

The Bestest Hotel in the World

A man who is going blind builds a palace for all to see.

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‘Let me ask you a question’, says Steve Wynn, the 56-year-old man who seems to run Las Vegas. ‘If we could build a hotel that, regardless of the century, was clearly, unequivocally, overwhelmingly the most lovely, elegant, beautiful hotel ever built in the history of the planet, a place where even the people in Johannesburg or Singapore would say, “It’s a wonderment”, well, wouldn’t that be something?’

It would. Unfortunately, Steve Wynn has built Bellagio, a spectacular impersonation of the greatest hotel on the planet. It is the greatest hotel on the planet as designed by people who have never been out of Las Vegas, or the greatest hotel on the Planet of Vegas. It is also, at \$1.6 billion (£965 million), the most ludicrously *expensive* hotel ever, with the only casino in the world containing \$300 million (£180 million) worth of Impressionist art.

Even though it may not quite live up to Steve Wynn’s dream, Bellagio, which opened last month after five years of building, will only enhance the reputation and wealth of the most extravagant hotelier in America (his greatest rival is Donald Trump). Wynn already owns several other huge hotels in Las Vegas – the Golden Nugget, Treasure Island, the Mirage – all of which are essentially casinos with bedrooms, and which earn his organisation approximately \$700 million every year.

But Bellagio is something else, the ultimate 3,025-room pleasure palace in a city where no one has yet been able to locate the dimmer switch. Bellagio is designed to offer visitors everything they would normally associate with Las Vegas – screaming slot machines, a hundred different ways to lose money on green baize, all-you-can-eat buffets, a brain-haemorrhaging show – but at Bellagio it is coated with a varnish of European culture. At Bellagio, named after a small Italian village Wynn chanced upon on holiday, more always equals more. It costs more to stay at the Bellagio than most places on the Las Vegas strip – about \$150-\$850 depending on room size and season – but for that you get a bigger atrium, more flowers, a wider range of tat in the gift shop, and a much more fanatical and over-inflated owner.

‘People need change’, Wynn insists from a seat overlooking a man-made, eight-acre moat at the front of his hotel. ‘I’ve been in Las Vegas long enough to realise the people who come here don’t just want excitement and noise all the time. They want to enjoy tranquillity and peace, maybe take a walk amongst wild animals and admire beautiful paintings and shops and vistas.’

The shops, he stresses, are not the stuff of malls, but of elegant arcades; they include Tiffany, Armani and Chanel. The restaurants are run by ‘James Beard Award-winning’ chefs flown in from Tuscany and New York. A glass sculpture in the entrance hall cost \$10 million. The show in the ballroom is by the French-Canadian modern circus troupe, Cirque du Soleil, and consists of lithe people jumping in and out of a giant stage full of water. The whole resort is lit by a designer who has won Tony awards for *Cats* and *Miss Saigon*. And of the

large bedrooms, almost overlooked in the hooplas of the grand public areas, each has marbled bathrooms, nickable bathrobes, and, as with most Vegas high-rises, windows that don't open lest the bankrupt hurl towards the travertine paving stones.

Despite his desire to dress his new place with the best of everything, Wynn knows that what may be regarded as classy in a thousand other cities here comes up against an insurmountable problem: Bellagio is in a city with a reputation for seediness, corruption, godlessness and the power to bring strong people to their knees. Of course, some people like it this way, but not Wynn, and so he has set himself the gargantuan task of changing Vegas's entire image.

Wynn moved to the city in 1967, and has already seen it transformed beyond recognition. The sex industry has moved underground; families and children are not just tolerated but courted. Almost 30 million tourists visit each year to part with a total of \$7 billion and sleep in absurd, Disneyland creations – mini-resorts dressed up as Ancient Egypt (The Luxor, shaped like a pyramid), the swashbuckling high seas (Treasure Island), mythical Arthurian legend (Excalibur, with its turrets and jousting tournaments), or modern-day Manhattan (New York-New York has a roller coaster). Wynn wants Bellagio to transform the reputation of Las Vegas yet again, this time into a city of culture.

So three years ago, when the hotel was only two or three storeys high (it is now 36), Wynn decided that the way to bring novelty to his hotel was not through neon and gilt, but through something small and pretty and real; fine art. This had never been done in Vegas before – the closest the city had ever got was the Liberace Museum. Wynn heralded this new gimmick with ornate billboards on the edge of the Bellagio construction site. Where other hotels on the Strip advertised the forthcoming Holyfield fight or Liza Minnelli show, Bellagio promised to outdo even the biggest draw: 'Coming soon,' the huge sign said: 'Van Gogh, Monet, Renoir and Cezanne. With special guests Picasso and Matisse'. This billboard soon became known as 'Show me the Monet'.

The notion began with Wynn thinking: 'wouldn't it be fabulous to have a Caravaggio behind the front desk?' He thought this would be 'a wonderful statement for the lobby – it would be a greeting experience. And imagine having a Tintoretto or a Titian in the ceiling.'

He soon found he had a problem. 'I'd taken art history at school – several courses, I loved it. But I didn't realise the extent to which the old masters market was dominated by religious subject matter rather inappropriate to Las Vegas. I would have gotten myself and my company in big trouble.'

Then Wynn discovered that his favourite period was really Impressionism. 'What's not to like about Renoir?' he asks. 'It's easy. It's like a training bra. It's like your first three-wheeled bike.' And so, with the aid of a highly respected New York dealer called William Acquavella, Wynn spent two-and-a-half years scouring auction houses and private collections in search of pictures to fill what had become The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art: two small, velvet-lined rooms and a gift shop just a few steps from the racket of the casino.

Wynn is keen to take visitors for a tour of his acquisitions, and no wonder. His gallery, and his upmarket Picasso restaurant in the basement, contain some remarkable pictures, and several, in the words of *Time* magazine's art

critic Robert Hughes, 'that any museum would envy'. Hughes also remarked that the whole Bellagio experience is so bizarre that it's almost enough to make you want to spend a weekend there.

'This is the greatest single female picture that Van Gogh painted in his life,' Wynn says, standing in front of *Peasant Woman Against a Background of Wheat*. 'It was painted the last week of June of 1890 in a wheatfield behind a hotel. This is the equivalent of a Mona Lisa-calibre picture.' It cost \$47.5 million; he likes the idea that fat people from Iowa enjoy it for just \$10 admission.

'It's facing a great picture by Paul Gauguin that was done in the year he died,' Wynn resumes. 'He went to Tahiti and the Marquesas in search of a more primitive lifestyle. He found something; he got syphilis!'

Wynn says that 'the stories that go with the paintings turn me on'. He stops in front of a Degas ballerina. 'This remarkable picture was sold to one of the most famous families in the world... Baron Rothschild bought it in 1918 at auction in France, and there it stayed in that family through generations until, for some remarkable and miraculous reason, one of the nephews sold it to us.'

Wynn then turned to Manet's *Portrait of Mademoiselle Suzette Lemaire, in Profile*. This is (my wife) Elaine's favourite painting. Suzette was quite a girl of her day, and her mum was no slouch, either.'

Next up, Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar*, another masterpiece with an adorably personal link. 'This picture was painted in 1942, the year I was born,' Wynn says, 'and is all about the Freudian theme that all of us have a dark side.'

Indeed. You do not get to be a kingpin in Vegas without very useful connections. Wynn was born in Connecticut, where he began his gaming career operating bingo halls (his father, now dead, was a compulsive gambler). He moved to Las Vegas in 1967, and soon became part-owner of the small New Frontier Hotel and the Golden Nugget. At the time of his investment, the downtown casino was little more than a gambling den; eight years later, Wynn had remodelled it into a garish resort, where high-rollers could find a little comfort amidst the neon – the prototype of his future hotels.

Perversely, Wynn made his name not in Las Vegas but in Atlantic City. In 1980, he opened the Golden Nugget Hotel & Casino with a series of television advertisements featuring himself and Frank Sinatra. In one, Sinatra treated Wynn like a lowly bellboy, ordering him to maintain an ample supply of clean towels in his room. The ads made a huge impact and demonstrated Wynn's savvy with the media; he knew that since all casinos basically provided the same thing, image was everything.

He became close friends with Sinatra, a friendship which came to the attention of Scotland Yard. In the early Eighties, Wynn's company, Golden Nugget Incorporated, planned to open a casino in London, which, at the time, was overrun with Arab princes. The CID investigated possible Mafia connections involving so-called 'key employees' of Gold Nugget Inc. Their report was inconclusive, but Wynn – who has claimed that he was unaware of the CID investigation, and successfully sued the publisher of a biography suggesting Mafia connections – agrees that his company withdrew its London casino applications before the Gaming Board had a chance to inspect them.

Back in Las Vegas, Wynn's reputation and fame grew. He became very friendly with junk-bond fraudster Michael Milken, as well as Rupert Murdoch,

Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. In his office at Bellagio hang three portraits of Wynn by Andy Warhol. 'When Andy gave them to me, I didn't realise what a big deal it was, and Elaine wouldn't put them up in the house because they didn't go anywhere. So we kept them in the closet. Then four months ago, a photographer came along and looked at them and noticed diamond dust in my hair (in the painting). He said: "Andy only put diamond dust in his favourite pictures." I said: 'Is *that* what the glitter is?'

'Wynn's a nut,' says John L Smith, a columnist on the Las Vegas Journal; he's also the author of *Running Scared*, the unauthorised biography of Wynn to which its subject took exception.

'I hate to admit this,' Smith says, 'but, in some respects, my book was a very tame look at him. He's quite a force on the local political scene, and he's making inroads into the (Republican) national scene by making big donations. He's respected for his ability to build big structures, but he's also feared.' Perhaps inevitably, Wynn's growing fame and fortune has brought its share of rich-man's misery. In July 1993, his 26-year-old daughter, who goes by the unusual name of Kevyn, was kidnapped after a dinner at her father's Mirage hotel. The kidnappers demanded \$2.5 million in untraceable notes, which was swiftly reduced to \$1.45 million. Wynn agreed to pay, and sent a hotel security man to the drop-off point, after which Kevyn Wynn was safely returned. The whole episode lasted less than three hours, fuelling speculation that the event was a stunt, and maybe even a money-laundering operation, though the FBI arrested the kidnappers' leader within days.

A curious feature of the kidnapping involved Wynn's refusal to deliver the ransom himself, due to his inability to drive in the evenings. 'I was born with a condition called *retinitis pigmentosa*,' he explains, as the fountains dance to Sinatra's 'Luck be a Lady.' 'I don't see in the dark worth a damn.' Wynn's close-up vision is also impaired, a fact he demonstrates by placing his hands on my forehead and my chin. 'I can't see above here or below there,' he says. 'If I live to be 90, I might go totally blind.' But he says he still skis 40 days a year. 'And I ski good. (But) I don't ski the bumps any more. I ski the *groomed* slopes.'

His eye problem has been linked to his choice of art – bold brushstrokes, big bright colours – a connection he dismisses. But it is difficult to know if Wynn appreciates the full ludicrousness of his attempts to import culture by the crateload to a city best known for such kitsch attractions as the Elvis-style gyrations of Wayne Newton or the white tiger magic show of Siegfried and Roy. Certainly, Wynn claims to know a lot about the leisure industry. 'I know what people are like out there in London and Paris and Hong Kong,' he says, sounding like Garrison Keillor but looking like Andy Williams. 'They want the same things that people in Syracuse want. They want to go on vacation, be in a fanciful environment and eat in great restaurants. British or Chinese, the leisure conversation is remarkably homogenous. Everybody in China is saying: "Shall we go to London, shall we go to Paris?"'

'When I go away, my wife and I like to go shopping,' Wynn continues as 1,000 fountains crash behind him (in the desert, water has always been equated with power). 'We eat food we don't eat at home, we wanna see shows. I want to appeal to the people who've felt "I don't want to go to Vegas to see an exploding volcano".' (The volcano has been exploding since 1989; it is outside his own Mirage hotel.) What Wynn really wanted was to build something that

would be good for the soul. 'Who says that theatre and the performing arts have to be centred in New York? It's inconvenient to go all the way to New York to go to the Met. Why can't we stay home?'

This is the crux of the new Las Vegas – the concept that you can actually build everything that is great about the world in one desert location. This explains the projected openings next year of the 'Paris' resort directly opposite Bellagio, complete with a half-size Eiffel Tower, and the construction of the 6,000-room Venetian, with the doge's palace and canals.

The more one talks to those who have adopted Vegas as their home, the more one detects the belief that it is Europe that is this mythical place where history is but a blur, and Vegas that is now the real deal, where the rest of the world must gravitate for its cultural refreshment. Local television channels treated the opening of Bellagio as the high watermark of elegance. On one station, a presenter remarked: 'It's certainly a lot easier to get to than Italy.' To which his colleague replied: 'Not tonight. Tonight, the traffic on the Strip will be real bad.'

The more pressing motivation behind the new Vegas is the realisation that gambling is no longer enough to sustain it. Many of the 'whales' – the high-rollers who stake fortunes on one visit – have been hit by the Far Eastern financial crisis; others have defected to casinos in the 37 other states which now also licence gambling.

As Wynn puts it, 'the idea that gaming is unique to Las Vegas is totally over. There's going to be gambling on Indian reservations and gambling everywhere. If anyone here thinks you can lean on the slot machine any more, I warn you that slot machines are slippery and have wheels underneath them that will go out from underneath you. But you can lean on beauty, on elegance. You can let a slot machine help you pay for it.'

It is also possible to Wynn's Bellagio as his attempt to legitimise his life, the way others seek honours from the Queen. At the official media launch in mid-October, he talked for almost an hour about how the whole world would now view Las Vegas differently. 'The city must now deal with Bellagio,' he announced in his gruesomely charming way, 'and, if it does, it will mean that the best days of Las Vegas are ahead of us.'

Wynn spoke of creating his place 'like one creates a symphony', and introduced his award-winning chefs as 'masters of the symphony's food and beverage movement'. The chefs spoke of how Wynn persuaded them to move to a city they would never have dreamed of even visiting (no doubt by offering vast sums of money). They said things like: 'We believe in Steve!'

Wynn revealed that he had originally thought of setting up his luxurious playground in London, but was thwarted by the lack of space. 'I looked at Regent's Green,' he said (Regent's Park? Golders Green?), 'but that was unavailable.' Later in his speech, he talked of how he wanted his resorts to be refined but not stuffy, like the 'Albert and Victoria' museum.

By the time I met him again a few days later, Wynn had already compiled a dossier of Bellagio's weakness, all of which he hoped to fix within 30 days: 'There is a list this long.' He extended his short arms. One problem was that the room service lift wouldn't go up. 'So the top man from Dover Elevators comes round,' Wynn explained. 'They love their Bellagio account. They want a failure of Dover Elevators like they want skin cancer.'

I asked Wynn what else kept him awake at night. 'I didn't lay awake thinking it wasn't going to work. We understood enough about the marketplace to

know what our yields and average take would be. We knew that the hotel would pay for itself. The only question was, would it make \$350 million, \$300 million or \$250 million a year?

Which is to say that culture is only the means to an end. The end is the same as it has always been in this part of the Nevada desert: the relentless pursuit of money. Rest assured that Bellagio's culture may be dismantled as swiftly as it has been assembled. For if, after a spectacular night at the gaming tables, you like the look of something in the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, you will be informed that all of the pictures are for sale. Anything to ensure that you don't leave Steve Wynn's new Las Vegas wealthier than when you arrived.

Postscript: A few years later Steve Wynn sold Bellagio and built Wynn, another luxury hotel on the Strip that looks as if it is made of solid gold.