

New Mexico

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From left: On the trip from Albuquerque to Las Vegas, Amtrak keeps kids, like Cody Wharton, busy with quiz games; when the games are complete they win a badge. Passengers take in the dramatic canyons outside Lamy enroute to Las Vegas. An Amtrak conductor looks forward to the train's Las Vegas arrival.

All Aboard

ZORA O'NEILL hops on Amtrak in Albuquerque for a weekend getaway to a town steeped in rail history, where tours of Victorian homes, encounters with Rough Riders, vintage memorabilia, and fresh tortillas at Charlie's Spic and Span are all on the menu.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JULIEN McROBERTS**



for Las Vegas

My plan: Win the lottery.

Pretty flimsy, but it's all I've got. Las Vegas' Castaneda Hotel, an 1899 icon of railroad-tourism history, is for sale. With a winning smile, owner and barkeep Marie Eldh told me her asking price: \$1.9 million. Plus \$500,000 for the liquor license, if I want to keep serving drinks in this dim cantina lined with antique booze ads—which I do.

I happen to be a railroad tourist myself, having just arrived on the Southwest Chief from Albuquerque. (The Southwest Chief is the successor of the famed Super Chief that led visitors through the exotic Southwest until the 1970s.) On previous car trips, I'd noticed the 37-room Castaneda, but assumed it was abandoned, as it was boarded up and ringed with weeds.

But this time, approaching from the train tracks, I noticed a side door propped open and, under the portal, a blue neon Bud Light sign. Marie sold me a cold one, and that's when I started dreaming.

By definition, we train fans are unrealistic—we choose these poky old iron horses over speedy cars and planes. I go by rail wherever possible, sometimes ending my travel days a bit footsore from walking at my destination, but relaxed and satisfied. But not in New Mexico, where I haven't lived without a car since age 15. A day jaunt to Santa Fe on the New Mexico Rail Runner Express got me thinking, though. Turns out, Amtrak has a convenient midday departure for Las Vegas from Albuquerque's downtown station, and the trip takes only three hours. In theory.



Las Vegas. I won't—*can't*—go anywhere else until another train comes along.

The Castaneda bar was the perfect place to toast this strangely liberating sensation. The hotel represents the start of the golden age of train travel, when English entrepreneur Fred Harvey smoothed tourists' way into the rough-and-tumble American West with his elegant trackside establishments, featuring starched napkins, gleaming silverware, and fine food. The Castaneda was the first of his elaborate Mission Revival-style hotels, the model for others farther west along the Santa Fe line, including Albuquerque's late, lamented Alvarado.

To publicize the hotel's opening, the railroad pulled strings to make Las Vegas the host town for the 1899 Rough Riders reunion, a year after the brigade had triumphed in the Spanish-American War under Teddy Roosevelt's lead. The aspiring president got a free train trip, with whistle-stop campaign stops en route, and, of course, a plush room at the Castaneda, which ensured the hotel's mention nationwide.

As I finished off my beer, Marie, who grew up in Las Vegas and has owned the hotel for 40 years, lamented the decline of Railroad Avenue outside, where auto-body shops sprawl next to gorgeous, crumbling railroad-era buildings. The very thing that ruined passenger trains—the automobile—continues to haunt the Castaneda.

But Marie spoke about the hotel's prime as if she'd lived it herself. "People come to Las Vegas just to see this building!" she said with pride.

As if on cue, a couple wandered in, squinting in the gold-lit gloom. "Wow, it's real!" the man said.

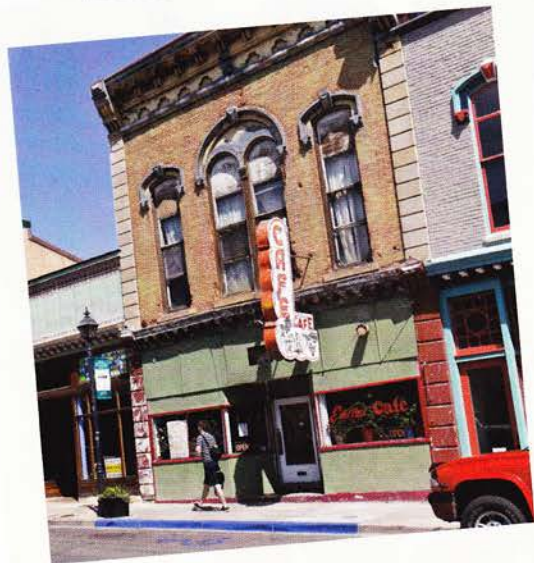
"We saw this from the highway," contin-

In my case, we left the Alvarado Station about 50 minutes late. At first we crept along, past Albuquerque's dustiest backyards, impressive heaps of scrap metal, and faceless warehouses. But soon we shook off the city and picked up speed. The Sandía Mountains were to my right, green fields and brown-black volcanic mesas to my left. An acequia ran alongside for a stretch, and a couple of paint horses, knee-deep in the water, turned their heads idly to watch us pass.

Because so many passengers have been on the train since it started its journey in Los Angeles the day before, boarding in Albuquerque is like arriving at a party at midnight—everyone has already bonded. I skipped the chatting cliques in the glass-roof lounge car and headed for the diner, where I was seated with a woman bound for Kansas City to visit her son, a musician. We discussed train trips and K.C.'s jazz scene, in a proper face-to-face conversation, the kind you can't have in a car or on a plane.

As we talked, the train began its slow climb up through Glorieta Pass outside Santa Fe. We could feel the change in elevation in our ears, and the red rocks pressed in on either side. By the time I got back to my seat, we'd arrived in the high plains: golden grass all around, shot through with an occasional green arroyo, and low clouds casting shadows on the rolling hills of the Pecos Wilderness.

The Las Vegas depot is a tidy redbrick structure, trimmed in curlicue wrought iron. I am *here*, I thought as I stepped off in front of



Clockwise from top left: Southwest Chief riders gaze from the observation deck windows onto the plains outside Las Vegas. The train began depositing passengers at the Las Vegas Train Depot in 1879. After a short walk into town, you'll discover Estella's Café, Tome on the Range bookstore, and a variety of antique shops along Bridge Street.



ued the woman. "We didn't know if it was a ruin or modern art!"

With Marie making a fresh sales pitch to the visitors, I realized that even if I bought the place today, I couldn't have the hotel part of the operation up and running by bedtime tonight. So I said good-bye and set off for my own room, at the Plaza Hotel.

I had packed light in anticipation of this walk. It's about a mile and covers almost two centuries of history. When the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe charged into New Mexico, the railroad didn't run its tracks into Las Vegas proper. Instead, the train arrived in 1879 at a depot a bit to the east. New businesses and homes sprang up here, creating East Las Vegas, often called New Town. It took decades of development to close the gap between it and "Old Town," the original Spanish-Mexican settlement of 1836.

Built in 1882, the Plaza Hotel was located in Old Town because the railroad had yet to kill off commerce on the Santa Fe Trail, which marched straight into the Plaza. Plus, one of the hotel's backers, Benigno Romero, was from a founding family, his roots firmly on the west side. In contrast with the Castaneda, the well-restored Plaza is bustling. I dumped my bag in my creaky old wardrobe, lifted my counterweighted windows to the evening breeze, and headed back down from my Victorian-era room to explore.

In my car-free state, Las Vegas' drive-in theater wasn't an option, but I could catch a free movie in the Ilfeld Auditorium on

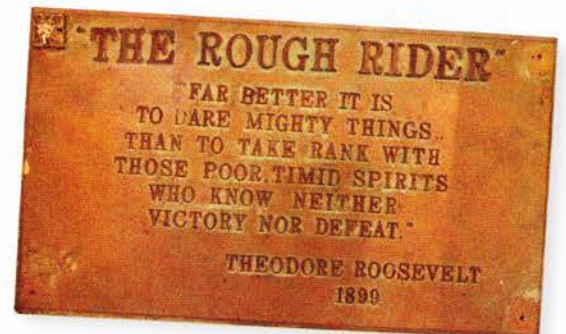
the campus of New Mexico Highlands University, a grand Romanesque sandstone building I'd passed on my walk over. Charles Ilfeld's name is all over Las Vegas. This entrepreneur arrived before the railroad, anticipating correctly that Las Vegas would grow into New Mexico's major commercial center. He backed the Plaza Hotel, which has now expanded into his former mercantile, where he dealt under the slogan "Wholesalers of Everything." My plan was to duck into the theater and admire the interior. But once the film started, it was hard to leave—the space is so beautiful and the crowd so convivial, it's the essence of small-town New Mexico.

Eventually I slipped out, down the double-front staircase and along University Avenue. While I was musing on movie theaters, trains, and bygone eras, two horses approached in the dusk, clip-clopping along the sidewalk. Their teenage riders drew into single file and tipped their baseball caps as they passed. Who needs a car when you have good manners and a handsome pinto?

Over a dinner of succulent lamb meatballs at El Fidel Restaurant, I cracked open a history of Las Vegas I'd picked up at the local bookshop. The bistro furniture and jazz soundtrack faded away as I read about the exploits of men



Clockwise from top left: During your stay, book a room in the clean, simple El Fidel, where you can also lounge in their lobby. The Castaneda Hotel may not have rooms to let, but you can stop in the bar for a cold one. Tuck into an elegant Victorian room at the Plaza Hotel. For Western history, check out the City of Las Vegas Museum and Rough Riders Memorial.





with names like Hoodoo Brown, Dutchy Schunderberger, and Mysterious Dave. In its first decade, the railroad was hardly a civilizing force. Instead, it made Las Vegas an easy destination for reprobates, opening an era of unprecedented violence. I'm shocked to read that the Plaza's patriarch, Benigno Romero, was shot to death by a stranger acting on a drunken bet.

The next morning at the Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation office, I picked up a guide to the city's best buildings. The organization's exhibit on "Lost Las Vegas" reminded me how perilous the Castaneda's situation is. We may think we live in a more preservation-minded age, when giant sandstone edifices can't be destroyed to build gas stations, but economics too often trumps history.

All the way down Bridge Street, I ogled party-painted cast-iron façades. At the promised bridge, the dainty Galinas River cooled the air and released the spicy smell of cottonwood. This is neutral ground between the two sides of Las Vegas, which only officially merged in 1970.

Just past the top of the small hill that follows, I spied the dome of the Carnegie Library, built in 1904 as part of a nationwide campaign. I like public libraries nearly as much as I like trains, so I headed up the stairs past Greek Revival columns with peeling paint and pulled open a squeaky screen door. The inside is well kept, with zia symbols decorating each corner. Readers are curled up in cozy chairs. On one wall I notice a bird's-eye-view map of 1882 Las Vegas. The Castaneda Hotel isn't there yet, but the train is, chugging in from the north.

Back outside, the Victorian homes that make this town a New Mexico architectural rarity stand colorfully sentry around the edge of the park, decked out in fancy shingles and spindles. The railroad gets full credit for this frippery—once the train came, homebuilders could order precut decorative pieces and other manufactured bits. I waved hello to a woman on the porch at the most elaborate house, three stories with a turret and a widow's walk. Dolly Crow set down her ice tea to show me around. I felt like a toddler as I stepped through the 10-foot-high door. Dolly has a copy of the 1882 map, too. In it, her house, built the year before, sits alone on

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the park, waiting for neighbors to match its grandeur. None ever have.

For lunch, I head to Charlie's Spic and Span, where cops and cowboys alike are chowing down. Over a ham, cheese, and green-chile sandwich, I plot my next move. The City of Las Vegas Museum and Rough Riders Memorial closes awfully soon. In a brilliant act of rationalization, I figure that very long name must require an equally long visit, so my afternoon will be better spent shopping.

Conveniently, Las Vegas is filled with antiques shops, which are practically museums anyway. Plaza Antiques, for instance, has a fine collection of old Las Vegas postcards set under glass at the front counter, and nearly every shop has a historic preservation plaque on the front relating some retail triumph or sordid gunslinger drama.

I unloaded a few choice purchases at



From top: The bar at the Plaza Hotel and Estella's (after 9 p.m. on weekends) are your stops for nightlife in Las Vegas. Las Vegas is a shopper's delight, with numerous antique stores within walking distance of the Plaza. If you've shopped til you drop, head to Abraham's Tiendita for one of his famous empanadas.

the hotel just in time to meet Richard and Susan Lindeborg for dinner at family-run Estella's. They're old-time Las Vegas, and Susan's father was a Santa Fe Railway station agent. He was excited to move to Las Vegas because of its Fred Harvey lore, she tells me, even if the Castaneda was nearly defunct by then. "My dad was a curmudgeon, but oh, he liked Fred Harvey," she recalls. "Especially Harvey apple pie with cheddar cheese—the best thing in the world."

Outside, after dinner, clouds were massing out in the flatlands to the east. With the slight slope on Bridge Street, it felt as if the whole town was sliding toward the plains—or perhaps the east was racing to meet it.

In the morning, I hoofed it to the museum. It's a small collection, reflecting the finer elements of the town's history: opera gloves, university pennants, a Steinway grand brought in prerailroad, by wagon train on the Santa Fe Trail. It seems the tiniest bit dull after reading about Mysterious Dave. But in the Rough Riders exhibit, photos from 1898 and even 1952 show men with a certain ne'er-do-well Western gleam in their eyes.

Back at the Plaza, I checked my train status, secretly hoping it would be hours late so I'd have time to cajole Marie into showing me the rest of the Castaneda. I was all set to walk to the station, but, oof, I discovered my bags were pretty heavy, thanks to my wanton shopping. That's one serious drawback of my car-free scheme.

Fortunately, an employee at the Plaza offered me a lift, which also granted me an extra 10 minutes for a final shopping blitz, across Railroad Avenue at Rough Riders Antiques. A bubbly vendor at this fine emporium, Elise Renault, told me that she has taken Amtrak all the way to Kansas to visit family. "It's a chauffeur!" she exclaimed with delight. "But even better—you can have a glass of wine, walk around, take a nap. ..."

My own chauffeur was nearly here. At the platform, I hear the train whistle in the distance. Another waiting passenger turned to me. "I used to live four blocks down from here, with my grandma," he said with a wistful smile. "I love that sound." ❖

Zora O'Neill is featured in "Storytellers" on page 5.

Need to Know: Las Vegas

Amtrak leaves Albuquerque at 12:10 p.m. daily, arriving in Las Vegas at 3:03 p.m. Returning, the trip is from 12:38 p.m. to 3:55 p.m. Last lunch seating in the dining car is at 1:45 p.m., so in case the train is late, pack a meal or eat before boarding—the snack bar on the train isn't inspiring. (800) USA-RAIL, www.amtrak.com

Make the **Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation** your first stop for history queries and maps. Outside the summer season, the group runs walking tours on request—call to arrange one with Pat Patrick, who specializes in railroad history. 116 Bridge St., (505) 425-8803, www.lasvegasmcchp.com

Set in a snug little WPA-era building, the **City of Las Vegas Museum and Rough Riders Memorial** has a fun exhibit on cowboy culture, and its staff is eager to answer questions.

The 1898 photo of the Rough Riders is easily missed—it's in the back, upstairs with the Teddy Roosevelt exhibit. 727 Grand St., (505) 426-3205, www.lasvegasmuseum.org

The best place to sleep in Las Vegas, the **Plaza Hotel** also has a good restaurant and lively bar. Request a room in the main building for antique furnishings, or one in the new wing if you prefer more modern style. 230 N. Plaza, (505) 425-3591, www.plazahotel-nm.com

For a less expensive bed—or simply to be closer to the train station—book at the town's other historic hotel, **El Fidel**, built in 1923. It's a bit less glamorous, but the rooms are simple and clean. 500 Douglas Ave., (505) 425-5994, www.hotelelfidel.com

Dolly Crow's grand Victorian on Carnegie Park happens to be a bed and breakfast, **The Crow's Nest**. The turret room is, of course, the best option, though the two other rooms, one floor below, have claw-foot tubs. 524 Columbia St., (505) 425-2623, www.thecrow'snestbandb.com

At **Estella's Café**, the chile *rellenos* are as delectably light as anything stuffed with cheese can be. After 9 p.m. on weekends, Estella's great-grandson Zač serves post-bar grub to a younger crowd. 148 Bridge St., (505) 454-0048

For breakfast or lunch, the massive menu at **Charlie's Spic and Span** covers all the New Mexican and diner bases. But most people won't make it past the monstrously gooey baked goods in the glass case at the entrance.



Find must-reads on local history, like *Appetite for America*, *Wildest of the Wild West*, and *Las Vegas New Mexico*, at **Tome on the Range** bookstore.

Tortillas come fresh off the machine. 715 Douglas Ave., (505) 426-1921

With art on the walls and a menu featuring local ingredients, **El Fidel Restaurant** is a little slice of Santa Fe—but with small-town friendliness. Sunday brunch will set you right for the train ride home. 500 Douglas Ave., (505) 425-6659

If you want something a bit more substantial for the train, stop at **Maryanne's** for its legendary burritos, a favorite lunch break for locals. On Sundays, get there before closing time at 1:30 p.m. 528 S. Grand Ave., (505) 426-8929

Shopping at Las Vegas's antiques stores is worth a trip unto itself. **Plaza Antiques** is especially strong on china and furniture. 1805 W. Plaza, (505) 454-9447

Some of the vendors at **Rough Riders Antiques** offer creatively fixed-up furniture. Don't miss the everything-for-\$1 shelf, and pace yourself—there's a whole downstairs, too. 501 Railroad Ave., (505) 454-8063

A little bit off the main drags, the stock at **Stuff Shop** is a bit more helter-skelter, but the place has a big selection of vintage clothing. 623 12th St., (505) 426-7732

Other great shopping destinations include the superlative community bookstore **Tome on the Range** (158 Bridge St.), artists' cooperative **El Zócalo** (212 N. Plaza), and **Thread Bear** (1813 W. Plaza), which caters to quilters with hundreds of beautiful cotton fabrics.