

Bright lights

From green wilderness to hotbed of glitzy debauchery, Las Vegas has beguiled visitors through the decades, writes *Lucia Cubb*, and it is showing no sign of slowing down

Staring out at the famous Las Vegas skyline, it's difficult to imagine how it all started. The primitive landscape of the Las Vegas Valley was once just a marsh of water and vegetation.

Today, Vegas is as hot a celebrity catnip as ever, with some even making 'Sin City' their home. Celine Dion and Nicholas Cage are just two of the myriad personalities to reside there, choosing the city as a glamorous bolt hole that – compared to Hollywood – offers them relative shelter from intrusive paparazzi lenses.

It's hard to go anywhere in the city and not see people wearing garments bearing the acronym TMT, which stands for The Money Team – and consists of former boxer Floyd Mayweather's family, friends, employees, business associates and fans. He has a 22,000 sq. ft mansion and \$15m worth of cars. It is not uncommon to see him and his TMT squad out at local shows and concerts.

Boxer Mike Tyson is another celebrity who leads a lavish lifestyle and has a mansion in the Vegas Valley. He lives in a \$2.5m house in the Seven Hills neighborhood in Henderson,

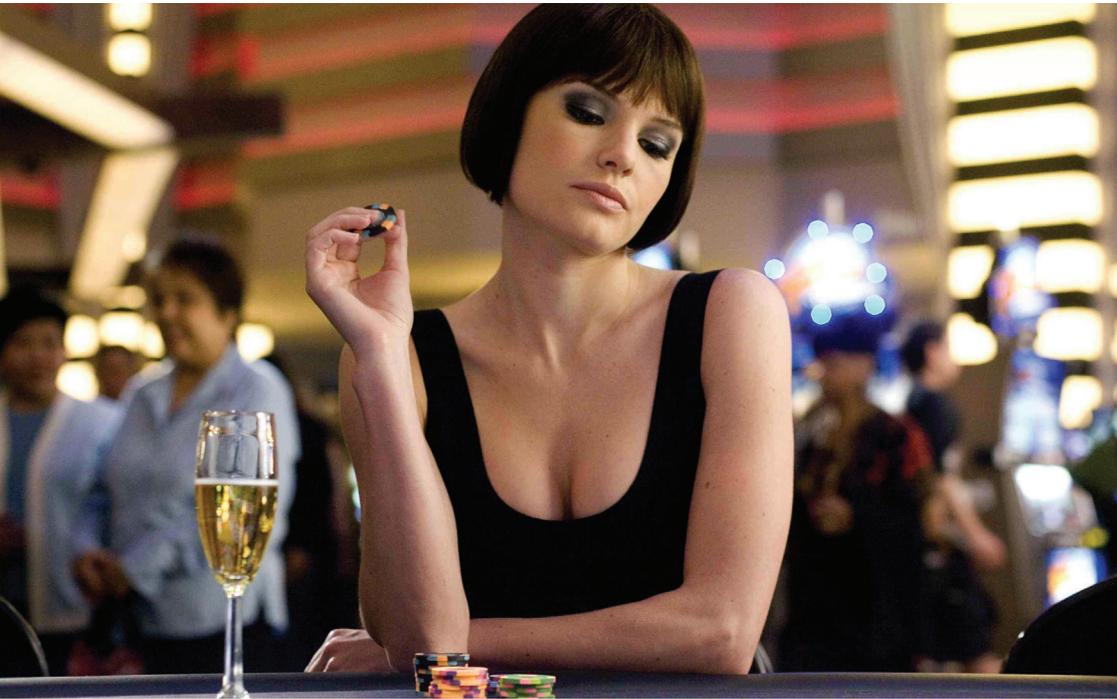
Nevada, with his wife, and is regularly spotted around town by fans.

One hundred and four casinos continue to attract the masses, including the highest of rollers, to the table. One of the most famous faces is Archie Karas, a man who arrived on the strip with just \$50 and transformed it into \$40m. Saudi Arabian businessman and international playboy Adnan Khashoggi gambled in his free time, and at his peak, he had a staggering \$4bn to his name. His winning streak hit the Hilton casino with a profit drop of 20 per cent – which just goes to show,

the House doesn't always win. It's not all about the tables though. Asian-inspired TAO Nightclub at the Venetian is regularly frequented by Hollywood royalty Kim Kardashian and Jamie Foxx and Robert De Niro is often seen at Caesars Palace Nobu, the Japanese-Peruvian fusion eatery he co-founded. The Bare Pool Lounge at The Mirage, a colossal (14,000 sq. ft) tropically themed pool area, is the perfect spot to soothe and unwind after a day in Vegas.

Founded in 1905, after the opening of a railroad that linked Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, Las Vegas rapidly attracted a group of pioneers that would build the foundation for the booming city we see today. With the rise of urbanisation in the 1930s, work starting on the Boulder Dam (now known as the Hoover Dam), ▶





and workers needed a playground in which to let off steam. Theatres and casinos popped up and the mafia started to shape the city.

Construction of The Strip came about after the El Rancho Vegas resort opened on a section of highway in 1941, and other hotel-casinos followed in rapid succession. Mobsters then helped to build what were to become popular hotels, such as the Sahara, the Sands, and the New Frontier. Tourists arrived in their droves – around eight million a year by 1954 – drawn by the magic and glamour of performers such as Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley.

But with the arrival of American investor Howard Hughes in 1966, the city transformed into the family and tourist-oriented mega-resort that continues to draw people from across the world in their millions.

In 1989, casino developer Steve Wynn opened the Mirage, the first mega-resort in Vegas.

This development allowed The Strip to reinvent itself once more. With old casinos demolished, monumental complexes took their place, plundering the aesthetics of other cities around the world, including Rome, Paris and Venice.

Entertainment and casinos remained Las Vegas' biggest employer, and as the city grew in

terms of the resorts, the number of visitors also increased. Even in 2008, as residents faced economic decline, rising unemployment and a housing price collapse, Vegas still received almost 40 million tourists, maintaining the gusto of the city. vegas.com ■

Above left: Kate Bosworth as Jill Taylor in the casino in the film *21* **Above: Vegas is famous for its themed strip that takes visitors to a replica Eiffel Tower and 'around the world'** **Below: Encore at Wynn Las Vegas is a luxury resort, casino and hotel located on the Las Vegas Strip**

