

How Reno became more than my favorite road stop



By Christopher Elliott

Reno, Nev., used to be my favorite road stop on the way to Lake Tahoe. I had a preferred 7-11 service station where I could check the tread on my snow tires and fuel up, an In-N-Out Burger joint, and within a few minutes, I was on my way to some of the world's best skiing.

Although I passed through Reno many times, I'd only really visited once, as a college student, when my friends and I hit the slots in the Biggest Little City in the World -- and lost, of course. We reflexively drowned our sorrows in black coffee the next morning. The all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast helped, too.

So when I had a chance to return to Reno this summer, I remembered the road stop and slots, and wondered: What more is there?

A lot, it turns out.



Beyond the casinos on Virginia Street lies a city that will surprise you. This isn't Las Vegas, where the casinos *are* the main attraction. Before you even cross the Truckee River, Reno reveals itself as a cool Western town. There's a vibrant downtown culture, a first-rate art museum and a riverwalk that rivals San Antonio, Texas. And you can probably guess what happened to Reno's road-stop status.

My first surprise: Not every hotel in the Arch District, which is known for its gaming and nightlife, is a casino. In fact, the [Whitney Peak Hotel](http://whitneypeakhotel.com) (look to the right when you see the big arch that announces you've arrived in Reno) is known for its rock climbing wall, cited in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's largest..

That wall stretches a dizzying 164 feet to the top of the high-rise hotel. There's also an indoor climbing wall with pitches ranging from easy (like climbing a ladder) to severe (like climbing a ladder that's placed almost vertically). My kids quickly made it to the top of the ladder-like walls, but refused the extreme pitches. After a few practice runs, they tried their hand at the outdoor wall. Fortunately, there's a safety harness that helps them to the summit. My 12-year-old son scaled it part way and then rappelled down.

He was hooked. "When can we do that again?" he asked.

Rock climbing in Reno. Who would have thought?



Stay in the Arch District and you'll find that even the casino hotels have something for kids. I know, that sounds like something of a contradiction, but [Midway](http://circusreno.com/event/midway-shows/midway-games), the carnival area at [Circus Circus](http://circusreno.com), was another unexpected surprise. There were circus performances and a variety of games the kids could enjoy, like Whac-a-Mole and Pixel Play.

If you like a more intense circus experience, you'll need to head over to [Eldorado](https://www.eldoradoreno.com) for a performance of [Cirque Le Noir](https://www.eldoradoreno.com/event/shows/cirque-le-noir-dark-side-cirque). If you've never seen a Cirque show, this is a great introduction. The auditorium is small and intimate, and the acrobatics are breathtaking. Stick around for the balloon trick at the end. (I won't divulge any details. Don't want to spoil the surprise.)

And that brings us to the other side of Reno. As you head down Virginia Street, you'll cross the Truckee River. That's where you'll find Reno's newest full-service resort, the

[Renaissance Reno Downtown Hotel](http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/rnobr-renaissance-reno-downtown-hotel/). It's the perfect launch pad for exploring a part of Reno few people know about, including the [Reno River Walk](http://visitreno.com/parks/river_walk/index.php), its arts scene and restaurants.

The river walk is lovely. It winds along the Truckee's whitewater rapids, where you can watch daredevil kayakers enjoying the ice-cold surf. "I wanna do that," my 10-year-old daughter exclaimed. I did, too, but you have to be a proficient swimmer before you can tackle these rapids.

"Maybe next year," I said.

The riverwalk leads you past coffee shops and restaurants to Whitewater Park and beyond that, to Idlewild Park, which hosted a food truck festival while we were in town and is a terrific place for birdwatching. Most of all, it was a safe, family-friendly place that invited us to come back time and again for an early morning walk. I didn't expect this. My picture of Reno was still stuck in the 80s.



What finally shattered that image, once and for all? The world-class [Nevada Museum of Art](http://www.nevadaart.org), the only accredited art museum in Nevada. I could probably spend several paragraphs describing its impressive permanent collections or its on-site restaurant, Chez Louie. But the main attraction was a Burning Man exhibit called [City of Dust](https://www.nevadaart.org/exhibition/city-of-dust-the-evolution-of-burning-man/), which explores the history of this legendary counter-cultural gathering. It features never-before-seen photographs, artifacts, journals, sketches, and notebooks about Nevada's most famous experimental desert city come to be. There's a mockup of the Burning Man and ashes of the Burning Men over the years.

After seeing the Burning Man exhibit, I knew we had to go to the desert to see it for ourselves. And I will -- one of these days. Hey, they apparently have a kids' section there, so I can bring the whole family.

Reno isn't just a road stop for me anymore. The next time I'm Nevada, it'll be hard to decide whether I'll stay here or head up to Tahoe. They're both worthwhile destinations in their own right.

Christopher Elliott's latest book is "How To Be The World's Smartest Traveler" (National Geographic). You can get real-time answers to any consumer question on his new forum, elliott.org/forum, or by emailing him at chris@elliott.org.