

Destination: Nevada

Historic Railroad Hiking Trail

What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas—but in the case of Nevada's Historic Railroad Hiking Trail, you'll want to tell everyone you know.

Just 30 miles from Las Vegas outside Boulder City, the six-mile, gravel rail-trail hugs the hills on the southern shoreline of vast Lake Mead. The trail offers panoramic views of the manmade lake and snakes through five railroad tunnels on its way toward Hoover Dam. After Hoover Dam was completed in 1935, the railroad ceased operation, and in 1962 the tracks were removed. It wasn't until 1995, however, that the trail was opened for recreation.

Though the trail begins obscurely at Highway 93 and Pacifica Way, the best place to begin your trek is the Alan Bible Visitor Center trailhead at the trail's midpoint.

Follow signs to pick up the trail at the edge of the parking lot and head southeast toward the lake. (Heading northward, you'll experience the trail's 3.6 miles of desert terrain through the Hemenway Valley, where jackrabbits bound over washed-out gullies, bighorn sheep graze and the usual desert-dwelling snakes and lizards are at home.)

On the easy, wide path, you'll first pass through a high cut in the red, iron-rich, volcanic rock, blasted out in 1930 for trains to pass through, carrying stone to the dam site. As the trail curves out toward the edge of Lake Mead, you'll find yourself several hundred

feet above the grey-blue water. While the descent isn't a sheer drop, take care as there is no guardrail.

The lake views are spectacular all along the trail. Peaks of ancient volcanic mounds rise above the lake surface of this drowned valley like the humps of an aquatic beast. Far in the distance, the craggy, smoky blue South Virgin Mountains rise into the clouds.

Each tunnel is 25 feet in diameter to accommodate the large equipment that passed through its walls. "Pioneer trails" from early dam construction parallel the trail intermittently. Just before Tunnel 1, look down the ravine to the right to see concrete plugs taken from Hoover Dam to install turbines.

You'll come across the first and second tunnels in quick succession, and their dark interiors provide a cool respite from the desert sun.



The Lake Mead National Recreation Area discourages hikers on any of its trails in the summer months, but fall and winter are prime touring seasons.

As you pass through Tunnel 2, notice that the ceiling and side-walls have been reinforced. This work was done after the tunnel was burned by arson in 1990. Wildfire gives rise to much of the plant life along the trail; creosote and mesquite bushes, which are fire resistant, are scattered in green and brown bundles along the trail and on the surrounding hillsides.

In this unforgiving terrain, it's quite a marvel to imagine the sheer magnitude of force needed to blast the path. In Tunnel 3 the arches were shored up to support the massive weight from above. Fault lines are visible in the rippled texture of the sienna hillsides all along the trail, and particularly in the rock face about 20 feet before Tunnel 4.

Passing through Tunnel 5, which was burned in 1978 and only reopened in 2001, you come to the trail's end, with high rock walls on either side and a chainlink fence blocking further passage. Though the trail stops just short of the dam, the plan is to complete its final mile in the next year. For now, you have only to turn around and head back the way you came—along a pathway rich with engineering history and stunning lake and mountain views.

Accommodations and Dining. The Hacienda Hotel and Casino (www.haciendaonline.com), located between Boulder City and Hoover Dam, offers affordable rooms, casinos and three restaurants. The historic Boulder Dam Hotel—built at the same time as the dam—is in downtown Boulder City and has restaurants and shops (702-293-3510). The local Best Western, called the Lighthouse Inn, can be reached at 702-293-6444. Camping and RV (no hook-ups) camping are available in the Lake Mead National Park Service on a first-come, first-served basis. Lake Mead RV Village (702-293-2540) has RV hook-ups.

area of enlargement



Historic Railroad Trail
gravel surface
trail length 6.3 miles

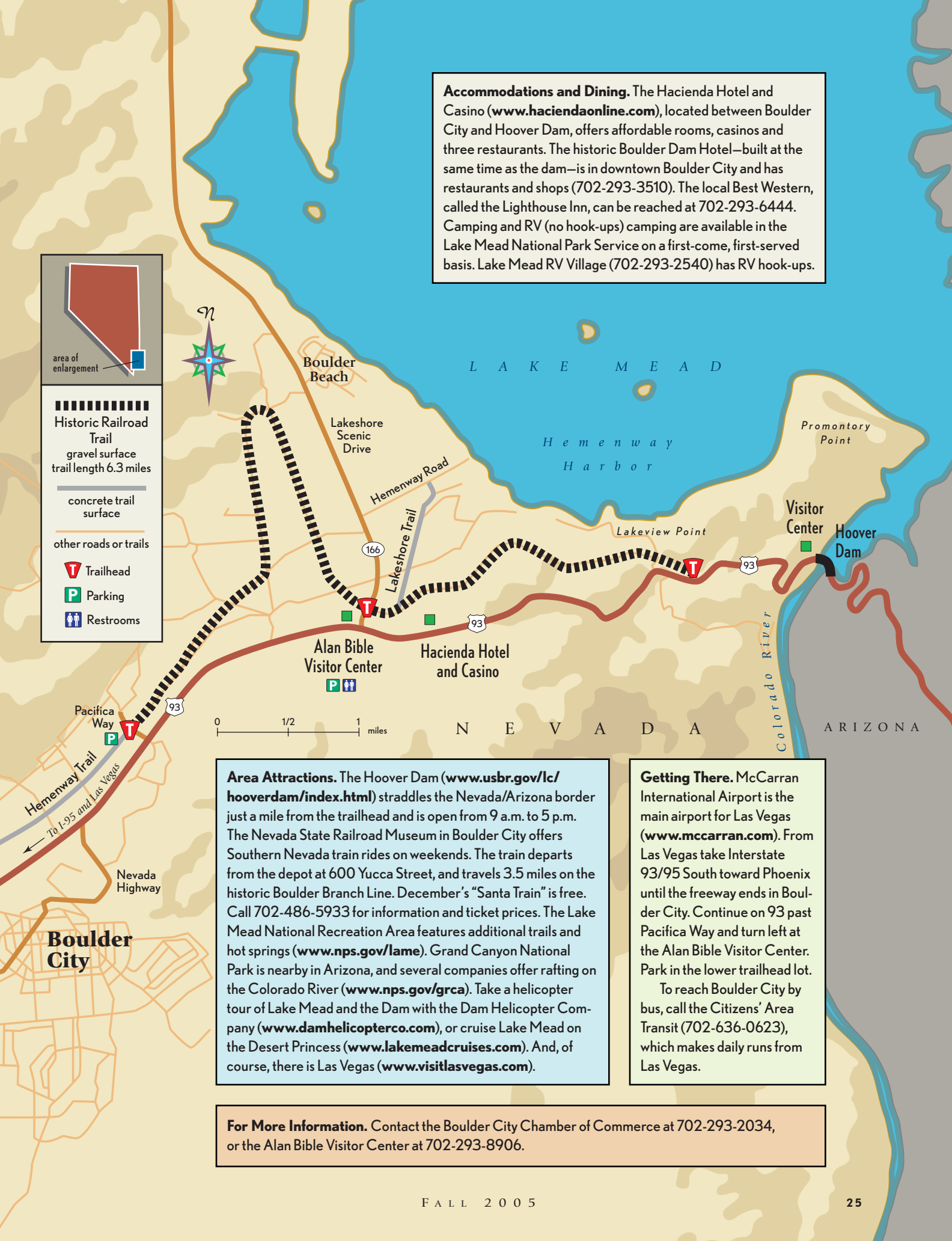
concrete trail surface

other roads or trails

Trailhead

Parking

Restrooms



Area Attractions. The Hoover Dam (www.usbr.gov/lc/hooverdam/index.html) straddles the Nevada/Arizona border just a mile from the trailhead and is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Nevada State Railroad Museum in Boulder City offers Southern Nevada train rides on weekends. The train departs from the depot at 600 Yucca Street, and travels 3.5 miles on the historic Boulder Branch Line. December's "Santa Train" is free. Call 702-486-5933 for information and ticket prices. The Lake Mead National Recreation Area features additional trails and hot springs (www.nps.gov/lame). Grand Canyon National Park is nearby in Arizona, and several companies offer rafting on the Colorado River (www.nps.gov/grca). Take a helicopter tour of Lake Mead and the Dam with the Dam Helicopter Company (www.damhelicopterco.com), or cruise Lake Mead on the Desert Princess (www.lakemeadcruises.com). And, of course, there is Las Vegas (www.visitlasvegas.com).

Getting There. McCarran International Airport is the main airport for Las Vegas (www.mccarran.com). From Las Vegas take Interstate 93/95 South toward Phoenix until the freeway ends in Boulder City. Continue on 93 past Pacifica Way and turn left at the Alan Bible Visitor Center. Park in the lower trailhead lot.

To reach Boulder City by bus, call the Citizens' Area Transit (702-636-0623), which makes daily runs from Las Vegas.

For More Information. Contact the Boulder City Chamber of Commerce at 702-293-2034, or the Alan Bible Visitor Center at 702-293-8906.