

TRAVEL

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PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Making like an A-list star

New service from Virgin offers vacationers the chance to act like a celebrity. Where better to start than Las Vegas?

BY EVA WISEMAN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Mid-song, on the back seat of a limousine in downtown Las Vegas, Elvis Presley has forgotten the words. He is also bleeding, steadily, from a dog bite on his right hand, and horribly aware of the threat the blood poses to his white polyester jumpsuit. Elvis is a man from Wyoming whose real name is Brad and, secretly, he prefers Van Halen. The car, which takes 10 minutes to turn a corner, smells of scared dog and sweat. This isn't how it was meant to be.

Virgin Holidays last week appointed James "Tappy" Wright, Jimi Hendrix's tour manager, as director of Rockstar Resources, responsible for creating a concierge service for all their vacationers that can cope with even the most diva-ish of demands. "I've dealt with some of the craziest requests over the years, so I think I'm pretty well placed. Whether it's simply having someone on hand at the resort to provide information," he says, "or to provide a bath full of champagne, we want all our customers to feel their holiday is extra special." The idea is that you compile a rider, submit a list of demands and your concierge (trained by Tappy) will attempt to fulfill them.

I looked to my heroes for inspiration. Jennifer Lopez's rider includes a request for her coffee to be stirred counter-clockwise. Barbra Streisand has rose petals sprinkled in her toilet bowl. Britney Spears asks for an "odor-free carpet," Mariah Carey needs a "special attendant to dispose of used chewing gum" and, along with Lily Allen, requires a puppy for the night. David Hasselhoff only has one demand — for his room to be furnished with a life-size cut-out of David Hasselhoff.

In the week leading up to my trip to Las Vegas, my own demands trickled through — I wanted to travel luggage-less, and for a selection of clothes suitable for all weather to be waiting for me in my hotel room. I wanted my flight upgraded. I wanted them to guarantee a gambling win. I wanted a set of Agatha Christie novels to read on the flight over, and a pack of Percy Pig sweets to eat in the air. I asked for a micro-pig to pet for an afternoon and, inspired by J.Lo, who won't perform unless her dressing room and everything in it are white, I asked for an all-white meal. I wanted to visit Vegas's best vintage store, and a celebrity lookalike (Lady Gaga or Beth Ditto or, failing them, Elvis) to serenade me on my journey there. And a pack of Penguin (chocolate) biscuits. As I sent my final requests I felt light-headed, fancy, and hoarse with want.

Las Vegas uses its gambled cash in the same way Athens trades on its ruins. When we arrive, and in every subsequent car ride, every cab driver points out how much each hotel we pass cost to build; every person we talk to has a story about seeing a man win millions and lose more. We eat in the Picasso restaurant, where, we're told, the Picassos on the wall are insured for US\$90 million. On The Venetian hotel's replica Rialto Bridge, identical but for the escalators running up and down its length, tourists pose for photographs fanning wads of US dollar bills.

Money will buy many of the things on my list — in addition to the white meal, cooked with cod, cauliflower, potato and egg by Michelin-starred chef Julian Serrano, in my two days in the city I saw a



Tourists take a gondola ride at the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. Returning to civvy street may seem like a comedown after a break with Virgin Holidays' Rockstar Resources, which aims to cater to vacationers' every whim, no matter how extravagant or ridiculous. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Cirque du Soleil show, had a pedicure looking out on to the strip, ate steaks beside the Bellagio fountain show, got a private tour of the Liberace museum, stayed at the exclusive Encore hotel and sunbathed in a cabana at Caesars Palace, where I watched people gamble waist-high in water beside the fenced-off topless pool, and overheard a woman's advice on marriage: "First you whore, sweetheart, then you bore." It was probably for the best that I didn't get everything I wanted. I could feel myself swelling as I slept — my desires solidifying in their mould like jelly. Micro-pigs, the concierge told me, are only available in spring. Fuming, in a way that came worryingly naturally, I settled for a puppy. And it was this puppy that, unwilling to leave its cage on the back seat of a limousine just by the Las Vegas sign, bit my Elvis impersonator hard on his pointing hand.

The ride started well, with a bowl of red M&Ms, the other colors painstakingly removed by minions. Elvis and I took turns trying to coax our hired puppy, a Bichon Frise mix, out of its traveling cage, but after she attacked, her teeth bared, we dropped her off with her owner in the Liberace museum car park. She growled until Elvis, shuffling round the foyer (he was banned from the museum to prevent icons clashing) was out of sight. "Little fur-coated razor blade," he muttered, repeatedly.

The museum itself — two flat-roofed warehouses which, inside, blind visitors with their glint, their hundreds of mirrored pianos and diamond-covered cars — was staffed by an elderly, limping steward who refused to look Elvis in the eye.

I assured the steward that he'd wait in the limo and he thanked me, admitting, "It's been a rough day." My day was going fabulously. We drove downtown, away from the hotels with their hourly pirate shows and gondola rides, and the windowless casinos where it's always evening, into what my Elvis called "real Las Vegas": the block-wide thrift stores and debt-management offices, and hair weaves rolling up the curb.

The Attic, Vegas' premier vintage store, as featured in *Vogue* and *W* magazine, blew up in a gas explosion the week before I arrived. The block where it stood is dusty and shattered, on a busy road with cars that toot when they see Elvis, but the shop is today setting up across the street, in a smaller space, now stuffed with rails of dresses. Though they're closed they open especially for me, and Elvis calmly waits outside the changing room to carry my bags when I've finished shopping. He offers his arm as we cross the street, and I feel less like a rock star, more like an TV reality-show auditionee, or an escaped old lady being gently escorted back to her retirement village. When he kisses me goodbye on the cheek, a bit of his make-up comes off on my collar.

It wasn't until I had checked in at the airport that I realized I'd forgotten to gamble. Could my concierge guarantee a win? He sat beside me as we fed US\$5 into the one-armed bandit by our gate, and willed good luck in through the air conditioning. Our cash was eaten, of course, but in the half-second when the cherries briefly lined up, I was surprised to hear myself cheer.

On the Net: virginholidays.co.uk; encorelasvegas.com; bellagio.com; elvisinaflash.com.

After Islamic banking comes halal travel

Frustrated by a lack of religiously sensitive travel services, Fazal Bahardeen set up a company to rate hotels on their friendliness to Muslim visitors

BY MARTIN ABBUGAO
AFP, SINGAPORE

In his days as a jet-setting telecoms executive, ready-to-eat meals were a regular part of Fazal Bahardeen's luggage.

Many of the hotels he stayed in did not have halal-certified restaurants for Muslim travelers like the 47-year-old Sri Lanka-born Singaporean.

Rooms lacked markers pointing to Mecca for prayers and staff were unable to answer questions from Muslim guests about their particular needs.

"Half of my life was spent in hotels and airplanes," Fazal said.

"But being a Muslim, I was getting frustrated by the travel industry or the hotels not being able to provide the right services. You don't know what the prayer time is, where the prayer direction is, and you can't find halal food."

But halal travel is now gaining popularity as demand for products and services permitted by Islam extends beyond food and interest-free financial instruments, and affluent Muslim travelers make their influence felt.

Halal travel is expected to be worth US\$100 billion annually within two years, said Fazal, who resigned from a senior management job at a major telecoms firm in 2006 and set up his own company to tap into the expected boom.

Fazal's Crescentrating Pte Ltd is believed to be the only company in the world that rates hotels globally for their friendliness to Muslim travelers.

Its online booking portal www.crescentrating.com also promotes halal tours.

Travel commentator Yeoh Siew Hoon said there is a real demand for halal travel, led by tourists from Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

"Take Indonesia — it is one of the fastest growing outbound markets in Asia, and is the number one source of visitors to Singapore," said Yeoh, who operates an industry Web site www.webintravel.com.

"Tourism Australia also produces a guide to halal restaurants due to the growing numbers of travelers from Muslim countries," she added.

Greg Duffell, chief executive of the Bangkok-based Pacific Asia Travel Association, said China's sizeable Muslim population is another potential source of outbound travel.

"A lot of suppliers are now amending their products to meet halal standards," Duffell said.

"It is a trend that started a few years ago. Since then, restaurants and resorts in Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam too have begun adapting their standards, so it's beginning to branch out," he said. "There are more designated halal restaurants in hotels now, and prayer facilities on the premises, especially at the airports."

Crescentrating's hotel grading system ranges from one to seven and is based on the availability of halal food as well as prayer rooms and mats — and the non-availability of forbidden items like alcohol and adult TV channels.

A rating of one is given to a hotel with no such facilities but whose employees are trained to answer questions from Muslim guests.

This can be raised a notch if the hotel has a list of halal-certified restaurants in its vicinity — even if it does not have one itself.

The company's highest ratings, six and seven, require a hotel to be free of alcohol, discos and TV channels showing movies unsuitable for families and children. In addition, all food and beverages must be halal.

Globally, only Dubai's Al Jawhara Garden Hotel has a rating of seven, while three hotels in Saudi Arabia and one in South Africa are rated six.

The halal food industry is worth US\$600 billion to US\$650 billion a year, according to Fazal and industry reports.

Islamic finance meanwhile boomed when Muslims began to look for investments approved by their religion, and the sector has attracted non-Muslims too after the global financial crisis.

"The halal consciousness is rapidly going beyond food and finance," said Fazal, arguing that with 1.6 billion increasingly wealthy Muslims worldwide, halal-friendly travel is likely to be the next growth area.

Muslim travelers account for seven to eight percent of global tourism expenditure, which totaled around US\$930 billion in 2009, up from just three-four percent 10 years ago, Fazal said.

This share is expected to expand to 10 percent in the next two years.

Crescentrating also hopes to stamp halal-friendly ratings on theme parks, convention venues, cruise ships, shopping malls and hospitals used by medical tourists.



Fazal Bahardeen, a 47-year-old Sri Lanka-born Singaporean, set up his own company to tap the growth in Muslim-friendly travel services. PHOTO: AFP