



A Heart Grows Fonder

Distant journey prompts a Vegas epiphany: today's culture may be tomorrow's artifact **BY REBECCA ZISCH**

I can't stop thinking about my summer vacation. Traveling halfway around the world to see five countries on two different continents, I visited ancient ruins and contemporary art museums alike. I saw both historic creation and modern inspiration—polar opposites on the cultural spectrum.

As a result, I've been thinking about Las Vegas, too. No, not in the way you'd think after a trip like that. I came back adamant that we have more culture than most people believe. Just because it's not the same culture as other places doesn't mean that it isn't culture.

It's the inherent nature of human beings to create culture. Every culture boasts its own product, its own behavior and institutions. Sometimes there's borrowing from others. Sometimes it's a specifically developed eponymous culture, the kind that happens here and stays here. And when the mere mention of just half of the name of the city you live in is evocative and recognizable, isn't that a clue?

While we may rarely brag about it, the culture that epitomizes Southern Nevada has a storied and illustrious history. Even the ancient city of Pompeii boasted gambling and brothels and spas that were easily recognizable from the street outside. Admittedly, they probably didn't offer ginger-lime body scrubs or mini facials in their spas. And there weren't neon signs because the only gas they knew about was pouring out of that mysterious mountain. The destruction of Las Vegas via volcano

seems unlikely, as the Mirage is no Vesuvius, but as in Pompeii, there are people enjoying similar pleasurable pastimes, nonetheless.

As natives or adopted residents of Southern Nevada, we understand that the place we call home is a popular vacation destination. Our hotels are at full capacity; the casinos ring out with hopeful gaming; clubs and restaurants buzz with diners and dancers. And just as we leave home to experience the culture of other places far and near, all of those people we call tourists come here to partake in the culture of our city.

Just because we don't look around and always see high culture on a pedestal or housed behind glass doesn't mean that there isn't any culture at all. With an ever-growing number of tourists appreciating our culture, why can't we do the same?

Maybe it's a matter of trying to be a tourist at home, soaking up culture here as you would in other cities: see monuments, museums and masterpieces. Have you ever really taken the time to appreciate the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign for its invention and iconic representation? When was the last time you visited the Clark County Museum or the Atomic Testing Museum to remember the people and science and industry that shaped this area? And have you scheduled a tour of the architecturally exemplary Morelli House to enjoy a personal interpretation of classic mid-century Vegas?

Sometimes our more thoughtful, more civilized sides are obscured by the vigorous, noisy culture we've set up for others. While it can be flashy and garish, the modern culture that attracts them is actually no less significant as a reflection of our home than those quieter cultural experiences. And it's possible that true appreciation of the current cultural ruckus may only come once it has long since faded away and been transformed into something else.

The way we pine for "Old Vegas" now will recur when buffets and blackjack are things of the past. Even keno cards and bingo blotters will be outmoded some day. So enjoy the sight of tourists in Elvis glasses and the endangered showgirl while you still can, because more and more of Las Vegas' cultural artifacts will have their well-deserved time in glass cases, and the things that we once took for granted will be behind signs reading "Do Not Touch."

Rebecca Zisch, a former museum curator for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Liberace Museum, can be heard regularly on Nevada Public Radio commenting on popular culture and Las Vegas.