Vegas a real winner outside the casinos

LAS VEGAS from N1

hokey. But even though sequin-clad Elvis look-alike Brendan Paul made us promise, among other things, not to step on each other's blue suede shoes, it turned out to be surprisingly sweet.

Newly rehitched, we made Las Vegas our honeymoon playground.

Anyone who loved *Top Gun* would find it hard to pass up an aerial thrill ride. Larissa donned a flight suit and boarded a propeller-driven aerobatic aircraft at Sky Combat Ace. For starters, Richard "Tex" Coe, a former Air Force F-16 fighter pilot, performed several barrel rolls, and flew upside down to test Larissa's stomach — then handed the controls over to her!

She flew the plane through an adrenaline-pumping inverted 360-degree loop as she pulled 7 G's (that's seven times the force of gravity), her face contorted into an odd Hobbitlike mien before reverting to unbridled glee at what she had just accomplished. Upon returning to terra firma Larissa declared, "My knees are wobbling, when can I go again?"

To get our feet back on the ground, we ventured to Dig This, an attraction that fulfills childhood dreams of playing in the dirt. We chose a session on the Caterpillar excavator, forbidding-looking pieces of equipment with steel-toothed buckets that loom overhead like escapees from Jurassic Park. After rumbling across the sandy site, we dug Humvee-sized holes, maneuvered 2,000-pound tires into pyramid-shaped piles, and played a form of excavator basketball where even LeBron James wouldn't dare block our shots.

We assumed all that getting dirty appealed mostly to men living out their boyhood fantasies, but owner Ed Mumm said half of the customers are women. "Quite frankly, they're better at it," he said. "They listen to the directions while men tend to barrel ahead." (Somewhere in that observation is marriage advice waiting to be heeded.)

Las Vegas defines its history in more recent terms than our hometown of Philadelphia. The desert city was just hitting its stride only 60 years ago, and some fascinating museums highlight the quirky events that have helped shape its identity.

The entrance to the Neon Museum is the repurposed La Concha motel, a circa-1961 structure whose swooping roofline defines futuristic Googie architecture (think "The Jetsons"). MICHAEL MILNE

There's a retro-cool vibe at the Neon Museum, where the gaudy signs of former casinos are preserved. Visitors enter through the restored lobby of the shell-shaped La Concha motel, a circa 1961 structure that was designed by Paul Revere Williams, the first African American member of the American Institute of Architects. Its white swooping roofline is a stellar example of the futuristic Googie architecture (think of the house on *The Jetsons*) that abounds in Las Vegas.

The huge signs, perched on the ground in an outdoor setting, are most evocative during a nighttime tour. Our guide, the jovial Ian Zeitzer from Northeast Philadelphia, led us on a serpentine path through the neon boneyard illuminating his "history lesson of lost Las Vegas." The fancy script letters of the Moulin Rouge sign once flashed outside the casino that was a trendsetter in 1955; it was the first integrated gambling hall in Vegas, attracting the likes of Sammy Davis Jr. and his Rat Pack pals Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra.

Mob duds at the Mob Museum, which tells the unvarnished story of organized crime and how its tentacles wrapped around casino ventures.

The picturesque Neon Museum has become a fashionable venue for outdoor weddings; a popular photo op is beside the restored 1940s-era "Wedding Information" sign, whose bright red arrow once pointed the way for nervous couples to tie the knot.

Back in the day, the ownership of some of the casinos was murky, a topic that's played out at the downtown Mob Museum, located in the former Federal Courthouse that was home to the Mafia-hunting Kefauver hearings in the 1950s. You have to admire a city that isn't afraid to highlight the sordid side of its history. The museum tells the unvarnished story of organized crime in America and how its tentacles wrapped around every aspect of casino ventures in Las Vegas. Visitors can also listen to tapes of undercover FBI agents as they ensnared the mobsters.

While casinos were popping up like mushrooms, the U.S. government was experimenting with mushroom clouds in the nearby desert. The National Atomic Testing Museum pays homage to the era when nuclear weapons were new and novel. Exhibits encompass the scientific and the social: Some local hotels offered rooftop viewing parties, with bag lunches and heavy-duty goggles to watch the atomic detonations.

If any portion of your youth was spent hunched over a pinball machine, you're in luck in Las Vegas. The Pinball Hall of Fame features more than 250 working machines dating from 1932 to the present day, just waiting for itchy flipper fingers. Tim Arnold, a self-confessed "pinball nut," created the Hall of Fame as a nonprofit entity that donates its proceeds to charity. We were drawn to beautifully restored games of the 1950s and '60s, which cost only a quarter to play. A pinball geek can while away hours there for less than she'd drop on a blackjack table in 10 minutes.

Epilogue: Newly remarried, we were leaving Las Vegas when we stopped at a gas station on the edge of town. After 10 days of living casino-free, Michael just couldn't resist a one-armed bandit placed right by the cashier. But each time he slid in a crumpled dollar bill, the machine kept spitting it out, and so ended our one attempt to gamble in Las Vegas. We guess it just wasn't meant to be.

Philadelphia natives and travel writers Larissa and Michael sold everything in 2011 to travel the world. Follow the journey at www.changesinlongitude.com.

Amenities vary by resort. *The $1,000 air credit offer is valid for new US and Canadian bookings of 7 nights or longer in select categories made now through 9/18/14 or until further notice, for travel starting 2/14/15 and completed by 12/15/15 to Sandals Barbados; other airfare credit offers available for select resorts. Blackout dates apply. Maximum Sandals Select point redemption per reservation is 20,000 Sandals Select points valued at $500 USD. Offer is combinable with Sandals Select Rewards point promotions or WorldPoint redemptions. Unique Vacations, Inc., reserves the right to verify all accounts prior to adjusting reservations. Limit one redemption reservation per member. Booking names must match the Sandals Select Membership account or it will be null and void. Baggage fees may not be included. Both passengers must be booked for the same flight and itinerary cannot include voluntary stopovers. Cancellation of hotel booking will result in cancellation of all associated airline tickets. Offer is combinable with other consumer savings promotions; not combinable with any other air credit offers. Offer is subject to availability throughout promotional period and may be changed or withdrawn at any time. Offer may not be applicable to group bookings. Other restrictions and limitations may apply. **Savings, applicable on resort accommodations, based on a 3-night minimum stay in specific room categories. Valid on new bookings made now through 9/18/14 or until further notice for travel now through 12/26/15. Blackout dates and certain restrictions apply. Offer may be changed or withdrawn at any time without notice. Sandals® is a registered trademark. Unique Vacations, Inc. is the affiliate of the worldwide representative of Sandals Resorts.