

50 Ways Vegas Has Changed Since Frommer's 1998

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By ShortArmsDeepPockets

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ShortArmsDeepPockets explores 50 Ways Vegas Has Changed since 1998.

As I sat around daydreaming about my upcoming Vegas trip (#21 and counting), I got to reminiscing about my first trip. Back in 1999, I had picked up a discounted copy of Frommer's 1998 travel guide for Las Vegas. It was slightly out of date by the time we traveled 18 months after its publishing date.

Fast forward 18 years and that out-of-date guide is nothing short of a time machine! I dug it up out of storage and, within a few pages, realized I had struck historical and nostalgia gold. One could write an entire book about all the things that are different about Vegas from 1998 until today, but I tried to trim it to the top 50 changes.

REST IN PEACE

Some of the individuals mentioned in the Guide have passed into the Great Beyond. Noteworthy passings include:



50. Debbie Reynolds: In 1998, Debbie Reynolds was quite prominent on the Las Vegas scene, as subsequent entries will demonstrate. We lost Debbie in 2016, a day after the passing of her daughter Carrie Fisher.

49 Jackie Gaughan: Las Vegas icon Jackie Gaughan was best known for his ownership of the Plaza back in 1998 ("Jackie Gaughan's Plaza"); however, over his 64-year career in the gaming industry he also owned the El Cortez, Gold Spike, Las Vegas Club, and other properties Downtown. Jackie died in 2014. His family name retains prominence through his grandson Brendan, a respected NASCAR driver.

48. Danny Gans: In 1998, Danny Gans headlined his own show, "Danny Gans: The Man of Many Voices" at the Rio Suites (now Rio All-Suite Hotel and Casino). The show was considered a must-see, having been awarded numerous accolades. Danny was known for his impression of Nat King Cole, as well as a rendition of 'The 12 Days of Christmas' done in 12 different impressions. The show would move to The Mirage and The Encore. Danny Gans died in 2009 at the far too young age of 52.

47. Benny Binion: The famous surname still figures prominently along Fremont Street, even if the patriarch died shortly after the Guide was published. Benny Binion's criminal record reads like something from a Guantanamo Bay rap sheet (including murder), yet the man whose Horseshoe Hotel and Casino was renowned for being the best place for real gamblers to play at is also respected for another legacy: the creation of the World Series of Poker. Binion died in 1989, and his family sold the property in 2004. Although the Casino remains open, the hotel was

closed in 2009 and remains shuttered to this day.

46. Kenny Kerr: Before Frank Marino, there was Kenny Kerr, whose self-titled show graced the stage at the Debbie Reynolds Hotel in 1998. Described as a “sophisticated female impersonator revue,” the production (also known as *Boylesque*) featured Kerr impersonating Marilyn Monroe, Dolly Parton, Janet Jackson, Diana Ross and Barbra Streisand. Kerr died in 2003 at the age of 60; another legend was gone far too soon.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Las Vegas is continually reinventing itself, and between 1998 and 2017, many casinos underwent transformations that included renaming:



45. The SLS was still the Sahara: While the SLS remains somewhat of an enigma, 20 years ago the property was known as the Moroccan-themed Sahara, which it had opened as back in 1952. Perhaps best known as the site of the Jerry Lewis Telethon, the Sahara was also renowned for its showroom, which attracted countless A-list performers. In 1998, the property was in the midst of renovations that would see a NASCAR-themed roller coaster open on site the following year. The Sahara closed in 2011 and re-opened as SLS in 2013.

44. The Linq was still the Imperial Palace: The newly-renovated Linq has enjoyed a rebirth under the ownership of Caesars; however, in 1998 the property was the Asian-themed Imperial Palace, owned by the ‘colorful’ Ralph Engelstad. One of the last privately-owned hotels on the Strip, the IP was known for its “Luv Tub” rooms as well as its poolside luaus back in ‘98. Caesars Entertainment rebranded the Imperial Palace as The Quad in 2012, then as the Linq in 2014.

43. The Westgate was still the Las Vegas Hilton: Opened in 1969 as The International Hotel, the property is likely best remembered as the home of Liberace and Elvis Presley throughout the 1970’s. A statue of Elvis still graces the entrance to the hotel. In 1998, the Las Vegas Hilton was noteworthy for its “Hilton” sign along Paradise Road, which remains the largest freestanding sign in the world (the hotel is also infamous as the home of the Tailhook Scandal, but that is another story in itself).

42. The Cromwell was still the Barbary Coast: At the corner of the Strip and Flamingo Road, amongst Bally’s, Bellagio and Caesars once stood the modest Barbary Coast. Built by Jackie Gaughan’s son Michael, the Barbary Coast was the jewel of the Coast Casinos chain back in 1998 along with the Gold Coast, Orleans and other properties. Following its sale to Harrah’s, the hotel/casino was renamed Bill’s Gamblin’ Hall (in honor of Bill Harrah), then (after flirting with the name Gansevoort) became the Cromwell in 2014. In 1998, the Barbary Coast was well-regarded for its turn-of-the-century San Francisco theme, stained glass, and Victorian-themed rooms.

41. The Westin Las Vegas was still The Maxim: East of the Strip on Flamingo Road, the Maxim was built in 1977 and by 1998 was noted as “...being stuck in the seventies.” Infamous for being the site of Tupac Shakur’s shooting, the Maxim Casino closed in 1999, and the hotel closed in 2001. Westin Corporation breathed new life into the property in 2003, and the Max Casino as part of the Westin pays homage to the Maxim name.

40. Hooters was still The San Remo: The Hooters property has undergone a half-dozen name changes since its opening in 1973. In 1998, the property was in the midst of a rebranding and was only mentioned on the map of the Frommers guide. The San Remo name stuck until 2006 when the site was upgraded and took on the Hooters moniker.

39. The Flamingo was still the Flamingo Hilton: Yeah, I know, not a big change, but in 1998 the Hilton name was best associated with the LV Hilton and the Flamingo. Today, Hilton Corporation has 20 properties in Las Vegas, most notably the Hilton Grand Vacation family of properties, as well as the Elara on the Strip.

38. The Downtown Grand was still the Lady Luck: The Lady Luck originally opened in 1964 and featured 17 slot machines and five pinball machines. In 1998, its selling points were its downtown pool and full-length mirrors in the hotel rooms. The Lady Luck closed in 2006 and reopened in 2013 as The Downtown Grand.

37. The D was still Fitzgerald's: In 1998, Fitzgerald's was owned by the Holiday Inn Corporation and the property had an Irish theme throughout. It was sold to the Stevens Brothers in 2011 and rebranded as the D in 2012.

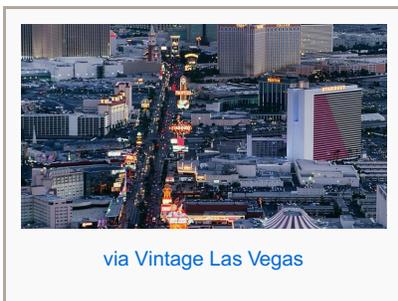
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

By 1998, most of the most famous Casino implosions had already taken place (Sands, Dunes, Landmark); however, many classic properties still stood.



36. Glitter Gulch: This is sort of a cheat, as the building still stands, but the Fremont Street strip club closed in 2016. In 1998, Glitter Gulch was known for its dancers, described as “...not too thin – fully fleshed, but not fat.” Infamous for its aggressive methods of separating unsuspecting tourists from their money in recent years, Glitter Gulch's signage is expected to be preserved by Derek Stevens as construction begins on a new downtown property on the site of the Las Vegas Club as well as Mermaids and Glitter Gulch.

35. Stardust: One of the most striking hotels during the 1990's, the Stardust's red and blue lighting scheme was instantly identifiable on the nighttime Las Vegas skyline. Known for a skimming scandal in the 1970's (popularized by the movie *Casino*), the beloved property was demolished in 2006. Boyd Gaming intended the land to be the site of its signature Echelon development, but the Great Recession of 2008 curtailed these plans. The site of the Stardust is currently owned by Genting, who will most certainly open their planned Resorts World hotel/casino in the next two years.



34. Desert Inn: Known as the “Best Elegant Hotel” in 1998, the Desert Inn was renowned for its luxury and class throughout its five-decade existence. Its infamy is derived from its history as the home of Howard Hughes for four years, who purchased the Desert Inn at the start of his Vegas hotel buying spree in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The Desert Inn was owned by Sheraton in 1998 and had recently experienced a major renovation in 1997. Sadly, the property was sold to Steve Wynn in 2000, and within four months Wynn had closed this venerable denizen of the Strip. Five years later, the Wynn opened on the site of the DI.

33. Debbie Reynolds Hotel: This one has fond significance for me personally, as I stayed at a later incarnation of

the hotel in 2012 through 2014. The Clarion, as it was known, was an absolute bargain! Floor-to-ceiling Strip view windows, a fridge, no resort fees, and a showroom on-site featuring Shades of Sinatra, among others. The property was demolished in 2015 and presently remains vacant. In 1998, the Guide noted that Debbie Reynolds had filed for bankruptcy and the hotel had lost its gaming license. (Author's fun fact: when I visited Las Vegas for the first time, our tour bus passed the hotel, and the guide informed us it was to be a World Wrestling Federation themed casino/hotel. Alas, that plan never came to fruition.)

32. Showboat: The Showboat was located at 2800 Fremont and best-known for hosting AWA Wrestling in the 1980's. It was renamed Castaways in 2000, and after much financial turmoil it closed and imploded in 2006. Ironically, Station Casinos bought the property and, from Wikipedia:

"Station still owns the property and, to keep its development options open, has been allowing a portable casino to operate on the site. This is because of a loophole in the law that allows a gaming license to be renewed so long as a casino is on the property and open to the public for at least eight hours every two years." Only in Vegas!

31. Bourbon Street: I fondly remember Bourbon Street as my room at Bally's on my first trip overlooked Flamingo Road, and I could see the unique sign quite prominently at night. With its New Orleans theme, it apparently was struggling in 1998 (having lost its gaming license). Harrah's (Caesars) bought the property and demolished it in 2005.

30. Algiers: This historic property was on the North Strip across the street from Circus Circus. It closed in 2004 after over 50 years in operation. A hotel only, the Algiers was known even in 1998 as being a throwback to the classic Vegas days. Nowadays, its land is part of the failed Fontainebleu development.

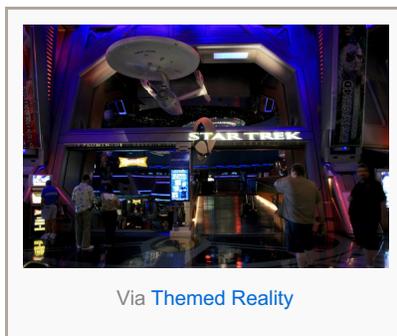
29. Riviera: Across from where the Algiers stood is perhaps the last of the classic Vegas properties to have stood the test of time. Built in 1955, the Riviera was described as "expensive" and "elegant as ever" back in 1998. Sadly, the Riv closed in 2015 and had been demolished in 2016 by the LVCVA (its current owner) to make room for parking.

28. Westward Ho: Nestled between the Stardust and Circus Circus on the North Strip, the Western-themed Westward Ho was described as an enormous two-story lodging fronted by a large casino. The last such motel-style property on the Las Vegas Strip, its former site is now home to Viva McDonald's, the neon-lit multi-story Vegas flagship restaurant.

27. Holiday Inn Boardwalk: The Boardwalk Hotel and Casino was a moderate-priced option for visitors looking to stay on the South Strip. Featuring a Coney Island theme, it was a neat complement to its neighbor in 1998, New York-New York. It closed in 2006 to make room for the Mandarin Oriental as part of CityCenter.

GOING ATTRACTIONS

In addition to the aforementioned hotels/casinos, many popular or prominent attractions that were renowned in 1998 have since been shuttered or become defunct. Some of the more noteworthy ones include:



26. Star Trek- The Experience: At the Las Vegas Hilton, this attraction was not yet open at the time the book went to print, but was definitely open in 1998. The exhibit featured simulator rides, interactive videos, Star Trek costumes, props and weaponry and a Cardassian-style restaurant that served Glop-on-a-Stick. It closed after a decade in 2008.

25. Las Vegas Strip Trolley: No longer operational, the Trolley was a very cool means of getting between Strip locations in the 1990's and into this millennium.

24. Rio Masquerade in the Sky: I wanted to cite the pirate ship battle outside of TI, but the fact that it had morphed into a battle of pirates versus strippers before being closed soured me on even mentioning it. Instead, another free attraction is sadly no longer active: the Rio's Masquerade in the Sky. Capturing the vibe of the Carnival of Brazil as well as Mardi Gras, the show featured music and even bead-throwing from an overhead float that moved above the gaming area. Guests could even pay to ride on the float! The attraction was discontinued in 2013.

23. Hollywood Movie Museum: Last year, when Debbie Reynolds passed away, there was an occasional mention that she had owned a casino in Las Vegas and some of these tributes also made mention of her memorabilia collection. In 1998, the collection was on display at her namesake hotel/casino. Ms. Reynolds owned well over \$30 million in such items, including a pair of Judy Garland's shoes from Wizard of Oz, Yul Brenner's bullwhip from The King and I, the Ark of the Covenant from The Ten Commandments, and thousands more. Remnants of the museum were still on display at the Clarion outside of the Wolf Theatre in 2014, prior to its closure and demolition.

22. Liberace Museum: Opened in 1979 by the man himself, the Liberace Museum was located at Tropicana and Spencer, just east of the Strip. Exhibits included costumes, cars, pianos and jewels that captured the essence of a legendary performer. Its location, as well as economics, resulted in the museum's closure in 2010. The guide did include a BOGO admission coupon, and it noted that proceeds from the museum benefitted the Liberace Foundation for the Performing and Creative Arts.

21. Let it Ride High Roller (Coaster): Located atop the Stratosphere, the Let it Ride High Roller was billed as "the world's tallest roller coaster." In 1998, it also had been updated to go faster than it had previously. At that time, only this coaster and the Big Shot were part of the thrill rides at the Strat. It took its last ride in 2005.

20. Splash: A staple at the Riviera for many years, this show featured (I'm not making this up): mermaids in a 20,000-gallon tank, dancing girls in leather biker outfits, Michael Jackson, Prince and Madonna impersonators, a bird act, and a juggler, just to name a few. Incredibly, this show continued for another eight years before closing in 2006.

19. Siegfried and Roy: We've all seen Vegas Vacation, and we all know about Roy's encounter with Montecore. Back in 1998, this \$90 hot ticket was a must-see for most Vegas visitors.

18. Follies Bergere: A topless dinner show at the Tropicana, Follies was (in 1998) the longest-running production show in town. Along with Jubilee, it was quintessential Vegas: showgirls, production numbers, elaborate sets and a good dinner. It ran from 1959 through 2009.

17. Jubilee: Jubilee took its final curtain call in February 2016. I was privileged to see a performance prior to its closing, and I am glad I did. In 1998, as throughout its later years, this underappreciated show kept plugging away, churning out classic Vegas night after night.

COMING ATTRACTIONS:

In 1998, several of the Vegas landmarks that are taken for granted today were still being constructed or in an inception stage. These include:

16. The Monorail: It's hard to believe, but in 1998, the monorail on the east side of the Strip only went between

Bally's and MGM Grand. I vividly recall riding it in 2000 as it passed the remnants of the MGM Grand theme park which had closed years prior. The Guide hinted at what was to come, noting a monorail being planned "...between Bally's and the Las Vegas Hilton." This vision came to fruition in 2004 and, although ridership has waned in recent years, it remains an integral part of the Las Vegas transportation system.

15. Paris: The Paris Casino Hotel was in progress by 1998, and the Guide cited the 540-foot replica of the Eiffel Tower as a future highlight.

14. Venetian: Known as "Venice" in 1998, this was described as "the mother of all new projects." Projected to have 6,000 rooms with canals and gondolier theme, the property opened in 1999 with just over 4,000 rooms.

13. Mandalay Bay: Known as "Project Paradise" in 1998, the development was projected to open that year, although it did not open until March of 1999.

SEISMIC SHIFTS

This is it: I tried to keep it to a Top 10 list, but had to cite 12 inclusions. These are the paradigm changes, the evolutions of such magnitude that they have represented fundamental transformation of Las Vegas as a tourist destination since 1998.

12. Wedding prices: Back in 1998, the stereotypical cheap-o Vegas wedding was still a reality. As noted:

"Weddings can be very cheap in Vegas. Go cheap, and the whole thing will put you back maybe \$100. Even a full-blown shebang package – photos, music, some flowers, video, cake, other doodads – will only run about \$500 total."

Today, the deluxe wedding package at the Stratosphere (for 100 people, mind you) costs almost \$11,000. The 'Elegant Affair' wedding package at the Wynn is just shy of \$30,000.

In fairness, Chapel of the Bells still has a basic wedding package available for \$175.00. However, weddings have definitely gone upscale in Sin City, with prices to match!

11. Cirque Mystere: This deserves an entry because, in 1998, Mystere (at Treasure Island) was described as follows: "*It's a world-class show, no matter where it's playing. That this is playing in Las Vegas is astonishing.*" It was unique, and there was definitely a sense of novelty about the Cirque du Soleil entity. Two decades later, there are now eight Cirque shows in Sin City, ranging from the classic Mystere (still at TI) to a Beatles show, a Michael Jackson show, and an erotic performance (Zumanity).

10. The Demise of Free Parking: I'm just going to leave it at that. [Grrrr...](#)

9. Spectator Sports: One line from the Guide sums up this shift from 1998 to the present: "*Las Vegas isn't known for its sports teams.*"

While the NFR, UNLV Rebels, Las Vegas Stars (AAA baseball team) and Las Vegas Thunder (of the now defunct International Hockey League) were part of the sports scene. It took the NHL's arrival in 2017 to make Las Vegas a "big league" sports town, with the Raiders quite possibly joining the Golden Knights in this conversation.

8. Telephones: Yeah, cell phones were definitely not a "thing" back in 1998. The Guide has a pretty detailed entry for telephones, which states that: "*Pay phones can be found on street corners, as well as in bars, restaurants, public buildings, stores and at service stations. Some accept 20¢; most are 25¢.*"

Needless to say, the notion that everyone would have their own phone with them at all times was the stuff of science fiction in 1998.

7. Cheap buffets: I will readily admit it: I am a glutton and love to eat. People ask what my favorite food is, and I respond “buffet.” The quote that makes me long for the good old days of 1998 is as follows:

“Lavish, low-priced buffets are a Las Vegas tradition, designed to lure you to the gaming tables and make you feel like you got such a bargain for your meal you can afford to drop more money. They’re a gimmick...”

Well, that didn’t last much longer. Today’s buffets are increasingly more and more costly, and while the quality has improved to go along with the price increases, many (including this author) long for the days of the Sahara’s \$3.99 lunch buffet. There are still vestiges of this aspect of old Vegas around (the Silver Sevens S7 Buffet comes to mind) but long gone are the days that an all-you-can-eat dining deal can be found on Strip.

6. World Series of Poker: In 1997, the WSOP was held at Binion’s and featured 4000 entrants, and \$11 million in total prize money.

The 2016 WSOP was held at the Rio featuring over 107,000 entrants competing for over \$221,000,000 in earnings.

The emergence of poker as a televised sport has resulted in this exponential growth and made celebrities of its champions, including 2003 winner Chris Moneymaker, whose ironic moniker and elite play coincided with the game being televised, making him a global sensation and making poker and its on-line counterparts commonplace around the globe.

5. Shopping: Frommer’s ’98 opens the (very brief) section on shopping with this tidbit:

“Unless you’re looking for souvenir decks of cards, Styrofoam dice, and miniature slot machines, Las Vegas is not exactly a shopping mecca.”

Well, less than two decades later, millions of tourists make the pilgrimage to Vegas to splurge at some of the most renowned stores on the planet. The Wynn alone boasts shops by Alexander McQueen, Cartier, Chanel, Dior, Givenchy, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Rolex and many more. The Bonanza Gift Shop still stands for those seeking kitsch, but the shopping landscape is unrecognizable from the dismal portrait painted by the ’98 Guide.

4. The Vegas Dining Scene: This entry is similar to the entry on shopping. With the hundreds of gourmet restaurants, celebrity chefs and fine dining options in Las Vegas today, it’s hard to believe that 20 years ago the scene was described as follows:

“In terms of fine dining, for the most part, Vegas is stuck in a time warp. A hotel’s star restaurant will more than likely be yet another overpriced steak and seafood joint.”

Wow! Still, the ’98 Guide does offer up this bit of prophecy:

“Little by little, quality restaurants have been sneaking into Las Vegas. Wolfgang Puck’s Spago, Emeril Lagasse’s Emeril’s New Orleans Fish House... all would be standouts in any other major city.”

It is almost unfathomable to imagine a Las Vegas devoid of vibrant dining options, yet less than a generation ago this was, in fact, the case!

3. Nightlife/Daylife: In 1998, daylife (daytime pool parties) hadn’t even been conceived yet, and there were precisely two “hotspots” for nightlife noted: The Beach on Convention Center Drive) and Club Rio (at the Rio hotel). No mega-DJ’s, no guest lists, no \$50 cover charges or \$1000 bottle service. However, it is quite possible that Club Rio may have been the granddaddy of this pretentious, overpriced scene based on this snippet from its description:

“This is the hottest night spot in Vegas ...made so by people who don’t mind long lines, restrictive dress codes, attitudinal door people, hefty cover charges, and bland dance music. Waits can be interminable, and admittance denied thanks to the wrong footwear or shirt.”

And there you have it: the prophetic blueprint for a multi-billion dollar industry! Back in 1998, who would have thought so???

2. Websites: That's right! In 1998, the World Wide Web was still in its infancy. In fact, only a handful of hotels (Treasure Island, Imperial Palace, Stardust) listed a web address – though, the Orleans listed its AOL keyword 'Coast Casinos.' No mention of Expedia, Travelocity, Hotels.com... Room bookings were all done via 800 numbers and likely quite a chore. Today, it's pretty much impossible to imagine not being able to shop for a hotel room online, but not quite two decades ago this was still a rarity.

1. Resort Fees: What else? In 1998, room prices were transparent and, adjusted for inflation, probably more expensive than today. For example, rooms at Circus Circus ranged from \$39-\$99, while standard rooms at Bally's ranged from \$99-\$135. Today, the resort fee on a \$68 room at Circus Circus is \$27 plus tax, while more infuriatingly, a room at Bally's (advertised as "on sale" for \$30) requires a resort fee of \$30 plus tax, effectively doubling the price of the room.

This scourge was unfathomable in 1998 but began to creep into the travelers' lexicon around 2009/10. Back in 2011, Caesars Entertainment even marched showgirls along the Strip advertising the absence of resort fees at their properties. That lasted less than two years when management infamously introduced the fees citing that visitors "wanted them." Yeah right...

CONCLUSION:

Las Vegas of 1998 was a far different place. The emphasis was still on elements of "classic Vegas" – gambling, cheap eats, and reasonable hotel room prices. The Strip still featured many remnants of the old days, and the luxury of new builds like the Wynn or Cosmopolitan could not have been imagined.

The guide features a quote that is eerily prophetic in this regard. In its description of New York – New York, the writer states: "It's hard to see how Vegas can ever top this, but then again that's been said before."

Amen.

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