

Tattooing

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SIN CITY

BY ALEZA FREEMAN
Vegas.com

No trip to Vegas is complete without a souvenir to commemorate the experience.

But, trying to pack that bulky, oddly-shaped souvenir drink glass can be quite a challenge. And, chances are, it won't be long before that pair of fuzzy dice or deck of playing cards ends up in the junk drawer, collecting dust.

Why not invest in a keepsake that's a little more permanent and won't take up any space in your suitcase? Come to Las Vegas. Get a tattoo.

"Everyone wants a memento from the Strip when they come out here," said Joey Hamilton, a tattoo artist at Club Tattoo in the Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood hotel. "A tattoo is a great little way of taking something back home."

As tattoo salons crop up in resorts both on and off the Las Vegas Strip, more and more tourists are "seeing the ink" and going under the needle. While many tourists are drawn to the star power behind Las Vegas tattoo shops (several are celebrity-owned), there also seems to be something in the Sin City air that drives visitors to ink their flesh.

"Las Vegas is a sexy city. People come here and lose some of the inhibition that they might normally have at home," said Thora Dowdell, who owns Club Tattoo along with her husband, Sean, and Linkin Park front man Chester Bennington. "I think what happens is they've been thinking about it for awhile, and once they leave Middle America they say, 'I'm going to do this. I've always wanted this baby flower on my foot,' and they'll finally accomplish what they've wanted for a long time. I also think just saying that 'I did it in Vegas' qualifies some of their decisions."

At one time, there was a stigma attached to tattoos and tattoo salons

"You don't know what somebody has beneath their clothes."

Joey Hamilton,
Tattoo artist

were located in the seedier areas of Las Vegas. But today they are exceedingly mainstream, said John Huntington, owner of Huntington Ink at the Palms Las Vegas. In fact, 55 percent of American women ages 18 to 35 have a tattoo, he said.

"When I came here 10 years ago people didn't even take meetings with me because I had tattoos," said Huntington. "Now I can walk into a meeting with (Palms Owner) George Maloof, or any other executive, wearing short sleeves, and they don't even take notice."

Huntington's first tattoo was of his Cadillac, an old school 1969 Fleetwood four-door special.

"I've always been interested and intrigued by them, but I was raised by a Southern mother, so out of respect for my mom, I didn't get a tattoo until I was 30 years old," said Huntington. "The first one, she cried. The next one, she cried. After the fifth, sixth and seventh one, she cried. Now she's pretty much like, 'I don't care what you do, I just want you to come home and see me.'"

The Palms started the hotel tattoo salon trend when it opened Hart & Huntington in 2004. The salon, which has since moved to the Hard Rock Hotel under the ownership of Cary Hart, was featured on the A&E Reality TV show "Inked."

Maloof was Hart & Huntington's first customer and has a Sacramento Kings logo on his left bicep to show for it.

"When we first opened, people were fascinated," said Maloof. "It had never been done. It was a different kind of concept, but it kind of fit with the theme of what we do at the Palms and it was something that, from a merchandising perspective, we wanted a piece of."

Maloof wasn't too worried about the stigma attributed to tattoo salons and tattooing.

"It was something we tried, it worked and other people followed," said Maloof. "I said, 'As long as it is sparkling clean and we give good service, I'm fine with it.'"

Other tattoo salons in Las Vegas hotels are Mario Barth's Starlight Tattoo at Mandalay Bay and Vince Neil Ink at O'Sheas. There are also plenty of tattoo salons in non-touristy areas of Las Vegas, as well as a tattoo school.

Hamilton, who has worked as a tattoo artist for 13 years and specializes in photo reproductions, said there is no stereotypical tattoo recipient. Club Tattoo even tattooed an 80-year-old woman with a butterfly on her lower back (a type of tattoo commonly known as a "tramp stamp").

"You don't know what somebody has beneath their clothes," said Hamilton. "A guy who walks through the door fully clothed could have his whole body done."

The city itself, as well as the location of the tattoo salon inside a hotel and casino, does seem to have some influence on Hamilton's customers. He gets a lot of requests for Las Vegas-themed tattoos like playing cards, dice and the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign. He recently spent seven hours tattooing a pinup girl in front of the famed sign on a German tourist.

Many of Hamilton's customers are females in their mid-30s, but he also tattoos a lot of high rollers.

"High rollers just like to get tattoos; it's not because they have money," said Hamilton.

"I don't think I've ever had anyone come in here and say, 'I just won \$10,000, I want a tattoo,'" he added. "But I don't know how many times I've told someone, 'OK, the tattoo is \$500,' and then they go out in the casino and win \$500. And it does happen a lot."

— Caroline Fontein contributed to this report.

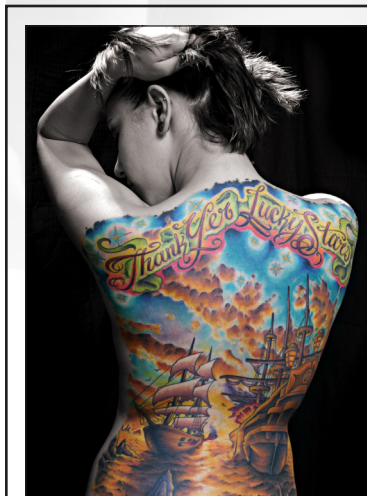


Photo courtesy Club Tattoo

Making time for a tattoo? Consider healing time too

With so many tattoo salons located right inside a Las Vegas hotel/casino, it's easy to stumble upon one during the first day of your vacation. This invariably leads to that spur-of-the-moment decision to brand your skin forever.

But typically it's better to wait and schedule a tattoo appointment until the end of a Vegas vacation; not because there's anything wrong with a spur-of-the-moment decision, but because a new tattoo will limit some of your vacation activities, such as swimming, sunbathing and soaking in the tub.

"That kind of cuts out the Jacuzzi evenings and the daytime poolside party," said Thora Dowdell, a co-owner of Club Tattoo in the Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood. "Sunshine is bad for a fresh tattoo. We consider it an open wound, and it needs to heal."

Given some healing time, typically about 10 days, your ink will be in prime shape for showing off to the masses back home and on your Facebook page — and you can carry on with normal activities.

"The first part of getting a tattoo is getting a good tattoo," said Dowdell. "The second part is getting a good heal."

—A.F.



Courtesy photos

Above, Club Tattoo owners Sean Dowdell, Chester Bennington and Thora Dowdell; Below, John Huntington, owner of Huntington Ink at the Palms.



Photo by Aleza Freeman

A tattoo artist adds to a customer's sleeve at Hart & Huntington at the Hard Rock Hotel.



Photo by Howard Freeman

Tattoo artist Joey Hamilton inks a koi fish on a tourist from London at Club Tattoo in the Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood.