGAS

To set the record straight, the Las Vegas Strip was not the invention of gangster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel as he surveyed a desert wasteland along US Highway 91, the main route from Southern California, in 1946.

In fact, Chris Nichols—historian and biographer of architect Wayne McAllister—possesses concrete evidence showing that McAllister, San Diego investor Jack Barkley, and hotel man Thomas E. Hull had proposed an extravagant Spanish Colonial Revival-style resort-casino on Highway 91 as early as 1938. Its inspiration was the palatial Agua Caliente Casino and Hotel that McAllister had designed ten years earlier in Tijuana as a luxurious refuge from Prohibition for the



facing: A bevy of the El Rancho's long-legged lovelies.



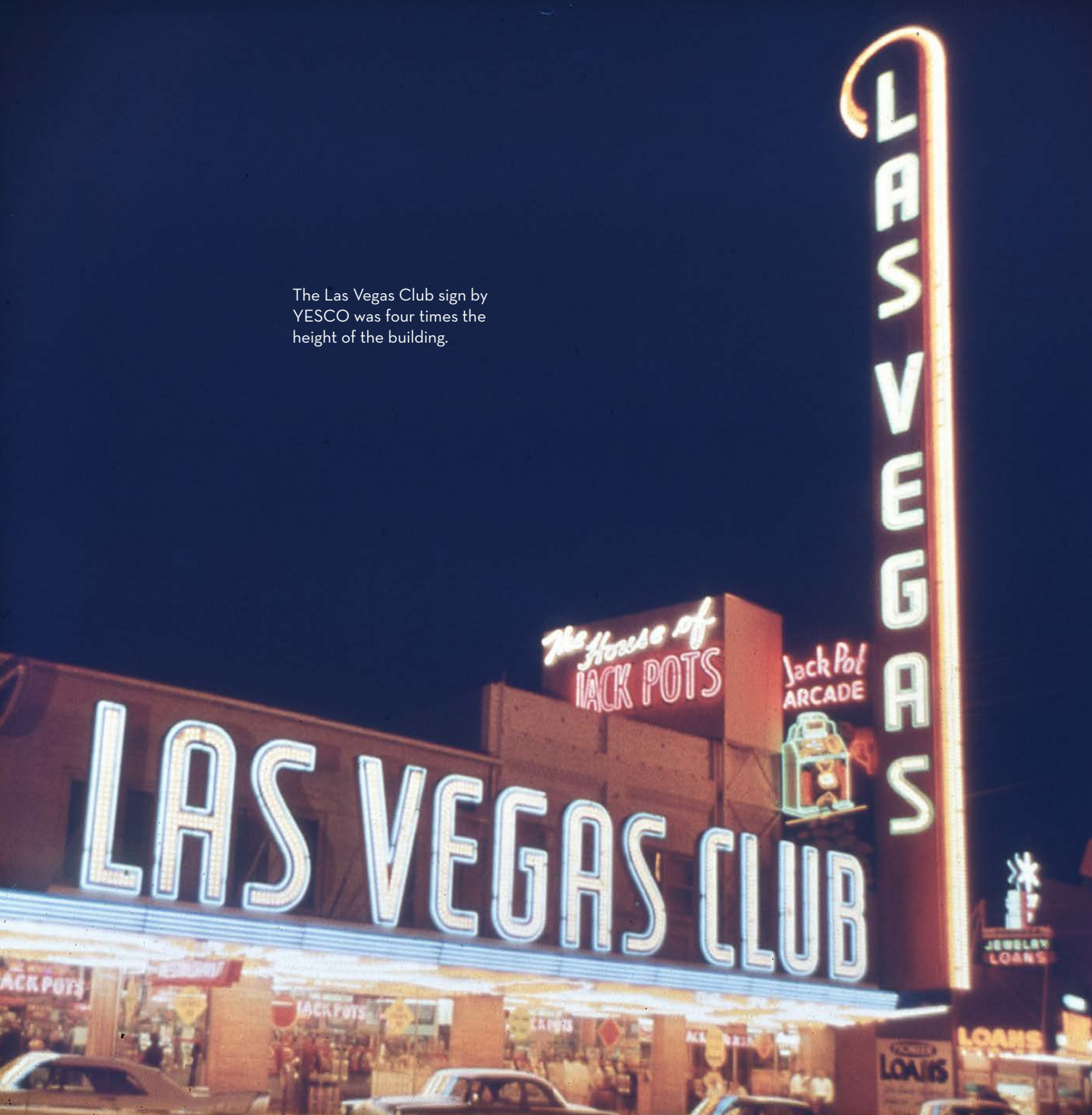
Tony Cornero's untimely death left the Stardust unfinished for two years, until new investors led by Moe Dalitz of the Desert Inn took over. When completed in 1958, there were five rows of two-story motel rooms stretching west behind the enormous

16,500-square-foot casino, massive showroom, restaurant space, and swimming pool. Covering the facade of the plain, warehouse-like building was a space age solar system of planets and stars with a colossal globe of Earth in the center ringed by a satellite. At 216 feet wide, the Stardust sign was the largest on the Strip, ushering in a new wave of bigger-is-better sign competition that lasts to this day.

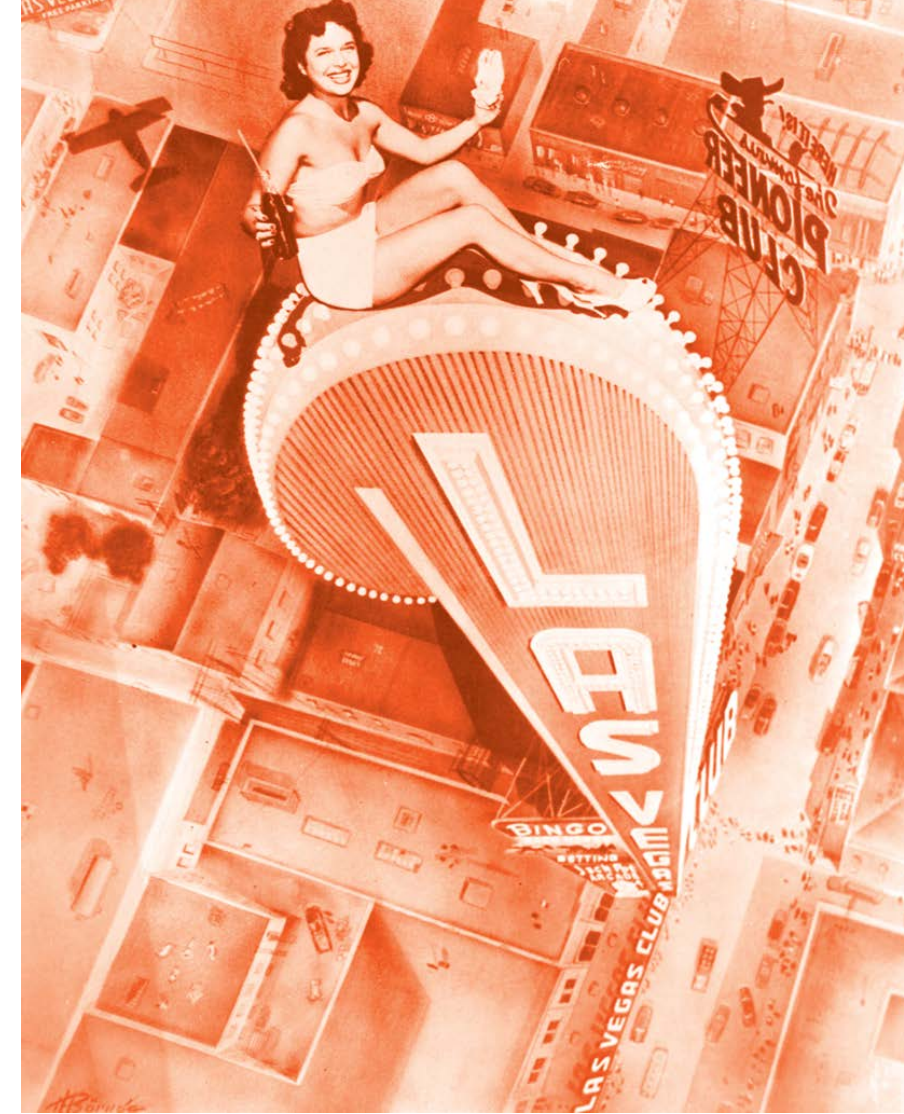


left: Artist Kermit Wayne of the Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO) designed the colossal Stardust sign, the widest on the Strip at 216 feet.

The Las Vegas Club sign by YESCO was four times the height of the building.



soon dominate the field. YESCO's first commission was for the Boulder Club in 1946, with a large, streamlined, vertical blade sign that was more modern than Old West (see page 21). That same year the Golden Nugget opened with a YESCO sign evocative of San Francisco's Barbary Coast during the gold rush (see previous pages). Rising to the occasion, in 1949 the Las Vegas Club commissioned YESCO to design a soaring vertical sign four times the height of the building.



above: Relaxing atop the Las Vegas Club sign with a Coke and a smile.

right: With their frontages open to the sidewalk, the Glitter Gulch casinos created an informal intimacy with the street that the Strip casinos couldn't match. Looking west (above), and looking east (below).





above: The Mary Kay Trio pioneered the Vegas lounge act at the Last Frontier by performing on a small stage behind the bar near the casino floor.

right: Louis Prima and Keely Smith with Sam Butera and the Witnesses brought the lounge act to another level starting in 1954 at the Sahara's Casbar Lounge.



INVENTING THE LAS VEGAS LOUNGE ACT

The pioneers of the Vegas lounge act were the dynamic Mary Kay Trio at the Last Frontier. They performed on a small bar stage near the casino floor with a high-energy show that had the magical effect of keeping gamblers at the tables into the wee small hours of the morning.

In November 1954, a broke and desperate Louis Prima—one-time New Orleans big band leader—called Bill Miller from New York asking if he would hire Prima's five-member musical group for a gig at the Sahara. As a favor to Prima, Miller booked him for a two-week stint—not as Prima had hoped in the hotel's main showroom, but at the pocket-sized stage

behind the casino bar at the Casbar lounge. Here's what the November 27, 1954 issue of *Jack Cortez' Fabulous Las Vegas Magazine* had to say about the act during its first week at the Casbar:

We never saw the Casbar Lounge, in the Hotel Sahara, so jam-packed every night at every performance to early a.m., as we have this past week. The reason, LOUIS PRIMA, His Quintette, and his beautiful wife, KEELY SMITH, are the star attractions. Each performance, they present, will keep you glued to your seat, thrilled, and you automatically chalk up a tremendously great show. The superb and impromptu entertainment, plus Louis' inimitable song stylings, his "fooling around" with Keely is entertainment without par. Oh yes! Congratulations are also in order for the Primas, they are expecting a "Prima or Prima Donna" sometime in March!

Said Keely Smith in 1999, "Bill Miller had hired us for two weeks, and we stayed six years!" During their incredible run, Louis and Keely solidified the lounge act as quintessentially Las Vegas.





left: Grooving to the sweet sounds of the accordion.

below: All barstools are fully occupied at the Fremont's Carnival Room lounge.



Liberace and Elvis ham it up in 1956. It was Elvis's first time performing in Las Vegas.



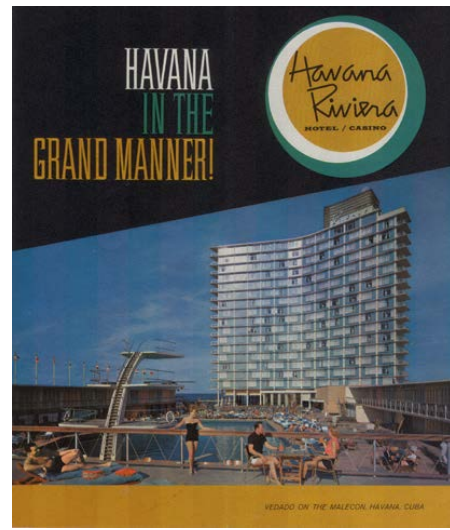
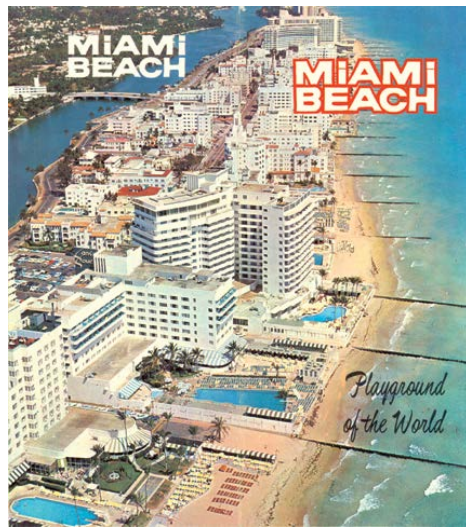
The Rat Pack

Although the group called itself "the Summit," the media and public knew them as the Rat Pack—Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop, among others. During the filming of *Ocean's 11* in 1960, the Rat Pack appeared nightly on the Sands's Copa Room stage, cracking each other up until the wee hours of the morning. They also acted together in two other films, *Sergeants 3* and *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (with Bing Crosby replacing a blackballed Lawford). Audiences loved the impromptu Sands performances, including numerous celebrities who crowded the front rows. Even after the group went its separate ways, Las Vegas in the early '60s would forever be known as the Rat Pack era.



facting: Frank Sinatra, Peter Lawford, and Dean Martin planning their heist in *Ocean's 11* near the Sahara's plaster camels.

immediate benefit of Las Vegas. Miami Beach continued to thrive for a few more years until the late 1960s, when its glossy sheen began to fade. Meanwhile, Las Vegas in the 1960s saw the completion of Caesars Palace, Circus Circus, the Landmark, and high-rise expansions of the Sahara, Dunes, Flamingo, and Sands. The year 1969 was especially momentous, with the opening of the massive International (one of the world's largest hotels upon completion), which hosted the triumphant return of Elvis to Las Vegas that year.



far left: Miami Beach was America's top resort going into the 1960s.

left: Havana was strong competition for Las Vegas when lavish hotels such as Meyer Lansky's Havana Riviera opened in the late 1950s.



above: A towering sultan greets guests to the original Dunes of 1955.



left: The first major expansion of the Dunes in 1961 included the Sultan's Table fine-dining restaurant and a convention hall.

above: The ultramodern Diamond of the Dunes tower of 1964 contrasts sharply with the kitschy rooftop sultan, who would soon retire to the sign boneyard on the edge of town.

right: The Dunes Top O' the Strip. "Providing a breathtaking view of the most fabulous city on Earth—Las Vegas!"

