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A stay at the decrepit tomb of what was once the Vegas Strip's coolest hotel

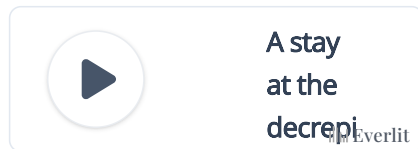
When it opened, Vegas had never seen anything like Luxor. Now, it's one of the most hated hotels on the Strip.



A panoramic view of Luxor on the Las Vegas Strip.
Joe Sohm/Visions of America/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

By **Katie Dowd**, Managing editor

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In 1993, a promotional video was made to herald the opening of Luxor Las Vegas, the “next wonder of the world.” It opens with photographs of explorer Howard Carter at the entrance to Tutankhamen’s tomb. “As he chips a hole through the end of the passageway, Howard Carter is asked, ‘Do you see anything?’” a narrator says. “‘Yes,’ he replies. ‘Wonderful things.’”



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The video then smash-cuts to the towering black pyramid on the Vegas Strip. “If only he had lived to see this!” the narrator exclaims.

Luxor Hotel & Casino P...



Over 30 years later, a resort that was once compared to the greatest discovery in archaeological history has 2.5 stars on Yelp. And within 10 minutes of my arriving at Luxor, it was clear why it's one of the most reviled hotels in Las Vegas.

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I pulled into the porte cochere shortly before noon and headed inside with my luggage in tow. Hoping to stow my bag while I explored the resort, I walked over to the bell services desk. The employee gestured for me to come closer, then angrily pointed behind me.

"That's the line," she said.

I turned to see a queue about 10 feet away. It extended all the way through the lobby to the casino floor. Mortified by my mistake, I joined the throng, watching as a man emptied out his suitcase on the floor and repacked it. Nearly 10 minutes went by, and the line had barely budged. Behind the desk, a loop of early 2000s music videos played. I wondered what Howard Carter would have thought about the Click Five.



The line for the bell desk at Luxor Las Vegas in March 2025.
Katie Dowd/SFGATE

Then, by some miracle, I got a text: My room was ready. I passed two broken moving walkways, a closed cafe and a long, blank wall lined with employee-only doors before finding the ancient-looking bank of elevators. When the first one opened, the electrical panel was exposed, wires spilling out. The doors shuddered shut, and the ascent began. Because Luxor is a pyramid, the elevators are more like funiculars, climbing sideways at a 39-degree angle. Signs in each elevator include this fact — perhaps to get out in front of the complaints — and describe it as a “thrilling” experience. Roller coasters are thrilling. Luxor’s elevators are a nuisance.



The room was so dim that I thought for a moment I'd forgotten to take off my sunglasses. The dark exterior of Luxor made for a perpetual tint in the room, worsened by the fact that one of the windowpanes was crusted in desert dust. This is probably a great setup for someone with a blistering hangover, but it gave a depressing pallor to the space. Upon closer inspection, I found tiny flies, both alive and dead, on the windowsill. I thought about smushing the lone survivor but, worried these might be minions of King Tut, decided against it. I wasn't going out like elevator guy.

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A standard queen room inside the pyramid at Luxor Las Vegas in March 2025.
Katie Dowd/SFGATE

There were two positives. One was the Wi-Fi, which was strong enough to seamlessly maintain a video call. The other was the toilet, which flushed with the force of a cruise ship lavatory. If you're eating at the Luxor buffet, this is no doubt a hygienic necessity.

Luxor wasn't always the butt of jokes, though. When it opened in 1993, it was one of three highly themed megaresorts that reshaped the Strip: Over a two-month span, Luxor, MGM Grand and Treasure Island all debuted. Luxor, which was funded by Circus Circus, was the most spectacular in many ways. The light beam that burst from the top of the pyramid was said to be the most powerful on the planet. The LA Times wrote that its designers said you could read a newspaper by its light 7 miles up, although proof from a passing astronaut was not provided. Luxor had the world's largest atrium, an enormous sphinx out front that shot lasers out of its eyes and a Nile boat ride that encircled the main floor.



The Las Vegas Airport with Luxor Hotel in the background on Jan. 1, 1996. Note how few other resorts were on Las Vegas Boulevard at that time.

Santi Visalli/Getty Images

“Nobody ever put the Nile River in a building before,” Luxor’s general manager bragged to reporters.

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The ride, which was skipped by an employee with a microphone, passed through Oldworld, Modernworld and Futureworld. Oldworld was primarily Egyptian history, although it did include some Aztec architecture. (If you’ve ever wondered why the Blue Man Group is housed in an Aztec pyramid-shaped theater, this is why.) In Modernworld, Luxor recreated New York City. The last vestige of this can be seen from the upper floors of the resort: Look down, and you’ll see a Chrysler Building mixed in among the atrium structures. Finally, Futureworld consisted of cutting-edge rides, including one deliciously ’90s concept where guests watching a live-action David Letterman-style talk show were sucked into a 3D action ride.

1993 - The Making Of ...



The riverboat was more than just an attraction. It was also the only form of transportation more annoying than the elevators themselves. Newspaper coverage of the opening noted that guests rode the boats from the check-in desk to the elevators. No mention is made of what happened to their luggage or how irritated they were to stand in line for a boat after getting in late. Guests who survived the nautical gantlet could then eat at the 1,100-person dinner show “Winds of the Gods,” which featured, for a time, a live elephant.

Tragically, Stoney died in 1995 with perhaps the grimmest exit of any Las Vegas performer: “The trainer walked through the door and that elephant started chirping and calling to him; then he reached out his trunk to the guy like he wanted to touch him,” an employee recalled. “The guy said, ‘Cut it out, Stoney,’ and sort of pushed the trunk away. Then the elephant kind of sighed and then he died.”

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Thousands of people “jammed the Las Vegas Strip behind temporary fences” to catch the grand opening in October 1993, the Reno Gazette–Journal reported, and over 100,000 people passed through the resort in its first weekend.

There was nothing like it: Long before every inch of Las Vegas Boulevard became crowded with hotels, Luxor stood alone. It was “going to hurt the 30- and 40-year-old square boxes with no personalities,” one gaming analyst confidently told the Associated Press.

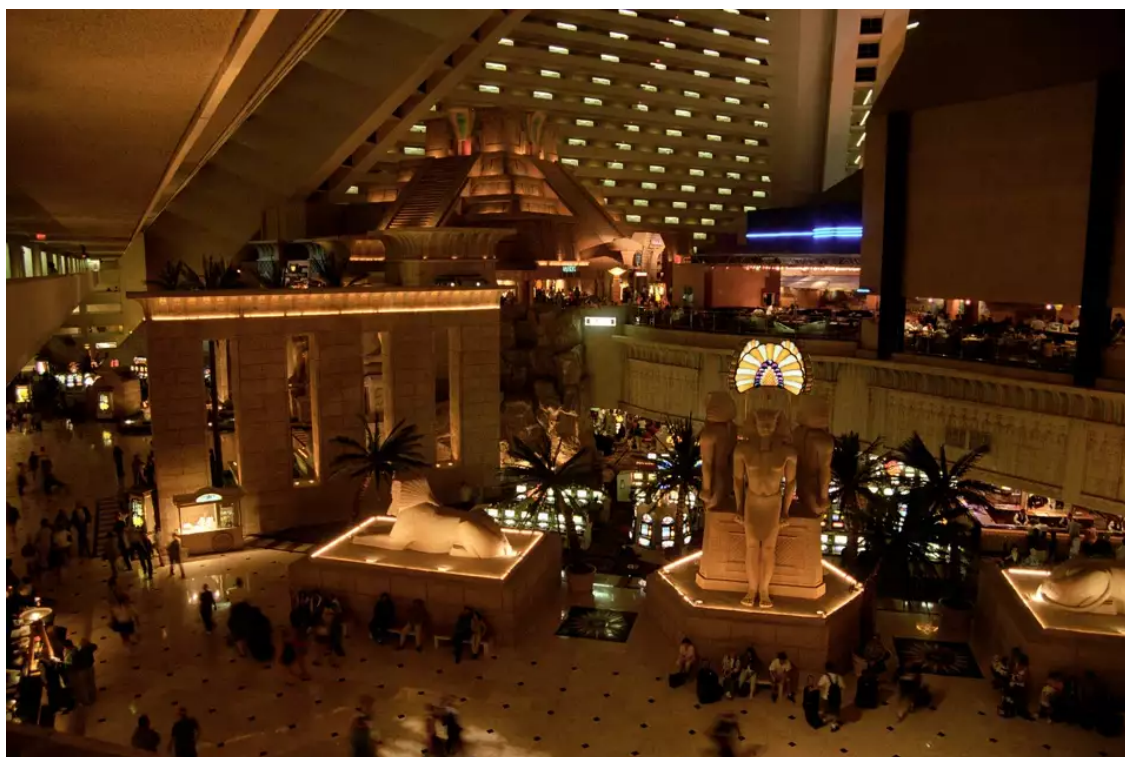


Interior view of Luxor Hotel on Dec. 20, 1995, in Las Vegas.
Santi Visalli/Getty Images

This was not the case. Almost immediately, the over-the-top Egyptian theme didn’t resonate with the gambling crowd. The hotel’s unique design was also the source of problems, like flooding in guest rooms and elevators on the fritz. “We’re in the doldrums, and you just have to suck it up,” Circus Circus president Glenn Schaeffer said less than three years after Luxor’s opening. “It is entirely unpleasant, but no one in the history of Las Vegas has built a property entirely from the inside out and then had to reposition it.”

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The original project had cost \$375 million, and Circus Circus dropped \$300 million more to add two new towers and scale back the Egyptian-style architecture. Gone was the Nile River ride, which presumably corroded the interior of the building. By 2007, almost all of Luxor's grand original theme had been removed.



The interior of Luxor on the Las Vegas Strip, as seen in 2000.
Peter Bischoff/Getty Images

"We're not a British museum with ancient artifacts, we're a casino-resort," Luxor's president said at the time. "This was a brilliantly conceived building from the outside. The pyramid always created a sense of wow and wonder, but the inside never delivered on that promise."

Stripped of its novelty, though, the gloomy interior is now bare and brutalist. Luxor has all the glamor of an apartment complex in the Soviet Bloc. As you wander the empty corridors, you wonder when a KGB thug is going to pop out from behind an ice machine. Hallways echo with the sound of doors slamming and, at least on my floor, there was a perpetual sound of dripping water.

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The atrium, once a space unlike any other in Las Vegas, is a confusing mix of attractions. There's the aforementioned Blue Man Group in one theater and Carrot Top in another, deepening the sense that you've somehow wandered into a time travel wormhole. A Titanic exhibit boasts the Big Piece, the largest single chunk of the ship on display. Next door, a King Tut exhibit is \$35 per person, which is \$24 more than it costs to see actual items from Tutankhamen's tomb (travel costs aside). I was unwilling to pay for this experience, but the website informed me it was a grab bag of general mummy lore, plus a VR walk-through of the tomb. The spirit of Howard Carter, wherever it is, is probably relieved he didn't live to see that.

With limited food options at the hotel, I ate elsewhere for dinner. On my walk back, I kept looking at the beam emanating from Luxor. Maybe it was the brightest light on Earth, but on a clear March evening, it seemed frail against the immensity of the sky.



Lightning strikes over Mandalay Bay and Luxor Hotel and Casino during a storm July 21, 2005, in Las Vegas.

Ethan Miller/Getty Images

That night, afraid of falling asleep without a security lock, I dragged an armchair in front of my door. At \$299.32 for two nights, it felt particularly absurd to be redesigning the room for safety. Still, sleep refused to come, so I flipped through a book on the history of Egyptian tomb raiding I'd brought with me. It told the story of how, for

centuries, Egyptians have descended below the sand and returned to the surface with untold treasures. A few years ago, Luxor refreshed its guest rooms using some of the old furniture from the Bellagio. Even tomb raiding at the Las Vegas Luxor was depressing.

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After a fitful night's sleep, I stumbled down to the lobby Starbucks. As I sat among health care conventioners in lanyards, it crossed my mind that this had once been the epicenter of Las Vegas cool. Will Smith filmed the music video for "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It" at this very hotel. It had a nightclub frequented by the likes of Paris Hilton and Kobe Bryant. Tupac Shakur was staying here the day he was killed. But in the dingy atrium, sipping a \$10 coffee, I had rarely felt less jiggy.



Las Vegas Boulevard, including Mandalay Bay, Luxor, MGM Grand and other hotels and casinos that are part of the Las Vegas skyline, is seen in this aerial photograph on Sept. 5, 2013.

SAUL LOEB/AFP via Getty Images

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