



Photo Courtesy of Vibe Girls Hike Club LV

From Solitude to Social:

How Locals are Finding Social Connection in the Outdoors

By Stephanie Forté

Making friends as an adult isn't easy, even in fast-growing, vibrant Las Vegas. With nearly 200,000 new residents arriving in Clark County since 2016, a rise in remote work, and almost 30% of local households occupied by a single resident, there's more risk of social isolation. Lately, many locals have been turning to the outdoors in search of connection and adventure.

Loneliness is more than a feeling—it's a health concern. "We know that social isolation is linked to loneliness and other negative health outcomes, including all-cause mortality and cardiovascular disease," said Dr. Courtney Coughenour, associate professor at the UNLV School of Public Health. Studies show that social relationships can reduce risks of heart disease, stroke, dementia, and depression—and even increase longevity.



Photo Courtesy of Vibe Girls Hike Club LV



Courtesy of Jousef Alandy-dy



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Vegas' New Third Place

Seeking social spaces beyond work or home, often called "third places," isn't new. Historically, these include cafés, bars, bookstores, and even barbershops. But in Las Vegas, where abundant public lands and trails surround the city, many are now adding the outdoors to this list.

Last spring, 32-year-old Anna Salazar created Vibe Girls Hike Club LV on Instagram, inviting other moms and women to join her and a few friends for weekly hikes. She didn't know what to expect but ensured women knew all were welcome.

"It's easy to find friends to have a beer with but very difficult to find friends willing to share healthy habits with you," said Salazar. Now, with over 5,700 followers, her hikes attract 30 or more women each week, about half who are new to the valley. Salazar said the group has helped some women discover the outdoors for the first time, while fostering fitness, mental well-being, and genuine friendships. "Many of our [women] hang out together outside of our hikes or attend other events together. We love it," she said.

Winter is the prime season for outdoor sports in Las Vegas, and many online platforms and social media groups have sprouted, connecting people interested in hiking, mountain biking, rock

climbing, skiing and more. Some locals have even turned their desire to connect people into businesses.

Social Spins

When Dan Kaleny, 36, moved to Las Vegas eight years ago, he quickly found plenty of fast cyclists who, like him, were game for early rides and grinding uphill at Red Rock Canyon.

"The part that was missing was, 'Let's hang out afterward.' And that happens [more often] when rides start and end at a café," said Kaleny.

In 2020, he and partner Dave Calica opened Pedal & Pour, a bike and coffee shop in southwest Las Vegas. A standout feature is the "Good Karma" board, where people leave a coffee for a friend—a small gesture to keep people connected. Kaleny explained it as a fun way to say, 'Hey, we missed you,' when people can't sync up for a ride.

Pedal & Pour's weekly Sunday "coffee ride" has brought Kaleny's vision to life. It now draws up to 50 cyclists of all levels and has become a welcoming space for newcomers to the area or cycling. It's helping cyclists find "their people." Women have connected with Las Vegas' Colavita women's amateur team, and once-solo riders now thrive in this local community.



Courtesy of Lee Canyon

Peak Connections

Since its start as a local ski haven in the early 1960s, Lee Canyon has transformed with a \$17 million investment over the past five years. Now open during all four seasons, the resort added a downhill mountain bike park, two new lifts, and the 10,000-square-foot Hillside Lodge with a coffeehouse and ski-in, ski-out bar, the Bristlecone.

"Something that sets Lee Canyon apart from some of the bigger resorts is that our skiers, snowboarders, and summer guests are mostly locals. We want people in Las Vegas to connect with one another and create amazing memories on the mountain. We're deliberate in creating events with a social component," said Josh Bean, Lee Canyon's director of mountain operations.

It makes sense. Studies show people spend more time outdoors when they have friends to join them. Consistent outdoor activity improves heart and lung health, lowers blood pressure and cholesterol, boosts attention and memory, and reduces stress.

High-Altitude Healing

In 2020, during the height of COVID, ICU nurse Daniel Feliciano at MountainView Hospital noticed fellow nurse Miles Foley was struggling. New in town, Foley carried the weight of his wife's deployment to Afghanistan that very afternoon. Feliciano, who

was going through a painful divorce, could relate, having watched his spouse deploy during his military days.

"I told him that the worst thing he could do was isolate himself," said Feliciano. And he asked Foley to join him at Lee Canyon for a round of disc golf.

They built a bond over the next four years during countless days at Lee Canyon. Foley gifted Feliciano ski lessons, and he reciprocated by teaching Foley to snowboard. The friends are training for a 24-hour adventure from Death Valley to Mt. Whitney. Foley has become "Uncle Miles" to Feliciano's kids, solidifying their friendship as chosen family.

"Lee Canyon is now our haven. It's a place where we and others heal from life's challenges," said Feliciano, who doesn't take anything for granted.

"As a critical care nurse, I'd remind everyone that life is shorter than we think. We have an incredible playground in our backyard. I hope to see you out there this winter," he said. ♦



Courtesy of Daniel Feliciano

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