



# English Learning for Curious Minds



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## Episode #154

### Las Vegas

### 30th Apr, 2021

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Las Vegas.

[00:00:28] It's a place where **fortunes**<sup>1</sup> are sometimes made and more frequently lost, and you will no doubt have heard of the saying, "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas".

[00:00:39] Las Vegas is, as I'm sure you will know, a strange place.

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<sup>1</sup> large amounts of money



## Las Vegas

[00:00:43] In today's episode we are going to tell the story of how Las Vegas went from nothing, from a tiny [oasis<sup>2</sup>](#) in the middle of one of the hottest deserts in the world through to having a reputation of being the world's "[Sin<sup>3</sup>](#) City".

[00:01:00] It is a super interesting story, and this episode has been a huge amount of fun to make, so I hope you enjoy it.

[00:01:08] Before we get right into today's episode, I want to remind you that you can become a member of Leonardo English and follow along with the subtitles, the transcript and its key vocabulary over on the website, which is [leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:01:24] Membership of Leonardo English gives you access to all of our learning materials, all of our bonus episodes, so that's more than 150 different episodes now, as well as two new ones every week, plus access to our awesome private community where we do live events, challenges, and much, much more.

[00:01:45] Our community now has members from over 50 countries, and it's my mission to make it the most interesting place for curious people like you to improve their English.

[00:01:55] So, if that is of interest, - and I can't see a reason why it wouldn't be - then the place to go to is [leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

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<sup>2</sup> a place in a desert where there is water and plants

<sup>3</sup> an act of breaking a religious or moral law



## Las Vegas

[00:02:05] Ok then, Las Vegas.

[00:02:08] The story of Las Vegas is, in many ways, unlikely.

[00:02:13] To remind you where the city is located, it's in the middle of nowhere.

[00:02:17] It's about 400km north of the border with Mexico, and about 400km inland from the Pacific coast.

[00:02:27] The nearest large city is Los Angeles, LA, which is around 350km away, and it's around 650km away from San Francisco.

[00:02:39] It's in the middle of a desert, and only 100km away from Death Valley, one of the hottest deserts in the world.

[00:02:48] It's certainly not the kind of geography that one might think would be the ideal place to build a city.

[00:02:55] But, as the Spanish speakers will know, there is something about the name of Las Vegas that suggests that it isn't all [arid](#)<sup>4</sup>, dry desert.

[00:03:07] Las Vegas means 'the [meadows](#)<sup>5</sup>' in Spanish, a [meadow](#)<sup>6</sup> is a kind of wet field.

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<sup>4</sup> very dry

<sup>5</sup> fields with grass and flowers

<sup>6</sup> field with grass and flower



## Las Vegas

[00:03:14] And indeed, although Las Vegas is in the middle of this [scalding](#)<sup>7</sup> hot desert, below the surface there is actually a lot of water, more than you would expect at least.

[00:03:26] This water meant that there were rivers, trees could grow, and there was some green grass - again, not what you would expect in the middle of the desert.

[00:03:37] Although there is evidence of human life in the area that dates back over 10,000 years, it wasn't until the 19th century that we really have any records of human history in the area.

[00:03:50] And our story, or rather, the story of Las Vegas, starts in 1821, 200 years ago, with a Spanish explorer who was traveling between New Mexico and California, through this [treacherous](#)<sup>8</sup> desert.

[00:04:06] Legend has it that as the explorers were traveling through the desert, they turned a corner and saw this [lush](#)<sup>9</sup> [oasis](#), this sea of green, in the middle of nothing.

[00:04:18] They stopped, marked it on a map, and named it Las Vegas, the [meadows](#).

[00:04:24] In the early 20th century, in 1905, the railway went through the area.

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<sup>7</sup> burning

<sup>8</sup> extremely dangerous, especially due to bad weather conditions

<sup>9</sup> an area with a lot of green plants, grass and trees



## Las Vegas

[00:04:31] The companies that built the railway sold a [patch<sup>10</sup>](#) of land next to the [railway tracks<sup>11</sup>](#) and turned the area into a stopping point for their trains.

[00:04:43] It was originally just a stopping off point - a place to get water, and to rest, but if we have to date the [founding<sup>12</sup>](#) of the city of Las Vegas, it would be to 1905.

[00:04:56] For 25 years or so, it remained a small, stop off point for railway travellers, and it wasn't until 1931 that things changed for Las Vegas.

[00:05:09] The reason for that change is again, linked to water.

[00:05:15] In 1931 construction started on the Hoover [Dam<sup>13</sup>](#), a [dam](#) built through the Colorado River to control flooding, to provide [hydroelectric<sup>14</sup>](#) power, and to help [irrigation<sup>15</sup>](#), to help water farmland.

[00:05:30] The Hoover [Dam](#) was to be built just outside Las Vegas, and brought thousands of young men to the town, in search of work on the construction of the [dam](#).

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<sup>10</sup> a small piece of ground

<sup>11</sup> the rails of a railroad

<sup>12</sup> establishment, beginning

<sup>13</sup> a wall built across a river to stop the water, creating an artificial lake

<sup>14</sup> producing electricity using the force of running water

<sup>15</sup> supplying the land with water in order to grow plants



## Las Vegas

[00:05:41] And given that the town before had been quite sleepy, a peaceful stopping off point for railway passengers, there wasn't a huge amount for these young men to do.

[00:05:52] **Gambling**<sup>16</sup> had actually been **outlawed**<sup>17</sup>, it had been illegal in the state of Nevada from 1910 to 1931.

[00:06:00] When construction started on the **dam**, in 1931, drinking alcohol was still illegal in the United States - **prohibition**<sup>18</sup> wasn't ended until December 1933.

[00:06:13] But of course, this didn't stop people drinking.

[00:06:16] In Las Vegas, illegal bars **sprung up**<sup>19</sup>, as well as the other kinds of entertainment that you might imagine would be demanded by the young, **unattached**<sup>20</sup>, male **workforce**<sup>21</sup>.

[00:06:29] The population of Las Vegas **swelled**<sup>22</sup>, going from 5,000 to 25,000, and the town's journey towards the city of **sin** had certainly started.

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<sup>16</sup> playing games of chance in order to win money

<sup>17</sup> illegal

<sup>18</sup> officially not allowing something

<sup>19</sup> appeared suddenly

<sup>20</sup> not married

<sup>21</sup> a group of people who work in a company, industry etc.

<sup>22</sup> grew large



## Las Vegas

[00:06:42] During the 1930s and early 1940s, businessmen started to add the first [gambling resorts](#)<sup>23</sup>.

[00:06:49] [Gambling](#) was now legal in Nevada, and these businessmen wanted to create places where people could go to [gamble](#)<sup>24</sup> for extended periods of time, not just for a few hours, but for days, for the weekend.

[00:07:04] The first of these was called El Rancho Vegas, or El Rancho Vegas I should say with an American accent, and was opened by a hotel owner called Thomas Hull.

[00:07:17] But Hull is not the name that most people associate with early Las Vegas.

[00:07:23] The name you will probably hear, when it comes to talking about the people who built Las Vegas, will most probably be Bugsy Siegel.

[00:07:33] Now Bugsy Siegel is a fascinating character and perhaps we need an entire episode just devoted to this man's life.

[00:07:41] He was born in New York, in 1906, and by the age of just 14 years old he had started his first criminal [gang](#)<sup>25</sup>. He would go up to people selling goods from a [cart](#)<sup>26</sup> on the street and tell them that they needed to pay him for protection.

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<sup>23</sup> places where people go for vacation

<sup>24</sup> play games of chance in order to win money

<sup>25</sup> a group of people behaving bad and usually involving in criminal activities

<sup>26</sup> a vehicle pulled by a horse and used for carrying goods



## Las Vegas

[00:07:59] They would ask him who they needed protection against - it certainly seemed unlikely that it was protection from him, as he was [merely](#)<sup>27</sup> a 14 year-old-boy.

[00:08:10] But then he would come back with [kerosene](#)<sup>28</sup>, with a very [flammable](#)<sup>29</sup> liquid, which he would [pour](#)<sup>30</sup> all over their [carts](#)<sup>31</sup> and set on fire.

[00:08:20] It turned out that they did need protection from Bugsby Siegel.

[00:08:25] Bugsy's life of crime continued the way it had started, and he became a [hitman](#)<sup>32</sup>, a contract killer, a gun for hire, for the Mafia, and formed a [gang](#) called Murder Incorporated.

[00:08:39] The gang's business was, as the name suggests, murder.

[00:08:44] In 1937 he moved west, to Los Angeles, and became friendly with lots of Hollywood movie stars.

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<sup>27</sup> just, simply

<sup>28</sup> a type of fuel used in jet engines

<sup>29</sup> very easy to start burning

<sup>30</sup> make a liquid fall on something

<sup>31</sup> vehicles pulled by a horse and used for carrying goods

<sup>32</sup> a professional killer



## Las Vegas

[00:08:51] It had become quite a common thing for film stars to go to Las Vegas for the weekend, and Bugsy Siegel thought there could be an opportunity to [capitalise<sup>33</sup>](#) on this, to create luxury hotels and [resorts](#) that were available for [the masses<sup>34</sup>](#).

[00:09:10] In 1940 Siegel moved to Las Vegas, with the purpose of building hotels and casinos for the mafia, investing their illegal money into semi-legal businesses.

[00:09:23] Siegel had [backers<sup>35</sup>](#), financial supporters, in different Mafia families all over America, and he proposed to them that building casinos in this new and [upcoming<sup>36</sup>](#) city would be a great way to [diversify<sup>37</sup>](#) their business interests, and to have some legal companies through which they could conduct their illegal business activities.

[00:09:48] He found a property developer called William R. Wilkerson, who was building a casino called The Flamingo, but was running out of money, and didn't have enough money left to complete the construction.

[00:10:03] Siegel proposed Wilkerson a deal.

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<sup>33</sup> take the chance to get advantage from something

<sup>34</sup> a large number of people

<sup>35</sup> financial supporters

<sup>36</sup> developing

<sup>37</sup> expand



## Las Vegas

[00:10:06] Siegel's partners would invest in the project, and Siegel would manage the **gambling**, and the food and drink, and in return he would be made a partner in the project.

[00:10:18] Wilkerson accepted, but after getting his **foot in the door**<sup>38</sup>, Siegel threatened Wilkerson and made him hand over his entire **stake**<sup>39</sup>, his entire ownership in the hotel.

[00:10:31] Siegel, and the Mafia, now had control of what was to become one of Las Vegas's first **cult**<sup>40</sup> entertainment venues.

[00:10:41] The problem was, Siegel's costs for the Flamingo were **spiralling out of control**<sup>41</sup>, and his Mafia **backers** were having to **inject**<sup>42</sup> more and more money into the project.

[00:10:54] Siegel had projected initial costs of 1.5 million dollars, about 20 million dollars in today's money, but the project ended up costing 6 million dollars, 80 million dollars in today's money.

[00:11:10] Now, it isn't clear whether these increased costs were Siegel just badly managing the project, or whether it was him putting money into his own pocket.

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<sup>38</sup> first step in the organisation

<sup>39</sup> financial involvement in the business

<sup>40</sup> popular among a particular group

<sup>41</sup> getting extremely high and out of control

<sup>42</sup> put



## Las Vegas

[00:11:21] It was probably a bit of both.

[00:11:23] Whatever the reason, his Mafia **backers** weren't happy, his investors were annoyed, and they were even less happy when the casino opened, and it was a huge **flop**<sup>43</sup>, it was a huge failure.

[00:11:37] The Flamingo Hotel opened in 1946, but the hotel itself was still under construction, so guests couldn't stay the night.

[00:11:48] One thing that this meant was that guests could **cash out**<sup>44</sup> their **gambling chips**<sup>45</sup>, they could exchange their **chips** for money, at the end of the night.

[00:11:57] What the casino would have wanted, of course, would be for them to continue **gambling**, because the longer you **gamble**, the more you lose.

[00:12:07] The end result was that the casino lost around \$300,000 on its first night, that's about \$4 million in today's money.

[00:12:18] Siegel may have been a lifelong member of the Mafia, but the one thing you don't do to your Mafia bosses is lose their money, and Siegel was murdered just a year later.

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<sup>43</sup> a total failure

<sup>44</sup> convert the earnings from the casino into money

<sup>45</sup> a counter used in gambling games to represent money



## Las Vegas

[00:12:30] Although the opening night of The Flamingo may have been a **flop**, it may have been a failure, the post World War II years saw continued growth for Las Vegas, and the Mafia continued to finance and operate hotels and casinos throughout the city.

[00:12:47] Siegel had understood one thing, and that was that people wanted some of this luxury that they saw film stars enjoying, but at a price that they could afford.

[00:13:00] Las Vegas had entered a phase of what you could call 'cheap', or 'affordable', 'luxury'.

[00:13:07] Hotels were relatively cheap, there were all you can eat buffets, and it was a place where you could live a life of **sin** for a price you could afford.

[00:13:17] Plus, there was always the dream that you could win big.

[00:13:22] The casinos paid singers **vast**<sup>46</sup> sums of money to perform for their guests, and the 1950s saw people such as Liberace, Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley arriving in the city.

[00:13:36] Las Vegas was also very close to the atomic testing site, the testing site for atomic weapons.

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<sup>46</sup> extremely big



## Las Vegas

[00:13:43] While today you might think that this would be a reason to not visit the city, because we are well aware of the damage that [radiation](#)<sup>47</sup> can do, in the 1950s it was actually a huge [draw](#)<sup>48</sup> for tourists, it was promoted as a reason to come to Las Vegas.

[00:14:01] Indeed, from 1951 to 1963 over 100 nuclear bombs were [detonated](#)<sup>49</sup> at the Nevada Test Site, and you could buy postcards with pictures of the large [mushroom clouds](#)<sup>50</sup> from nuclear bombs.

[00:14:17] There was even a special [suite](#)<sup>51</sup> at a casino called the Desert Inn called the Sky Room, which was the highest room in the hotel and offered the best views of the explosions.

[00:14:30] You could sit there during an explosion and drink one of their famous Atomic Cocktails.

[00:14:37] This all ended with the partial test ban [treaty](#)<sup>52</sup> in 1963, but it is fascinating to think that this was such an attraction for so many people less than 60 years ago.

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<sup>47</sup> a form of dangerous energy that comes from an atomic reaction

<sup>48</sup> attraction

<sup>49</sup> exploded

<sup>50</sup> clouds shaped as a mushroom and caused by an atomic bomb explosion

<sup>51</sup> a set of expensive, connected hotel rooms

<sup>52</sup> a written agreement between two countries



## Las Vegas

[00:14:51] I imagine that, if you had no idea that it was dangerous for you, and you were safely in a hotel room several kilometres away **sipping**<sup>53</sup> a delicious cocktail, then it probably would have been quite interesting to watch an atomic bomb explosion.

[00:15:08] The next famous **landmark**<sup>54</sup> in our history of Las Vegas involves the American entrepreneur Howard Hughes.

[00:15:16] If you remember the 2004 film, The Aviator, with Leonardo Di Caprio, the main character is him, Di Caprio plays the **eccentric**<sup>55</sup> genius businessman, Howard Hughes.

[00:15:30] The story goes that Howard Hughes was staying at the Desert Inn, the place where you could enjoy an Atomic Cocktail, in 1966.

[00:15:39] But he refused to leave his room, and instead, he bought the entire hotel.

[00:15:46] He then went on to buy a number of different hotels and casinos, including one small hotel called the Silver Slipper casino purely because he wanted to move a

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<sup>53</sup> drinking something by taking small amounts

<sup>54</sup> an important and easily recognised place

<sup>55</sup> strange or unusual



## Las Vegas

**neon**<sup>56</sup> **slipper**<sup>57</sup>, an **illuminated**<sup>58</sup> **slipper** that was on the roof, because its **flashing**<sup>59</sup> kept him up at night.

[00:16:06] What Hughes did do is to start pushing the Mafia out of Las Vegas.

[00:16:12] They had been there since the early days, and by the late 1960s it's thought that 10 out of the 11 major casino hotels were financed with Mafia money, and therefore controlled by **the mob**<sup>60</sup>.

[00:16:28] Hughes was keen to give Las Vegas a new reputation, a reputation for **glamour**<sup>61</sup>, not for cheap luxury and **hedonism**<sup>62</sup>, and to push the Mafia out of town.

[00:16:40] He invested around \$300 million in different hotels and casinos, and with this, attracted numerous other businessmen to start building their own hotels and casinos.

[00:16:54] The image of Las Vegas started to change, and by the late 1960s it was putting itself forward as a family-friendly destination.

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<sup>56</sup> a type of gas used for lighting

<sup>57</sup> a soft, comfortable shoe that is worn indoors

<sup>58</sup> lit with bright lights

<sup>59</sup> shining brightly and suddenly

<sup>60</sup> the Mafia

<sup>61</sup> an exciting and charming attractiveness

<sup>62</sup> the search for pleasure



## Las Vegas

[00:17:04] But being a family-friendly city wasn't very exciting, and investment in the city slowed.

[00:17:12] There was the new, Atlantic City in New Jersey, and this was attracting the crowd that had previously loved Las Vegas for its [hedonism](#).

[00:17:22] The 1970s and 80s saw many of the hotels and casinos of Las Vegas grow old and lose their attraction, and it became known for cheap, low quality entertainment.

[00:17:35] Entertainers did still come to perform at the hotels and casinos of Las Vegas, but instead of being the place you went to thousands of [adoring](#)<sup>63</sup> fans, it became known as the place you'd go when your career ended and you needed the money.

[00:17:52] Then, in the late 1980s, things started to take off again.

[00:17:58] Investors [ploughed](#)<sup>64</sup> money into huge new projects, starting with the \$630 million Mirage hotel, complete with 5 waterfalls and a 15 metre volcano.

[00:18:12] And this takes us to the modern day, where Las Vegas seems to have reinvented itself again, with a strange mix of [sin](#), of [vice](#)<sup>65</sup> –it's a city where you can [gamble](#), drink, and do all sorts of things that you might not normally do—but it is also

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<sup>63</sup> showing extreme love

<sup>64</sup> invested a very large amount of

<sup>65</sup> criminal activity



## Las Vegas

an entertainment venue for the family, with adventure parks, amazing shows, and more.

[00:18:37] It is a pretty amazing story, of a small railway town in the middle of the desert, one which started off as cheap entertainment centre for construction workers, was then controlled largely by the Mafia, became deeply uncool and unloved, and has now [re-emerged](#)<sup>66</sup> as a strange mix of [hedonism](#) and family fun.

[00:19:00] It's a city that is only just over 100 years old, and has already gone through a [myriad](#)<sup>67</sup> of different [phases](#)<sup>68</sup>. Who knows what the next 100 years will hold for the world's most famous City of Sin.

[00:19:16] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Las Vegas.

[00:19:22] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:19:27] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode. I don't believe we have any members who live in Las Vegas, but if you have been to Las Vegas, or even if you haven't, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

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<sup>66</sup> appeared, risen again

<sup>67</sup> a very large number

<sup>68</sup> stages in a series of events



[00:19:40] For the members among you, you can head right into our community forum, which is at [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com) and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:51] And as a final reminder, if you enjoyed this episode, and you are wondering where to get all of our bonus episodes, plus the transcripts, subtitles, and key vocabulary, then the place to go for that is [leonardoenglish.com](https://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:20:06] I am on a mission to make Leonardo English the most interesting way of improving your English, and I would love for you to join me, and curious minds from 50 different countries, on that journey.

[00:20:18] The place you can go to for all of that is [leonardoenglish.com](https://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:20:24] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:20:29] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Fortunes</b>	large amounts of money
<b>Oasis</b>	a place in a desert where there is water and plants
<b>Sin</b>	an act of breaking a religious or moral law
<b>Arid</b>	very dry
<b>Meadows</b>	fields with grass and flowers
<b>Meadow</b>	field with grass and flower
<b>Scalding</b>	burning
<b>Treacherous</b>	extremely dangerous, especially due to bad weather conditions
<b>Lush</b>	an area with a lot of green plants, grass and trees
<b>Patch</b>	a small piece of ground
<b>Railway tracks</b>	the rails of a railroad
<b>Founding</b>	establishment, beginning



## Las Vegas

<b>Dam</b>	a wall built across a river to stop the water, creating an artificial lake
<b>Hydroelectric</b>	producing electricity using the force of running water
<b>Irrigation</b>	supplying the land with water in order to grow plants
<b>Gambling</b>	playing games of chance in order to win money
<b>Outlawed</b>	illegal
<b>Prohibition</b>	officially not allowing something
<b>Sprung up</b>	appeared suddenly
<b>Unattached</b>	not married
<b>Workforce</b>	a group of people who work in a company, industry etc.
<b>Swelled</b>	grew large
<b>Resorts</b>	places where people go for vacation
<b>Gamble</b>	play games of chance in order to win money
<b>Gang</b>	a group of people behaving bad and usually involving in criminal activities
<b>Cart</b>	a vehicle pulled by a horse and used for carrying goods
<b>Merely</b>	just, simply



Las Vegas

<b>Kerosene</b>	a type of fuel used in jet engines
<b>Flammable</b>	very easy to start burning
<b>Pour</b>	make a liquid fall on something
<b>Carts</b>	vehicles pulled by a horse and used for carrying goods
<b>Hitman</b>	a professional killer
<b>Capitalise</b>	take the chance to get advantage from something
<b>The masses</b>	a large number of people
<b>Backers</b>	financial supporters
<b>Upcoming</b>	developing
<b>Diversify</b>	expand
<b>Foot in the door</b>	his first step in the organisation
<b>Stake</b>	financial involvement in the business
<b>Cult</b>	popular among a particular group
<b>Spiralling out of control</b>	getting extremely high and out of control
<b>Inject</b>	put



Las Vegas

<b>Flop</b>	a total failure
<b>Cash out</b>	convert the earnings from the casino into money
<b>Chips</b>	a counter used in gambling games to represent money
<b>Vast</b>	extremely big
<b>Radiation</b>	a form of dangerous energy that comes from an atomic reaction
<b>Draw</b>	attraction
<b>Detonated</b>	exploded
<b>Mushroom clouds</b>	clouds shaped as a mushroom and caused by an atomic bomb explosion
<b>Suite</b>	a set of expensive, connected hotel rooms
<b>Treaty</b>	a written agreement between two countries
<b>Sipping</b>	drinking something by taking small amounts
<b>Landmark</b>	an important and easily recognised place
<b>Eccentric</b>	strange or unusual
<b>Neon</b>	a type of gas used for lighting
<b>Slipper</b>	a soft, comfortable shoe that is worn indoors



Las Vegas

<b>Illuminated</b>	lit with bright lights
<b>Flashing</b>	shining brightly and suddenly
<b>The mob</b>	the Mafia
<b>Glamour</b>	an exciting and charming attractiveness
<b>Hedonism</b>	the search for pleasure
<b>Adoring</b>	showing extreme love
<b>Ploughed</b>	invested a very large amount of
<b>Vice</b>	criminal activity
<b>Re-emerged</b>	Appeared, risen again
<b>Myriad</b>	a very large number
<b>Phases</b>	stages in a series of events

*We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*Let us know in the forum [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com)*

