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Desert oasis

NEVADA | Gorgeous lake anchors Tuscan-style village outside Las Vegas

Comments

October 5, 2008

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

HENDERSON, Nev. -- Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. Well, a few drops perhaps, but not a glass full, according to Geoff Rhodes, spokesman for Lake Las Vegas Resort here.

"A limnologist tests the water daily," he assures us, as our tour boat rocks slightly on the man-made lake at the heart of this residential and resort destination, just 17 miles southeast of the Las Vegas Strip.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Fly into Las Vegas and rent a car, which is essential if you want to visit Hoover Dam or Lake Mead. If you plan to spend all your time at Lake Las Vegas, you'll only need the airport shuttle. Ask your hotel to recommend a shuttle service.

STAYING THERE: Ritz-Carlton, a four-star luxury hotel next to Lake Las Vegas, will have rooms for two starting at \$259 a night in January (high season), not including taxes or a daily \$25 resort fee. The same room in August (low season) costs \$199 a night. Club Rooms, with access to the Club Lounge -- where breakfast, buffet salads, sandwiches and hors d'oeuvres are served all day -- start at \$299. Children under 12 stay free in all rooms; older kids cost \$50 a night; (702) 567-4700, www.ritzcarlton.com.

At the Loews Lake Las Vegas Resort on the north shore, superior double rooms as of Jan. 4 start at \$229 a night, not including taxes or a daily \$22 resort fee. High season at Loews is September through December; (702) 567-6000; www.loewshotels.com.

The 300 privately owned condominiums at MonteLago Village Resort, next to MonteLago Village, have full kitchens and

The water is clean, but is it clean enough to drink?

"Why would you want to?" Rhodes wonders aloud. "You can kayak on it or fish in it or swim in it -- I swim every day at Reflection Bay. But if you're thirsty, have one of these," he says, handing us a couple of the chilled water bottles that everyone here keeps on hand in late summer, pulling them out of nowhere like a rabbit from a hat.

At first blush, the idea of creating a 320-acre lake in an arid, alien environment seems like a crime against nature. With water on its way to becoming more valuable than oil, hoarding an estimated 3.5 billion gallons of rapidly evaporating H2O in order to sell real estate seems like a particularly blatant case of corporate greed.

Yet there was the lake, dazzling the eye beyond our hotel window. Two miles of sparkling blue water, it lapped gently against the boat dock at MonteLago Village, a sun-baked Tuscan-style creation so artful it would fool Palladio. On the plaza, visitors licking ice cream cones were taking in every arched doorway and narrow lane, peering into shop windows and reading posted restaurant menus. Families with strollers sat in the shade near the fountain; the 104-degree heat had driven most people indoors.

Mansions climbing the slope



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living rooms with fold-out sofas for prices lower than typical hotel rates. Two couples sharing a one-bedroom unit for four nights starting Jan. 4 (a fifth night is added free) pay \$957. Larger units are available; (702) 564-4700, www.montelagovillage.com.

Castle Management lists private condominiums for rent. For information, call Annie at Castle's office at (702) 566-1358.

WHERE TO EAT: Medici Cafe at the Ritz-Carlton serves Italian and American dishes with creative use of unusual ingredients and flavors. Top-flight service, elegant presentation and expensive.

Marssa at the Loews Lake Las Vegas Resort serves sushi and steaks in a formal setting. Expensive.

Rick's Cafe, Loews' family restaurant, serves American and Southwestern specialties in a bistro setting. Mid-priced.

Sunset & Vines in MonteLago Village features steaks and seafood with an expansive wine list and casual-elegant atmosphere. A favorite with local residents. Expensive.

A few visitors milling around on the dock were waiting to board the Lady of the Lake, one of several tour boats available for hire. The trip, which circles the lake's 10 miles of shoreline, is the only way you'll get a glimpse of the gated community of South Shore and its enormous mansions climbing the slope.

On this much-coveted side of the lake, 782 homes, from palaces to condominiums, sit under the shade of mature palm trees, surrounded by desert and tropical landscaping. We'd already tried to drive through the area and had been stopped by a uniformed guard. Celebrities like Celine Dion, currently performing in Las Vegas, and popular LPGA golfer Natalie Gulbis live here, in relative privacy.

As our boat circled around to the North Shore, we passed the stately Loews Lake Las Vegas Resort on a grassy hill above a swimming cove with a sandy beach and condominium complexes, one after the other, built with lake views.

At the lake's east end, near the dam, hundreds of empty acres remain undeveloped. Real estate sales have tanked, forcing the Lake Las Vegas development company into Chapter 11 bankruptcy and prompting a reorganization. The financial turmoil isn't obvious to the casual observer,

however, since business continues as usual.

We expected the MonteLago Casino at the far end of the village to be hopping with customers. After all, isn't gaming the reason most people come to Las Vegas? Not always, it appears.

Not there to gamble

At Lake Las Vegas, guests are diverted by other charms: Three award-winning 18-hole golf courses, rental canoes at the lake's marina, kayaking on Lake Mead and first-class restaurants in the Ritz-Carlton and Loews hotels. Nightly concerts on the lawn – performed on a floating stage at the waterfront – bleed potential gamblers away from the card tables and one-armed bandits at the casino.

The way Henderson resident Shirley LaChance sees it, the casino is doomed by bad decorating.

"I really hate that place," said LaChance, who brings all of her out-of-town guests to the lake for a day's outing. "It's dark and dreary, and the colors are old-fashioned. It makes me depressed. But we love driving along the lakeshore and the boat tours."

Pilar Abaya Ellis, the director of sales at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, located at the head of the lake, provided another perspective.

"People don't come here to gamble," she said. "They come to get away from the hustle and bustle of the Strip. They'll spend three days in town at a conference, say, going to meetings, gambling, seeing the shows. Then they add some vacation days with us to relax or play golf. We don't compete with Vegas; we're an alternative."

And a pleasant one at that. But the essential question remained unanswered: Does a man-made lake belong in a desert?

Back in the mid-1980s, the residents of Henderson, a booming town, thought an emergency water reservoir was a good idea. So did city officials. And so did the owner of a useless chunk of land bordering the Lake Mead Recreation Area. So the Lake Mead people swapped their land higher in the canyon, along with the canyon's water rights, for the land next to their border. The government agreed to help pay for the dam, eventually passing along the cost – \$26,360,000 – to taxpayers.

The finished dam measures 3,500 feet long and 1,418 feet high. Long pipes buried under the lake carry the water from the Las Vegas Wash, the stream that once trickled through the canyon (and made Las Vegas habitable), into Lake Mead. Lake Las Vegas was filled by water pumped up from Lake Mead, which continues to add water as needed.

Even before the dam was completed in 1991, Lake Las Vegas' owners had worked up a three-phase development plan. They broke ground in 1987, and the second phase started 11 years later. Many homeowners own their land. Development and investment companies bought other large parcels to build hotels and condominiums. But 2,500 acres remain undeveloped, and with the real estate market in a deep funk, it could be a long time before the project is finished.

In the meantime, Lake Las Vegas remains an interesting vacation choice. Hotel prices are a bit lower than Sin City's, there's the lake to enjoy, and even the fishing is good; anglers can catch largemouth bass, rainbow trout and carp. There's no shortage of opportunities for adventure, with an array of outfitters ready to take you horseback riding, jet and water skiing on Lake Mead, flying over the Grand Canyon on a helicopter and sailing, kayaking and biking. For some real gambling, though, you'll want to drive to the Strip for the day.

Unfortunately, Lake Las Vegas has no central tour office or even a list of outfitters and their tours. Hotel concierges have some of this information and they're happy to share it. They also can book tee times at the area's three golf courses.

Henderson, Nevada's second-largest city, boasts plenty of shopping and splashy casinos, and Hoover Dam and Lake Mead are only a half-hour drive away.

The valley is packed with people, and there's more to come. As long as the water holds out.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based free-lance writers.

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