

Las Vegas: Feasts and flowers for Lunar New Year

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LAS VEGAS (AP) — Las Vegas is getting ready for the year of the snake. The casino capital celebrates Chinese New Year — also known as lunar new year — in a big way, with feasts, exhibits, performances and other events at outdoor festivals and at casino-resorts like Bellagio and The Venetian.

While the new year holiday falls on Feb. 10, some of the offerings are under way already and will continue through much of February. Las Vegas also hosts a three-day Chinese New Year in the Desert festival downtown, Feb. 8-10, and a one-day event in the city's Chinatown neighborhood on Feb. 17.

Asians and Asian-Americans are an important and growing demographic in Las Vegas, in terms of both residential population and tourism. More than 6 percent of the 589,000 people who live in Las Vegas are Asian, according U.S.

Census estimates. About 3 percent of the city's 39 million annual visitors — totaling over a million people a year — are Asian or Asian-American, according to the 2011 Las Vegas Visitor Profile Study. International tourists include 188,000 annual airport arrivals from China, 132,000 from Korea and 107,000 from Japan, according to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, with even more flying into California airports and heading to Las Vegas by bus or car.

While Asian tourists visit Las Vegas throughout the year, the period surrounding the lunar new year holiday is a particularly popular time for leisure travel, especially among China's growing middle class. "They want to leave their homes and go travel during holidays," said Jan-le Low, who is helping to organize the Chinese New Year in the Desert festival in partnership with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Fremont Street Experience. She said that according to tradition, if you travel during the new year holiday, "it's a sign that you're going to be doing this the whole year."

This is the second year for the Chinese New Year in the Desert festival. Cultural performances are scheduled for the Third Street Stage on Feb. 8 from 5 p.m.-10 p.m., and on Feb. 9 and 10, noon to 9 p.m. A dragon dance Feb. 8 at 6 p.m. will kick off with virtual fireworks on the 90-foot-high (27-meter) LED display canopy at Fremont Street Experience, the downtown pedestrian mall and entertainment area. A parade with floats steps off at 8 a.m. on Feb. 10. The festival also includes food vendors and other activities and events.

Las Vegas' Chinatown is not a historically ethnic residential neighborhood like Chinatowns in New York or San Francisco. But it is a commercial area worth visiting for Asian restaurants and businesses, located along Spring Mountain Road west of the Las Vegas Strip. The Chinatown Year of the Snake festival takes place Feb. 17, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., with cuisine from around Asia, arts and crafts, and performances drawing on a variety of traditions, including Chinese lion and dragon dances, martial arts, Japanese taiko drummers and Polynesian dance.

Bellagio's Conservatory & Botanical Gardens annual floral display welcoming the lunar new year is up through March 3. The display, incorporating principles of the Asian design philosophy feng shui, includes large hanging red lanterns, an 18-foot-tall (5.5-meter) money tree decorated with gold coins, a 9-foot (3-meter) blue-and-yellow snake, a waterfall, incense pots, and a wooden boat with a 38-foot (11.5-meter) mast in a pond of koi fish inspired by 15th century Chinese fishing vessels. Also on display are figures of six children wearing outfits made from hundreds of colorful carnations and chrysanthemums.

Bellagio will host a dragon and lion dance on Feb. 12 at 6:30 p.m., and a \$500 per person new year dinner is being offered at Bellagio's Tuscany Kitchen, prepared by the culinary team from Beijing's Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, recreating dishes that have been served there to visiting dignitaries.

The waterfall atrium connecting The Venetian and Palazzo resorts hosts an art installation featuring a 98-foot-long (30 meters) animatronic snake named Sophie Chow coiled throughout a massive peach tree decorated with flowers, lanterns and coins, on display through Feb. 25. On Feb. 9, drummers and firecrackers will launch a dragon dance at 3:30 p.m. through The Venetian lobby, casino and atrium, ending at the Palazzo. On Feb. 10 at 1 p.m., at The Shoppes at The Palazzo's Chloe rotunda, a traditional Chinese fan dance will be followed by distribution of 500 red envelopes with gift cards, chocolate coins and other surprises.

Special menus for the new year around Las Vegas include a \$28.88 dinner (eight is a lucky number in Chinese culture) at Monte



Carlo's Dragon Noodle Co. & Sushi Bar; a Chinese-themed four-course prix fixe at Fleur by Hubert Keller at Mandalay Bay; a four-course prix fixe at Rice & Company at Luxor Hotel and Casino; and a "China Poblano" menu by chef Jose Andres at The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas.

Other events and special offerings in Las Vegas marking year of the dragon include themed treatments at Mandarin Oriental's Forbes Five-Star spa; a parade through the MGM Grand Feb. 10 at 5 p.m. by the Cirque du Soleil dance troupe; a dragon dance visiting retailers at ARIA and Crystals at CityCenter, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on Feb. 11; and a dragon and lion dance at 6 p.m. Feb. 12 at Wynn Las Vegas.

If you go.

LAS VEGAS TOURISM: <http://www.lasvegas.com>

CHINESE NEW YEAR IN THE DESERT: Feb. 8-10, Las Vegas, <http://www.cnyinthedesert.com> .

LAS VEGAS CHINATOWN: <http://www.lvchinatown.com/>

BELLAGIO CONSERVATORY & BOTANICAL GARDENS: <http://www.bellagio.com/attractions/botanical-garden.aspx> . Earthcam view of Chinese New Year display: <http://www.earthcam.com/client/bellagio/>