

Viva flowery Las Vegas



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Until recently, most of what I knew about Las Vegas came from “Las Vegas,” the television show. So when I visited the real thing around the holidays, I was prepared for the glitz and the glitter as well as the smoke-filled casinos and the relentless music of the slot machines.

“It’s Sodom and Gomorrah,” my husband said and we both laughed. I giggled at the engaging braggadocio of the phony Eiffel Tower, the fake Sphinx, and the pseudo Statue of Liberty. I was even ready for the in-your-face cornucopia of oversize bosoms and bling.

And I got a kick out of the gondolier who took us on a 12-minute ride in the canal at the Venetian Hotel, sang “O Sole Mio” and pointed out the sights. “There’s the Bridge of Sighs,” he told us.

“Yeah,” my husband said. “We saw it in Venice.”

“Oh,” the gondolier said, and he sang another song.

But if the phalanx of over-the-top hotels known as “The Strip” is a street of broken dreams for addictive personalities, it can be fun for the relatively sane and sober among us — an adult Disney World of designer shops, excellent restaurants and a never-ending parade for people-watchers.

And a very pleasant surprise for gardeners like me. Amid the flash and the frenzy, Las Vegas is a flower show.

Pink and coral rose topiaries, pastel snapdragons and pink geraniums bloomed in the twinkle of the Christmas tree outside Caesars Palace. Cascades of purple Phalaenopsis orchids reigned in the lobby of the Wynn Las Vegas. And on the way into the casino at The Mirage, I strolled through a tropical haven where lady slippers and dendrobiums held court on a mossy bank and epiphytic orchids grew on trees amid borders of poinsettias and bromeliads.

But the fairest flowers of all

blossomed in another shrine to odds and opulence — the Bellagio, best known perhaps for the dancing fountains that put on a \$40-million show for passersby on the lake outside the hotel that you may have seen in the George Clooney-Julia Roberts remake of “Ocean’s Eleven.” I’d have loved seeing George Clooney, but contented myself with the flowers. They started showing up in the lobby with a centerpiece of bare tree branches decorated with cut red roses in individual vases of water and with the deep red tassels of love-lies-bleeding dripping from the main container. And to top it all off, a ceiling sculpture of 2,000 multicolored glass flowers by Dale Chihuly.

All this was only a warm-up for what came next — the Bellagio’s conservatory, where the displays encompass the seasons

beneath a 55-foot-high glass ceiling. I left my husband at the slots — he lost only \$12 — to absorb the holiday display, which took two weeks to install, opened shortly after Thanksgiving and already has been dismantled to make way for the Chinese New Year show.

The holiday exhibit was enough to make you want to sing “Jingle Bells.” White amaryllis nestled beneath birch trees and snow-kissed evergreens surrounded by ferns and poinsettias and



10,000 poinsettias fill the Bellagio’s conservatory.



The reindeer at the Bellagio wears a coat of pecans.



PHOTOS BY IRENE VIRAG

Father Polar Bear is graced with 18,000 carnations, which are replaced every few days.

ivy. Reindeer made of pecans flew over an icy pond crossed by a birch bridge. A polar bear family made of white carnations added to the Christmas glow, and 600 pounds of cranberries filled a bog sparkling with giant stars made of quartz crystals.

The snow on the tree branches was artificial, but the ice on the ponds was real, thanks to chilling units beneath the conservatory. The cranberries were shipped in from Washington State and the 10,000 live blooming poinsettias in the beds were changed every two weeks.

Happily, none of them were the painted floozies I wrote about recently. “They’re not for me,” explained Audra Danzak, the Bellagio’s director of horticulture. “We’re about elegance and sophistication so I don’t think the painted ones would work.”

“Basically, the conservatory is one big container garden,” she said. “The trees are in rolling planters and bins, and it’s like putting a puzzle together. Everything is designed ahead of time, of course, but there’s always tweaking to be done. First we thought about white roses for the polar bears. We did a mock-up of the baby bear with roses and carnations — the carnations definitely lasted longer. The flowers get checked and changed out daily. We’re using about 65,000 carnations a week.”

There are 150 people on Audra’s staff, and the work is constant. “We also do fresh flowers for all the MGM Mirage hotels — Bellagio, The Mirage, New York-New York and Treasure Island — and we get requests from other hotels and restaurants, so the staff gets used up quickly. Working with fresh-cut flowers in the desert is different — a flower that might last five to seven days someplace else will only last three days here. You have to check everything every day.”

The Chinese New Year display opens tomorrow, and spring 2007 is in the works.

“Chinese New Year is very important to us because we have many Asian clients who come here to celebrate,” Audra told me. “It’s the Year of the Pig, so we’ve been researching pigs. We have a feng shui consultant, so we’re sure that the design is correct. We’ll be using citrus trees, tangerine trees; the color orange is a sign of prosperity. Our color scheme for the plants will be gold, orange, red. We’ll be using bamboo, bonsai trees, koi ponds — you’ve got to have koi.”

For spring, Audra said, there will be cherry and willow trees to suit the mood and an emphasis on oversize garden ornaments created from plant material. “We’re doing a garden hat that will be 15 feet in diameter, giant trowels and a huge watering can made of growing plants with a big chocolate flower coming out of it. And we do butterflies every year — but this year they’ll be really big.”

I’d like to get back in the spring. But not for the slots. The flowers are a much better bet.

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