OUTSIDE THE BOX
LAS VEGAS DOUBLES DOWN ON FRESH AIR

2014 TRAVEL SPECIAL

Fresh Air

to

LAS VEGAS

by MATT VILLANO
IT'S A LAZY THURSDAY EVENING IN DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS,

and I'm sipping a Manhattan cocktail while enjoying the warm desert air, all under the light of a full moon.

Yes, the moon is real. And, yes, I'm really in Vegas.

From up here at the Commonwealth lounge's rooftop bar, I can see just about everything—the moon, some stars, the lights of the Fremont Street Experience down the street, and even the skyline of the Las Vegas Strip to the south. Around me, under a phalanx of misters that are keeping us cool, dozens of other patrons—most of them locals—are unwinding after a long day. The vibe is casual, relaxed and refreshingly unpretentious.

Places like the Commonwealth represent a new trend in town. For years, local developers and casino companies tried their hardest to keep customers from the outside world, pumping indoor spaces with over-oxygenated air and artificial light. Nowadays, however, it seems Sin City is embracing the outdoors.

Perhaps the biggest example of this movement is The LINQ, the open-air esplanade leading to a giant Ferris wheel (technically, it's an "observation wheel") near the center of the Strip, between the Flamingo and The Quad (formerly the Imperial Palace). Also in the works: a giant park on the south end of the Strip. Even Vegas concerts are going alfresco; in October, the two-day Life is Beautiful Festival took over 15 blocks of downtown Las Vegas, attracting tens of thousands of revelers to celebrate food, music and art.

With all of these developments, it may soon be possible to go to Las Vegas and spend more time outside than indoors.

REDEFINING THE CENTER STRIP

The epicenter of Las Vegas' movement to embrace the outdoors is The LINQ, the open-air shopping and entertainment destination opening in phases across the street from Caesars Palace. A central plaza connects shops, restaurants, a bowling alley/concert hall and the soon-to-open High Roller, which, at 550 feet in diameter, will eclipse the Singapore Flyer as the world's largest observation wheel.

Think of the place as a free theme park within the bigger theme park of the Las Vegas Strip.

Parent company Caesars Entertainment has pumped more than $550 million into the project and sees the place as a modern-day spin on urban renewal. "The whole idea is to give people space to congregate outside," explains Christina Karas, a spokeswoman for the casino company.

On the surface, this overarching vision is obvious. The tree-lined central walkway has benches and a fountain, and most of the restaurants offer spacious patios for open-air dining and drinking.

Look more closely, and even some of the tenants reflect this new philosophy of embracing the outside. When it
opens in 2014, The Polaroid Fotobar, for instance, will serve up free Wi-Fi for visitors to upload pictures to social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram and will encourage people to print their pictures taken elsewhere in Las Vegas on-site. Brooklyn Bowl will mash up bowling lanes, a restaurant and a nightclub, all in an indoor/outdoor space.

Then, of course, there's the High Roller, which will revolve around the notion of taking in the spectacle of the Las Vegas valley from above (even if it is from climate-controlled pods). Who knows? The next great song about this town may be titled "Vista Las Vegas."

REINVENTING DOWNTOWN

The Fresh Air movement has also caught hold of downtown Las Vegas—the older casino district a few miles north of the Strip. Here, the effort is dual-pronged: New development is complementing major renovations to some of the oldest casinos in town.

Take the Downtown Grand, for example. The historic casino hotel between Ogden and Stewart avenues (the former Lady Luck, which opened in 1964) was gutted and completely rebuilt, with new additions including open-air gambling on Third Street and PICNIC, a rooftop pool and grassy knoll that will be open to the public (for a fee).

At the circa-1971 Plaza Hotel & Casino, an open-air beer garden with faux grass and live music opened last fall. There's even SlotZilla, a zipline attraction with a massive replica of a slot machine serving as a tower.

And on the other side of downtown, to the east of Fremont Street (in an uber-hip area appropriately dubbed "Fremont East"), visitors can get a suntan (or a sunburn, if they're not careful) exploring Downtown Container Park, an open-air shopping and dining destination with vendors occupying retrofitted shipping containers (seriously).

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Add to these spaces Park on Fremont, a hipster bar with a patio that intentionally spills out into the adjacent parking lot every night, and Commonwealth's rooftop oasis, a great place for tasty handcrafted cocktails, and "Old Las Vegas" is full of places to double down on O2.

"With the climate we have, and the space that's available, there's almost no limit to how much we can take advantage of being outside in Las Vegas," says Rehan Choudhry, founder and CEO of the Life is Beautiful Festival. "It's nice to see that people are finally starting to realize how lucky we are."

CREATING A NEW YORK-STYLE PARK

After the High Roller debuts this year, and after summer sunbathers flock to PICNIC at the Downtown Grand, Sin City's next big open-air endeavor will sprout on the south end of the Strip, between New York-New York and Monte Carlo. In addition to a new plaza connecting the two casino hotels, the project will include a green space inspired by New York's Madison Square Park eventually leading to a new sports arena, the latter scheduled to open in 2016.

This project doesn't have a formal name yet, but MGM Resorts CEO Jim Murren has described the area as designed to encourage social interaction and facilitate people-watching. "Our vision is to extend the excitement we traditionally create within our world-class resorts outside onto the Strip, and ultimately in an entertainment district leading to our new arena," he said, in an announcement released last year.

The project's planners are considering including fountains, trees, dining options (including a Shake Shack) and more. For a town that historically has kept many of its most enticing amenities indoors, this future is, indeed, a breath of fresh air.

MATT VILLANO covers Las Vegas for guidebooks and other travel publications.