

My first reaction when asked about bike trails in Las Vegas was: who the heck takes time from the casinos to ride bikes in Sin City? It's difficult to envision gamblers getting up early in the morning to ride their Schwinn along the traffic-choked, high-rise Las Vegas Boulevard. However, Las Vegas is much more than the Strip, and has become the fastest growing bedroom city in the U.S. throughout the past 20 years.

First of all, it is actually possible to ride bikes on the Strip and downtown Fremont Street areas. In fact, the city has squads of bicycle cops who roam areas day and night where squad cars can't venture. They're very effective in preventing street crime, as well as herding the city's millions of visitors safely as they make their way around Sin City.

There are bicycle rental agencies in Las Vegas that cater to visitors who want to exercise or get around the traffic-congested Strip areas much more quickly than they can in cars and cabs. However, unless you're an expert cyclist who's had daily experience in city traffic in New York City's Manhattan, it isn't wise to try riding in Las Vegas during busy hours of the day.

For Vegas visitors who want safer biking experiences, there are tour companies that conduct guided tours in quieter desert and mountain areas beyond the Strip and downtown. Some will bus bikers to parks, Lake Mead, Boulder Dam and Grand Canyon areas, where the spectacular scenery adds to the pedaling fun.

The secret of successful cycling within the downtown and Strip areas is to get out on the streets as close to dawn as you can. This means about 4:30 am in the summer and 6 am in winter, when cyclists can enjoy a good safe hour before the heavy car, taxi, bus and truck traffic begins. Also, many Vegas summer days quickly heat up to 100 degrees plus by 10 am, making cycling very uncomfortable.

There are no designated bike lanes in those areas, and riding on sidewalks is against the law. Helmets are mandatory, and cyclists are advised to wear bright reflective strips or patches on backs, arms and legs. Plastic water bottles are a must, especially when in the 100 plus Vegas summer heat,

When Atlantic City became the Eastern version of Las Vegas in the mid-1970s, all of the construction was done in the beachfront Boardwalk area hotels, while the rest of the city was left to deteriorate badly. Las Vegas planners for its residential areas have shown considerably more concern for its citizens and newcomers. Along with all the bedroom communities, they planned many parks and bike trails throughout.

Probably the best bike trails within the Las Vegas metropolitan area are located in the suburb of Summerlin, a large planned community of more than 50,000 homes. The development includes over 150 miles of designated cycling and hiking trails within its comprehensive planned network. Streets have marked bike lanes, and neighborhood cycling club groups are common sights every day throughout the Summerlin communities.

By far the most scenic bike trails are in the Red Rock Canyon of the Mount Charleston area, about a 30-minute drive from the Strip. The mountainside views are spectacular when the rising sun emphasizes the brilliant red, copper and orange hues of the prehistoric rock formations. More than a mile above the the dry desert floor, the Red Rock canyon boasts impressive growths of trees that tower above the trails.

When riding in the cool mountain air, cyclists can feel they're a continent away from the gridlock traffic, desert heat and glare of Sin City. Additionally, at some crests, they can actually enjoy views of the far-away Strip, especially at dawn and dusk, when the glittering city lights up the sky for miles around.

Other designated cycling areas include Henderson Trails, Lamb State Park, the Blue Diamond Mountain Trail, Cottonwood Valley and Blue Diamond.

