

BY STEPHANIE FORTE

MIXING ADVENTURE, ACTION, AND RELAXATION AT LAKE MEAD

Dusting off the surf shorts that have seen little use since I moved to the Mojave Desert, my assortment of gear appears to belong to a fickle traveler. Trail shoes and a daypack for hiking along with a beach bag, flip-flops, reading material, swimsuit and a towel for wakeboarding and, of course, sunscreen and drinking water for survival. Add one fishing pole, for the obvious. My neighbor watches with envy as I pack the car. Little does he know that I'll be home that same night.

As the red rocks and Strip fade to the west, I savor the words that line the streets leading to Lake Mead's entrance: marina, Jet Ski® and boat rentals. One thing is for sure in our area – when the thermometer rises, Lake Mead is the cool cure. As the adrenaline rush of a vacation sets in, my only worry is whether or not I can do it all in one day.

Lake Mead became one of America's most diverse outdoor playgrounds as a by-product of the world-renowned engineering feat, Hoover Dam, which was built to tame the mighty Colorado River. In 1935, as the water's diversion tunnels were closed, the lake, with a capacity of 32 million acre-feet of water, began to fill. Declared a National Recreation area in 1964, the lake set the standard for operation policies of other national recreation areas in the United States.

Today, as bighorn sheep roam the area's magnificent rocky outcrops and the cacti bloom in all their splendor, Lake Mead can be enjoyed year-round. Located 25 miles from the Las Vegas International Airport, the lake's busy season begins on Memorial Day and runs through mid-September. Visitors may use a National Parks Golden Eagle pass or purchase an annual pass for \$20.00 to enter the area. The use fee for vehicles is \$5.00 for 5 days – a bargain considering the lake's wealth of outdoor opportunities.

With 550 miles of shoreline contrasted by severe desert landscape, exploring the lake is best done by – what else – a boat. For the history buff who wants to drink in the scenery with a mimosa in hand, Lake

just add water and enjoy

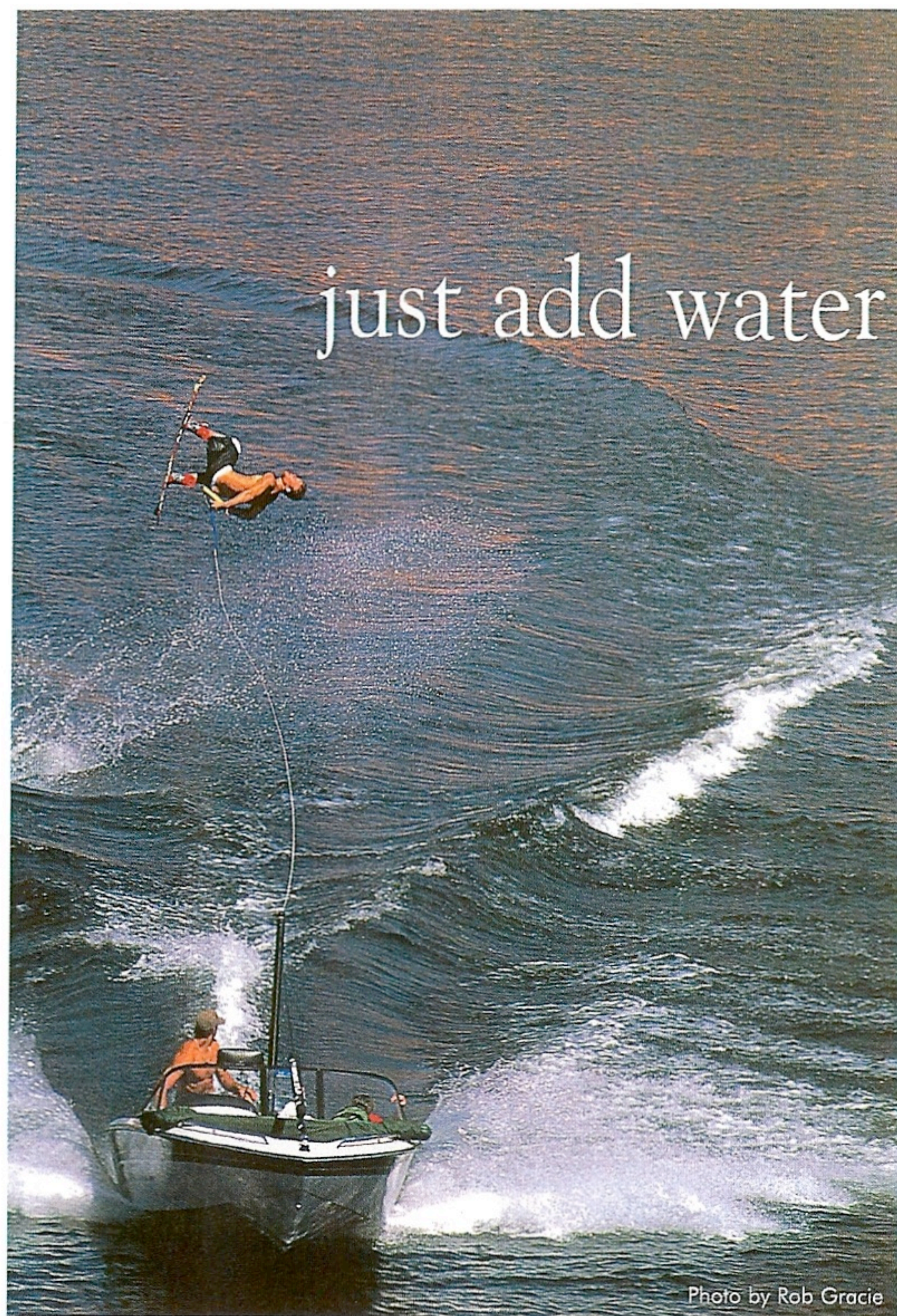


Photo by Rob Gracie

Mead Cruises' *Desert Princess* is the perfect guide, with its Buffet Breakfast Cruise. As the three-level, Mississippi-style paddle wheel makes a two-hour round-trip journey toward the Black Canyon and Hoover Dam, you'll learn the fascinating history and geology of the region while enjoying a buffet breakfast, complete with champagne. If you're not an early riser, check out the 1 1/2-hour mid-day sightseeing cruise, the early dinner trip, or the dinner-dance cruise. Whether it's the stillness of morning or the glow of the day's last light, a cruise on Lake Mead is a romantic adventure even admired from afar.

For a more up-close and personal experience, visitors

can hop aboard Lake Mead Cruises' six-hour ECO-Adventure tour, on the 57-foot catamaran, *Velocity*. While cruising to the edge of the Grand Canyon, you'll learn the area's archeology and ecology while exploring desolate beaches sheltered by majestic canyon walls, and swimming the waters where sailboats glide through the desert breeze. But if the speed-demon in your soul needs something more, Lake Mead's got that, too.

(Lake Mead Cruises is an authorized concessioner of the National Park Service.)

EXTREME – EASY

What's the hottest extreme sport to hit ESPN's summer X-Games and Lake Mead? Wakeboarding, that's what. Water's answer to snowboarding requires the rider be towed behind a boat just like a water-skier. However, wakeboarding's similarity to waterskiing ends there. Riding the boat's wake, advanced wakeboarders pull off gymnastic tricks that make this sport very exciting to watch. Yet, the real thrill comes in the actually doing. And, before you say "I'm too old and out of shape for that," 40-something Tom Robinson, owner of Tom's Water Sports, will tell you the opposite.

"Wakeboarding is easier to learn than waterskiing," says Robinson, who's originally from Denmark and has been teaching at Lake Mead for seven years. "And, it's more fun." In other words, if you own a swimsuit



Photos by Rob Gracie

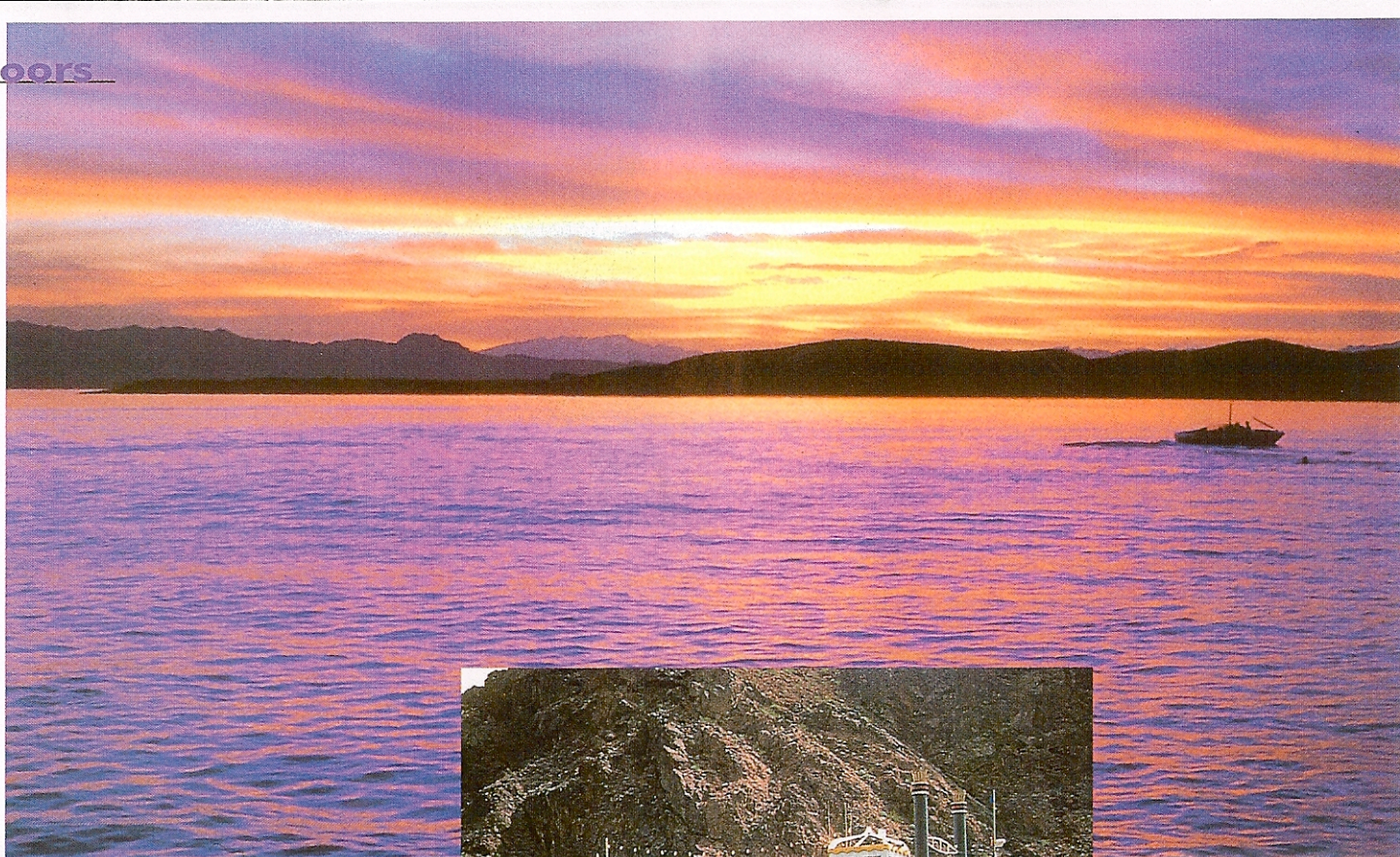


and a towel you can get in on the action. In fact, Robinson's business is now 90 percent wakeboarding clients who are 25 to 45 years old. Las Vegas' hometown pro-wakeboarder, Rhett Merrick, agrees. He says that only two years ago he would get a blank look from people when he told them he was heading to the lake to wakeboard. "Now, you go out to the lake, and you don't really see people waterskiing. Everyone is wakeboarding," says the 23-year-old UNLV senior.

A certified water-ski instructor, Robinson isn't knocking the sport but admits to swaying his clients towards wakeboarding. With students aged eight to 68, Robinson notes, "You don't need much athletic ability to learn to wakeboard." Merrick concurs, revealing the daily routine of a

pro-wakeboarder: "get up, play Nintendo, go out and ride for 20 minutes, play more Nintendo." However, when training to compete on the pro-tour, Merrick is up as early as 4:00 a.m. to be on the water at first light, then spends a few hours bouncing on his trampoline rehearsing tricks. Earning a 4th place win at the prestigious R&R Pro/Am in Hawaii, Merrick insists, "Wakeboarding is the new extreme sport everyone can do — you don't have to be strong."

There is more good news for those interested in picking up a new hobby on the water. The learning curve in wakeboarding is accelerated, and it's easier on the body than waterskiing because the boat moves at a slower speed. "When you fall there is not as much impact," says Robinson.



Sunset at Lake Mead, photo by Rob Gracie. Boat photos courtesy of Lake Mead Cruises.



Boats can be chartered for two to six people for full or half-day lessons. Students first become acquainted with their gear, then Robinson performs a series of demonstrations. When students take the plunge, he keeps a close eye while towing each rider and assessing their performance from his 22-foot Tige' boat. Once the student is able to stand and ride behind the boat, "We start to discuss how to turn the board, teaching students their heel and toe edges," he explains.

"I would say 90 percent of the people get up [on their wakeboard] their first three to four tries," he says, adding that those with a history in skateboarding or snowboarding are quicker. Robinson is so certain that students will be up on their boards the first day that he guarantees it – or your money back. Though he warns, "We can't guarantee that you'll be doing tricks."

So, if you have your heart set on perfecting your whirlybird, front flip

or a scarecrow, Merrick says "go for it," especially if you're single. Tossing back his head of bleached-blond hair, he laughs and admits he's a bit of a show-off on the water. And, "I've definitely gotten a few girls because of wakeboarding," he admits.

MORE SPEED PLEASE

If your appetite for speed still is not satisfied, then explore the water on a Jet Ski. On crafts seating two to three people, you can share the adrenaline rush. Rentals are available at each marina and special personal watercraft (PWC) tours can be arranged through Lake Mead Cruises. If you're in the market for a new PWC visit Skiwi Rentals, located on East Lake Mead just before the Henderson entrance. New Zealand transplant Todd Kelling offers an 11-hour one-day rental that is a great way to test-drive the latest equipment from Yamaha, SeaDoo, and

Polaris. Rental fleets are rotated every two years, so there are bargains for those in the market. And, if you've never tried jet skiing, don't fret. In Kelling's media room, clients unfamiliar with PWCs view instructional videos and get a full briefing before they reach the water's edge.

SEARCH FOR SOLITUDE

Fishing at Lake Mead has been the cure for stressed-out city dwellers for a long time. The lake's peaceful ambiance soothes, and its excellent sportfishing satisfies. Popular catches include largemouth bass, bluegill, trout, and crappie though the stripped bass is the most sought-after by anglers. In order to fish from the shore, visitors must obtain a fishing license from either Nevada or Arizona. For those planning to try their luck by boat, that activity will require a fishing license from one state and a special use stamp from the other. Anglers are expected to be familiar with methods of capture, so visit the ranger station for details and the marina to purchase your fishing license and supplies.

While an array of fish is to be had, protected species include the razorback sucker and the bonytail chub. Visitors are asked to return such fish to the water and report your findings to the National Park Service Resource Management.

SWEET DREAMS IN PARADISE

Watching the sun rise and set from a deserted piece of beachfront real estate is a rare luxury that's still available on this lake's shoreline. Considered primitive sites, these plots of paradise can be found by boat beyond the already developed areas. Visitors must choose a spot that is not designated, "No Camping." Other backcountry sites can be reached by backpacking, horseback, or car. Lake Mead NRA is accommodating to outdoor enthusiasts who want to explore its terrain, but visitors must refrain from camping in restricted or ecologically sensitive areas. The desert is a fragile place, and cars should remain on approved roads.

The National Park Service offers eight developed campgrounds that come complete with restrooms, running water, grills, picnic tables, and shade cover. Sites are on a first-come/first-serve basis and are \$10.00 per night. Group sites are also available. The visitor center and ranger station both offer more information.

LAND LOVERS

Boulder Beach, a designated swimming beach, is the hot spot for sunbathers. Beach blankets and lounge chairs cover the rocks and offer the perfect place to catch up on reading or go for a relaxing swim as the water temperature averages 78 degrees or cooler in the spring and summer seasons. Marked with buoys to restrict boats, the area is ideal for swimming though there are no lifeguards on duty.

Hiking and mountain biking trails can be used to further explore the

unique terrain surrounding Lake Mead, with spring and fall presenting the more ideal weather conditions for these activities. Trail maps and information are available at the visitor center and ranger stations. **lv**

Lake Mead Information Guide Visitor Information

(702) 293-8907

On weekends call (702) 293-8990

www.nps.gov/lame

Weather Information

(702) 736-3854

Information at Lake Mead

The Alan Bible Visitor Center, located 4 miles from Boulder City, NV, on US 93, open daily 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Other information stations:

Nevada: Overton Beach, Echo Bay, Callville Bay and Las Vegas Bay; Arizona: Temple Bar.

Camping

For group sites call (702) 293-8721, Mon.-Fri., 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Lake Mead Lodge

1-800-752-9669

Skiwi Rentals

Jet Skis, super size SUV, powerboats and party pontoon boats available.
(702) 568-8999

Lake Mead Resort & Marina

Personal watercraft, ski boats, fishing boats, water-ski and wakeboard equipment.
(702) 293-3484

Tom's Water Sports

Wakeboard or water-ski instruction, 2 - 6 person groups. Larger groups can be accommodated.
(702) 558-0678 or tomswatersports@sprintmail.com

Lake Mead Cruises

Breakfast buffet, mid-day sightseeing, early evening dinner, evening dinner and dance cruises or ECO-Adventure tours available.
(702) 293-6180