Opulent hotels and casinos line the famed Las Vegas Strip; a dazzling main street that can be seen from outer space. Photo by Deborah Stone. Las Vegas is the world's most famous monument to excess and wild abandon.

It's a place where anything goes — where a midget size Elvis croons tunes on one corner of the Strip, while down the way, a woman in scanty attire with head-to-toe tattoos breakdances for a crowd; where men work the street flicking cards in your face, advertising a menu of risqué and raunchy adult entertainment options. It's also where persistent hawkers try and entice passersby into their bars, nightclubs and dens of iniquity with that one simple, but heavily loaded word — "free."

It's an obvious trap, but there's always some poor sucker who falls for the ploy and ends up learning his lesson the hard way.

The cornucopia of vices on display 24 hours a day along with the glitz, bright lights and all you can eat buffets serve as magnets to the millions of tourists who flock to Vegas.

They come to escape from reality and to get themselves a big slice of fantasy pie with a hefty dollop of decadence on top.

I recently spent a few days in this razzle dazzle town after a lapse of almost seven years. Other than more mega, ostentatious hotels and casinos and newly created show venues, the place hadn't changed much.

The most noticeable addition was the City Center (still under construction), a collection of new hotels, residences, spas, restaurants and upscale shopping set right off the Strip.

Vegas was its typical raucous and crazy self with a host of colorful characters and for a few days, it was highly entertaining — especially the people.

Watching people is a great Vegas pastime. I'm especially fascinated with the older women playing the penny slots. Most are hard core veterans of the game and they will sit until the wee hours of the morning, cigarette in hand, smoke billowing around them, as they work the machines in earnest.

And then there are the intense card players at the high stakes poker and blackjack tables where the pressure is palpable and the mood is dead serious. Or the group of gregarious, excited folks having a winning streak over at the craps table. Once strangers, they're now best buds, hoping that Lady Luck continues to keep them in good company.

Casinos make the perfect showcase for human nature to unveil itself in all its blemished glory. It's a psychologist's dream come true.

I also like to spend time sitting at an outdoor café and watching the masses stroll along the

Strip.

Here’s where you’ll see people from all over the world, many wide eyed and mouths agape, taking in the sights. And let’s not forget about the packs of young guys on the hunt for the opposite sex and the throngs of young gals in pursuit of the same.

As darkness falls, the mating calls get louder, the mood becomes rowdier and inhibitions go by the wayside.

The scene is akin to a colossal Mad Hatter party where booze, not tea, is the drink of choice.

Although the people provide much of the entertainment, shows take center stage in Vegas.

You’ll find world class entertainers, from famous singers to well known comedians and magicians. And then there are the multi-act productions, which are in a class of their own.

Cirque du Soleil has a bit of a monopoly in this market. Currently, the Montreal-based company has seven shows operating at different casinos on the Strip.

The productions are a fusion of acrobatics, dance, comic antics, music and awe inducing visual effects. And audiences love them.

In past visits, I have seen Cirque’s "O" and "Mystere," both of which were wonderfully entertaining. This time around, I caught "LOVE," a theatrical spectacle set to music by the Beatles.

The show began as a collaboration between George Harrison and Cirque’s Guy LaLiberte.

After Harrison’s death, the remaining Beatles and the families of the late group members helped make Harrison’s vision a reality, using the master tapes at Abbey Road Studios.

The music director is none other than Sir George Martin, who is best known for his work producing the Beatles’ music.

Often referred to as a "rock ‘n roll poem," the show can be described as a psychedelic journey through the trends and social/political climate of the ’60s, with a liberal dose of Beatles’ history.

It’s a celebration of the musical legacy of this iconic group. The content of the selected songs is artfully interpreted through a series of innovative performances done by a cast of international artists.

They include acrobats, tumblers, extreme sports athletes, urban freestyle dancers and aerialists, all who bring a youthful, raw energy to the production, while showcasing their impressive talents. Each of the acts astounds and overloads the senses.

In "Help," for example, four inline skaters take the stage to leap 11-foot ramps in high octane fashion.

"Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" features some incredible high flying aerial moves, while "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!" culminates in a jaw dropping swing trapeze routine. Bungees figure prominently.

They are climbed and repelled, used to propel birds around the stage during "Blackbird" and provide flying devices for airborne performers in "Come Together."

Dynamic and larger-than-life characters take the stage in a carnival like atmosphere, which is

enhanced by a montage of images and photos of the group.

The action takes place in a custom-built theater-in-the-round at the Mirage. Audiences are enveloped in a state-of-the-art panoramic visual and surround sound environment, which helps to create an intimate and powerful entertainment experience.

"LOVE" is an unforgettable trip down memory lane, which will leave you with feelings of nostalgia for a bygone era.

Down the street at the Wynn is "Le Rêve" (The Dream), another show I caught while in town.

Though not a Cirque production, it is reminiscent of one.

It’s an evocative aqua spectacle, also in-the-round, which features a blend of aerial acrobatics, provocative choreography and outrageous antics. The production conjures up an imaginary world with its elaborate effects, mystifying characters, and awe-inspiring feats.

Performers dazzle the audience on stage, in the air and from the water. They appear from every angle of the theater, at times ascending from the pool, descending from the ceiling or running through the aisles alongside the audience.

One of the highlights of the show is a tango number performed with both synchronized swimmers in the water and tango dancers on a platform. It’s a multi-level extravaganza of red high heels and legs moving to the intoxicating beat of the music.

A pair of strong men and their daring feats of strength is another crowd favorite. "Le Rêve" immersed me into a world of fantasy, adventure and intrigue and I was enchanted and captivated by its magic.

Choosing shows at Vegas is like being a kid at a candy shop, albeit a very expensive one.

The selection is extensive and can be overwhelming, especially for the first time visitor.

Half price tickets do exist if you’re willing to stand in line and not be picky about availability.

And there are also hotel packages that include admission to some of the hottest productions.

For me, being in Vegas without seeing a show is not an option.

It’s part of the total experience of this city – a place that stands alone in its opulence, its magnetism and its garishness.

For information on all things Vegas: www.visitlasvegas.com