

Fabulous Las Vegas Road Trip (V25A)

Don't I live in Las Vegas? Yes. But this was a "staycation" at the Las Vegas Strip. I didn't move to Las Vegas for the Strip, and since I moved here, I've only been to the Strip three times – the last time for fun was seven years ago. But in 2023, a new entertainment venue opened up. The Sphere is a 516-foot diameter ball-shaped building with the largest high-definition screen in the world all over the inside, and its outside is covered with an LED screen of sorts that displays animated images. I wanted to see it, as well as check out a couple other sites in the area, including the views from the STRAT Tower. I decided to make an overnight staycation visit out of it.

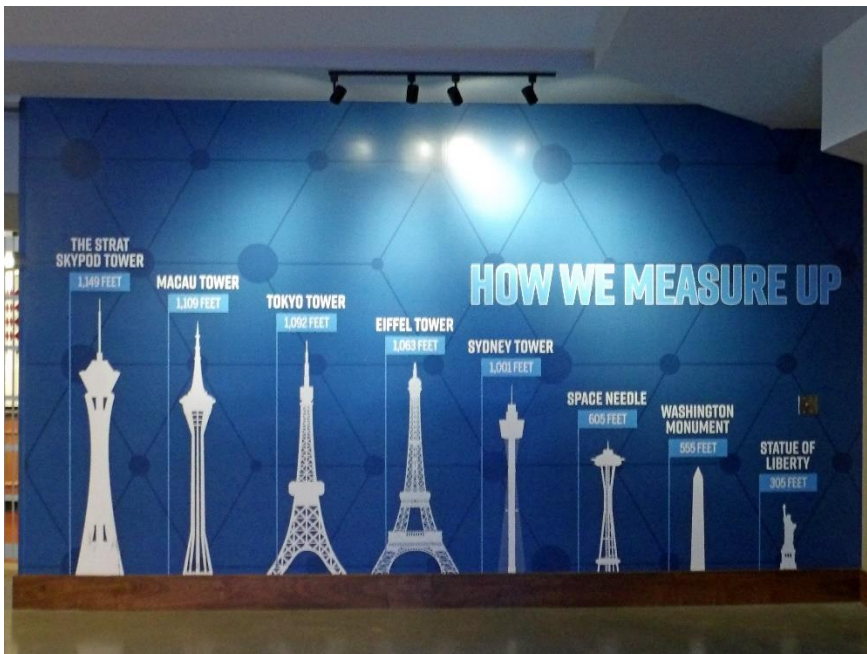


The Gateway Archway, where Las Vegas Boulevard enters the city of Las Vegas. The city has spruced up the Las Vegas Boulevard entrance to the city, which starts at Sahara Avenue at the north end of the famous Las Vegas Strip.

That's right. The Strip isn't actually in Las Vegas, but rather it's in unincorporated Clark County. Most visitors to the Las Vegas Strip never actually set foot in Las Vegas itself, but "unincorporated Clark County" doesn't roll off the tongue like "Vegas" does.



Further north along Las Vegas Boulevard, you come across the *Showgirls* sign and then the first of a number of vintage hotel, motel, casino and other historic signs that have been preserved, restored and put on display along the main roads leading into downtown Las Vegas. The Neon Museum in town helps preserve Las Vegas's historic signs.



But my target for the city was to see Las Vegas from the STRAT Tower's observation decks. The STRAT Tower, on the left, at 1,149 feet tall is the tallest observation tower in the United States.



The STRAT Tower, a part of the STRAT Hotel and Casino



Looking south down the Las Vegas Strip. The Strip has lost most of the kitschy casinos, hotels and motels I saw when I first visited here in 1991, replaced by gleaming high rise hotels with thousands of rooms, casinos, restaurants and shopping malls. (That's my house you're looking at in the distant right.)



The Las Vegas Strip in 1991, looking north where the Venetian, the Palazzo, Wynn and Encore now stand. Circus Circus and Excalibur retain their 90s looks, the only major properties from my visit back then that haven't been redeveloped or replaced. And it was announced just last month that Circus Circus has been put up for sale for possible redevelopment.



Looking north towards downtown Las Vegas, where Fremont Street is at the heart of its hotels and casinos district. The mob pushed to develop the Strip to the south, outside of Las Vegas city limits, as there was less law enforcement scrutiny. The local Mob Museum tells more of this history.



The Sphere saw me taking pictures from the STRAT Tower, so it smiled for the camera. You can get a sense of how big it is by comparing it to surrounding buildings.



The Sphere's emoji face display, now named Orbi, is probably its most popular exterior display. It's animated, too, so it's often looking around and making faces.

But more on the Sphere later.



President Trump usually stays here when he's in Las Vegas. The Trump International Hotel Las Vegas is not far from the Strip but not actually on it. Trump stands at the corner of Fashion Show Drive and Sammy Davis Jr. Drive, closer to strippers than the Strip. That's probably why he stays here. Either that, or he finds that the name is easy to remember.



Across the street from Trump is Déjà Vu Showgirls Gentlemen's Club. And nearby is Sapphire Las Vegas Gentlemen's Club, the world's largest such club, claiming to feature 400 "entertainers" nightly.



Or perhaps Trump guests cross the street to do some shopping at the Love Boutique.

I've never done an "escape room" before, but they're increasingly popular. Basically, your party gets locked in a room, and you have to find clues, figure out puzzles and perform tasks that will result in your "escape" from the room. Or they'll let you out when time expires.



I can't imagine what might go on in an XXX adult-themed escape room, but I suggest picking your playing partners carefully.

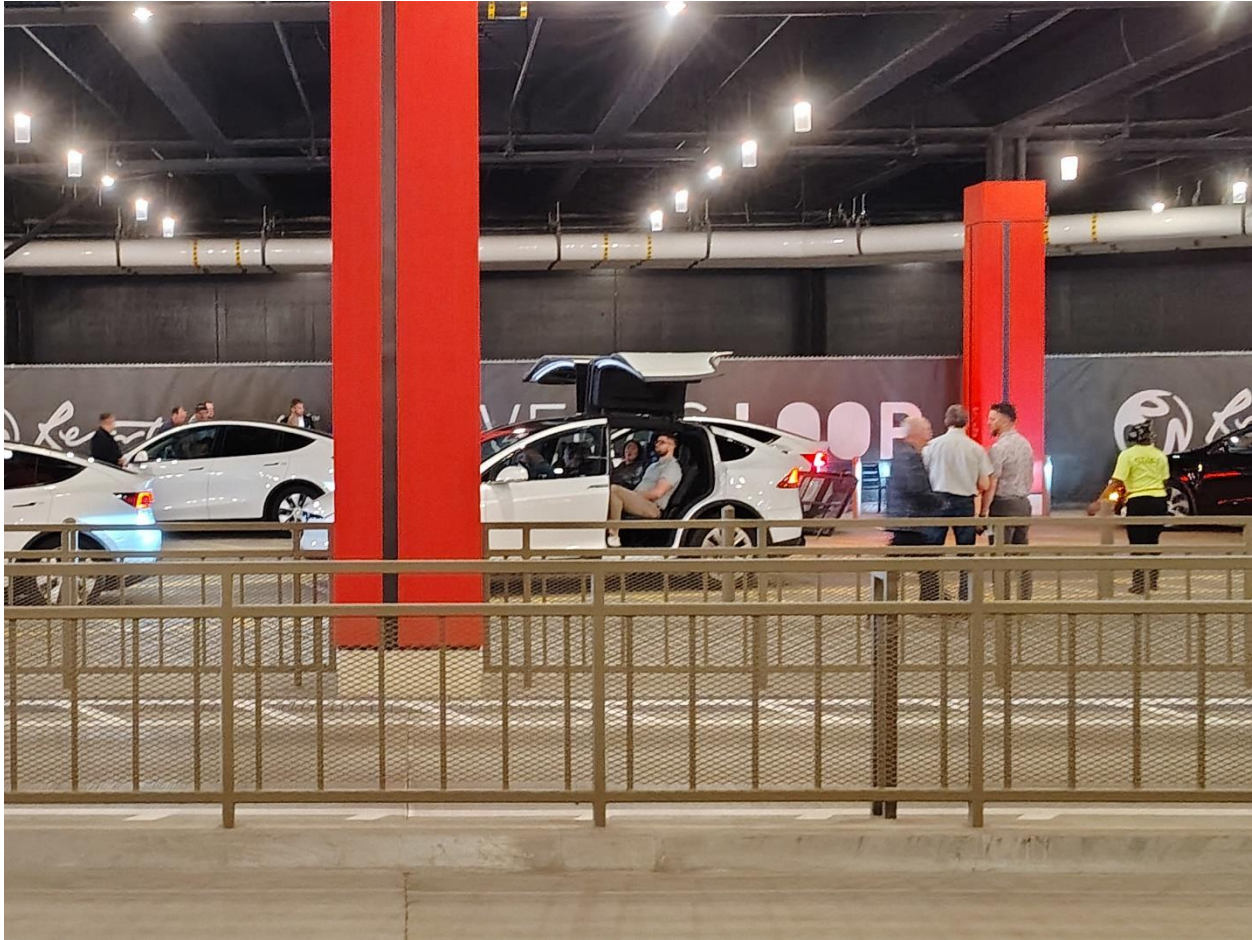
If you think Trump is old news and are more interested in the real power behind the throne, or at least behind the Resolute Desk, well, Elon Musk and his The Boring Company (TBC) are having an impact on Las Vegas. Rather than putting in a subway or light rail line along the Strip that also connects to downtown and the airport, TBC is digging tunnels underground with narrow paved roads that Tesla cars scurry around on, carrying passengers to various destinations in the system. It first opened in 2021, and it currently only operates between stations at the convention center and Resorts World, but it will be expanding in the coming years. I stopped at the Resorts World station to check it out.



Current price is \$5 to get from Resorts World across the street to the convention center. “Across the street” is a bit misleading when you consider how big these places are. It’s a 25-minute walk.

Currently the cars in the 70-car fleet all have drivers, but someday they’re expected to be driverless. Which if you’ve seen how badly people drive here, and it’s probably a good thing that the driverless cars will be below ground.

There were no cars at the station for the first ten minutes I was there. It’s the nature of conventions that most people go to the convention in the morning and leave in the evening, so it’s a bit “burst-y”, especially as each car only carries 1-3 passengers at a time.



I was also curious about this. As a big and tall guy with long legs and big feet, I find most car backseats to be pretty cramped. And with broken bones in both ankles and massive medical boots, I can't sit for very long like the passenger shown here, as it puts all the strain where the broken bones are. Their solution for folks like me and those in wheelchairs? They'll arrange surface transportation for you in handicapped-supporting vehicles.

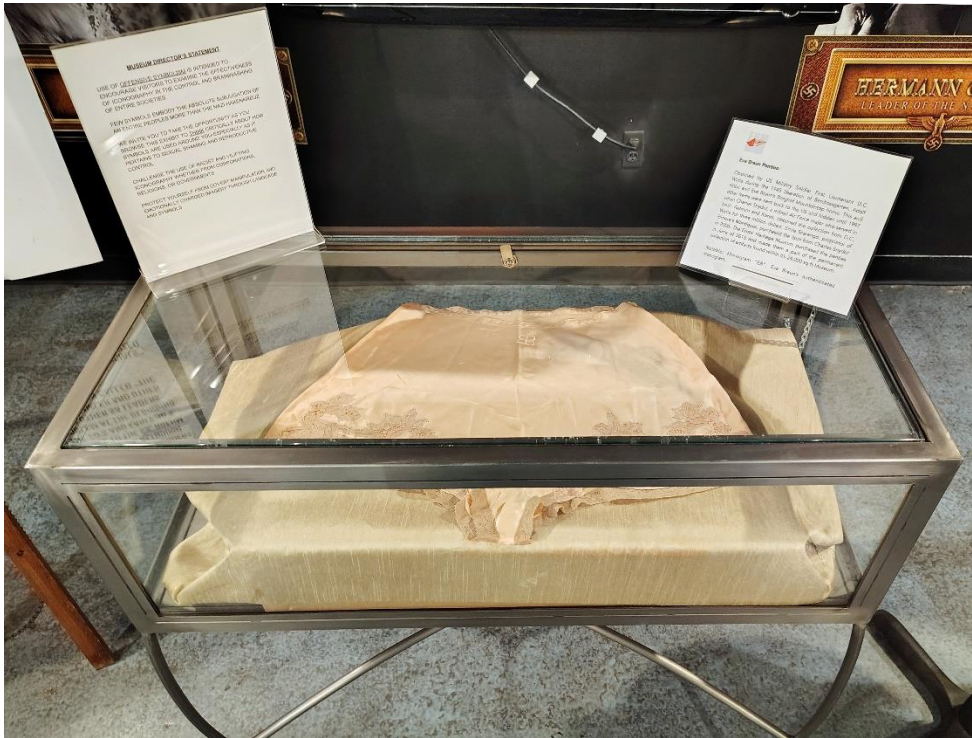
With some time to kill before I could check into my hotel and with a museum across the street from Trump, I decided to check out the museum.

The Erotic Heritage Museum certainly lived up to its name, and it's certainly not for kids, but it was a lot more interesting and informative than I expected.

And they allowed photos, too, so it gave me another chance to test my new cellphone's camera in a museum setting.



The Clintons and Trumps in an exhibit on political parody.



On display in an exhibit on sex policies in Hitler's Nazi Germany was this pair of panties that belonged to Eva Braun, his mistress until they married before committing suicide near the end of WWII in Europe.



An authentic letter written by the Marquis de Sade, from whom we got the term “sadism”.

I spent a night at the Ellis Island Hotel and Casino, a smallish hotel about a half mile east of the Strip on Koval Lane, within walking distance to both the Strip and the Sphere. When there are no big events in town, it's possible to get a relatively cheap room early in the week – Monday night, in my case. My room was advertised at \$59 for the night.

Most Vegas hotels tack on mandatory resort fees, \$39/night at Ellis Island, but they can run \$50/night or more in the big hotels on the Strip. What does a resort fee get you? Access to the pool, in-room coffee and bottled water, in-room safe, a newspaper, local phone calls, housekeeping and faxes at Ellis Island. At least the parking was free. Parking can run upwards of \$20/night at most Strip hotels. My room, resort fee and taxes for the one night added up to \$106 for the night for a \$59 room. But the room was acceptably nice and convenient.



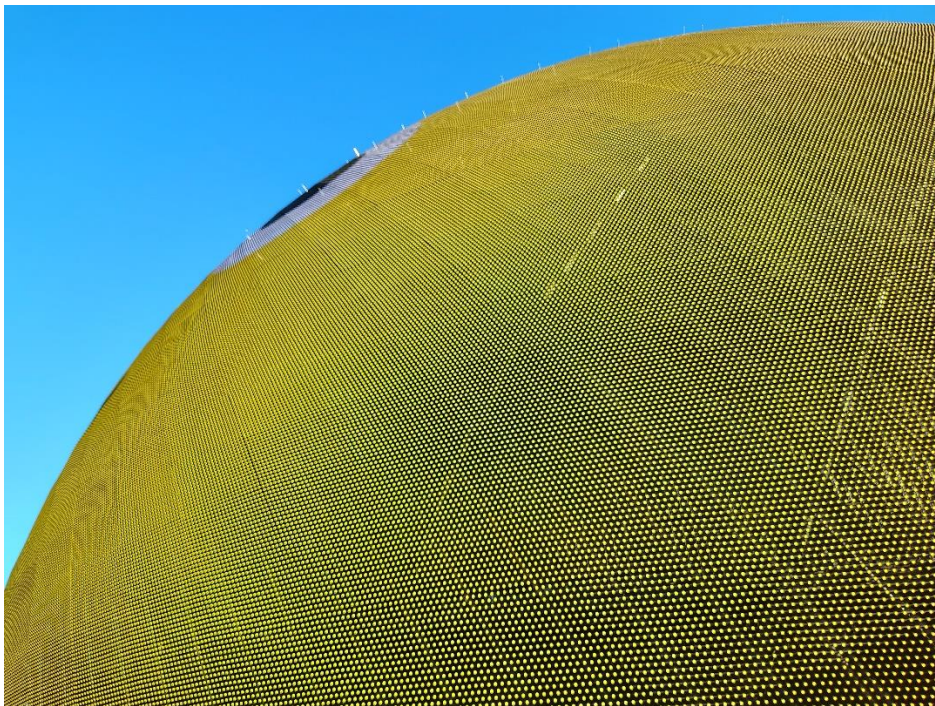
En route to the Sphere, I stopped for a photo of the graffiti on this power pole, a makeshift Tupac Shakur Memorial where people pay tribute to the young rapper who was gunned down at this spot back in 1996. A suspect in his murder was arrested here in Las Vegas in 2023 and is awaiting trial.



At 550-feet tall, the High Roller Ferris Wheel was the tallest in the world when it opened in 2014, but it lost that title in 2021. It takes 30 minutes for one rotation. And because it's located behind buildings on the Strip, I'm not sure what the appeal is with its parking lot views. But that's just me.



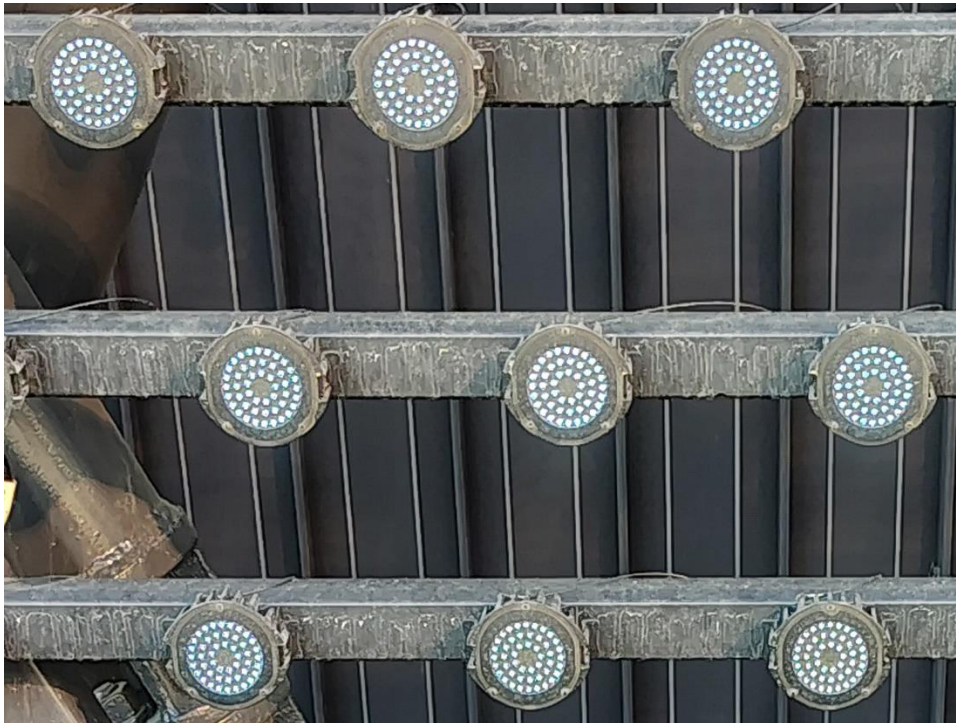
I approached the Sphere from the south, and got some insight into its construction. It's basically a spherical domed building that houses the entertainment venue. Attached to that and built around it is the exosphere. The exosphere is 30% taller than the dome and supports the LED panels that make up its 580,000-square-foot outside display.



Here's Orbi again. But from this close, it's easy to see some of the display's 1.23 million hockey puck-sized LEDs, spaced 8 inches apart, and each containing 48 diodes.



Here's a look at the LEDs from close up...



...and even closer.

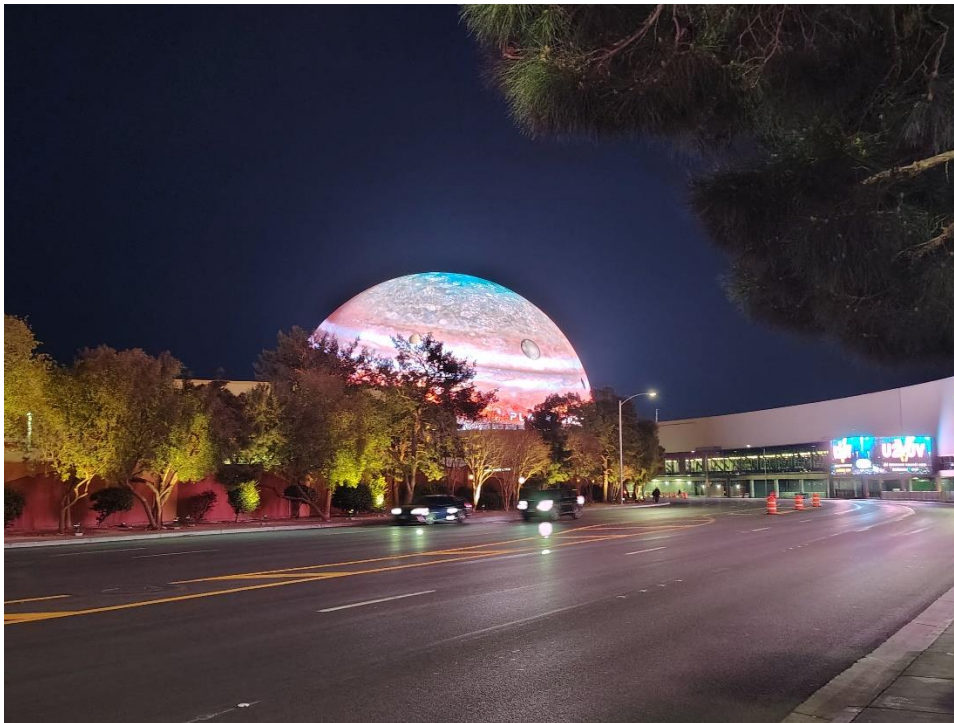
The displays on the outside of the Sphere look better after dark and from some distance – less like a bunch of dots and more like an LED TV display.



A close-in view from the plaza out front, an ad for the show I saw at the Sphere



From a couple hundred yards further away



I stopped for more Sphere views as I continued to walk west towards the Strip along Sands Avenue.

They let us in about 45 minutes before the movie started so that we could be awed by the architecture and some “robots” before the show, what they call the “Sphere Experience”.



The futuristic atrium, where you could buy refreshments and souvenirs at futuristic prices (\$7 for pop, \$17 for a beer). For a 50-minute movie, I figured I could do without at those prices.



One of the animatronic robots that told visitors about the Sphere. I spent too many years working in high tech to be much impressed by it, but the kids seemed to like it.



One of a number of 3-D hologram displays. Check out the floating lantern at the upper left as it starts to drift out of view.

Inside the dome, seating is provided for up to 17,600 people. There's a 160,000-square-foot LED screen that wraps around the rest of the interior. No hockey puck LEDs here. With 16,000 x 16,000 resolution, it is the highest resolution LED screen in the world, with upwards of 250 million diodes.

To create an even more immersive experience, its advanced sound system has almost 1,600 speakers with "beamforming" capabilities that allow it to deliver consistent volume to every seat. If there's a breeze in the movie, you feel it. If there's a smell in the movie, you smell it. If the movie shows a herd of elephants running past, your chair makes you feel it. If the movie shows an underwater scene, they dump water on you. Okay, not that last one. It's not that immersive.

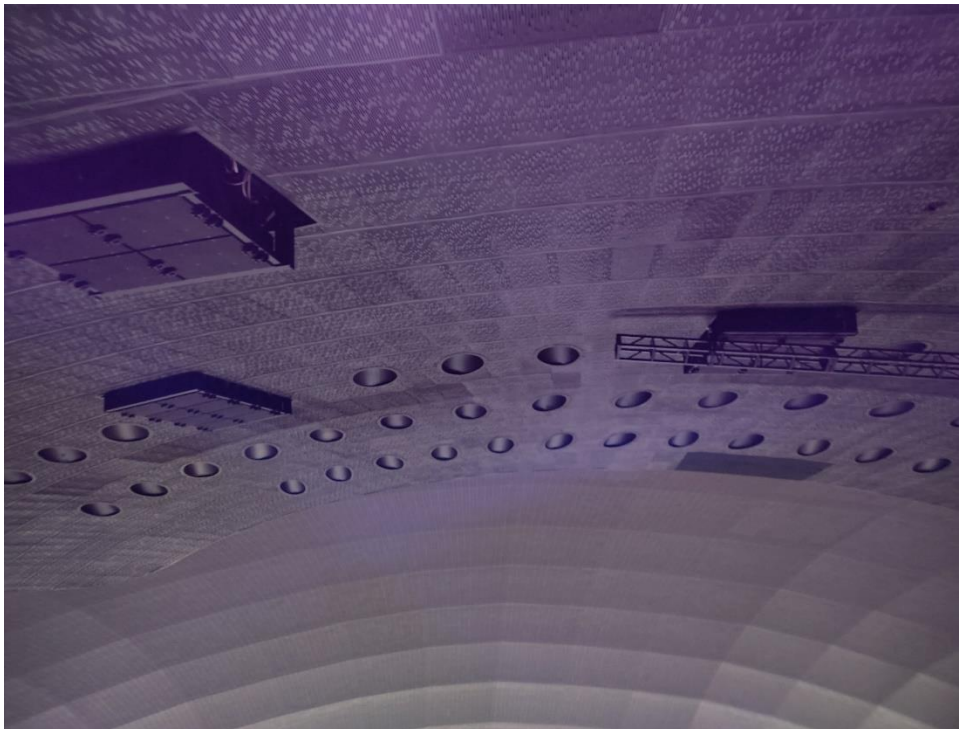
The movie I saw was David Aronofsky's *Postcard from Earth*. Its simplistic plot was mainly used to set up lots of very cool video clips of nature and culture scenes. Given the size of the viewing area and immersive effects, it's an impressive experience if that's what you focus on. (Those determined to see "wokeism" and "DEI" in everything will have no problem finding them here, as the movie delivered its environmental message with the subtlety of a sledgehammer against the skull.)

Unfortunately, they allow people to use cellphones to record the movie, so bright cellphone screens were also in my field of vision. Including a woman in the row in front of me who spent half the movie scrolling through and replying to text messages, and the other half getting some video clips on her phone that I suppose she'll immerse herself in later.

By the way, ticket prices (including tax) were \$109.



The seats, legroom and steepness of the seating area. I had a “semi-ambulatory” seat, which meant I only had to go a few steps down to my row. They also said it was for people who need a little extra legroom. If that’s what this row had, other rows must have been really cramped.



Looking up at the dome above my seat.



Before the show, I got this picture looking down toward the screen. It doesn't look like much at this point.



After the show as people were leaving, I got this picture. The movie started with the small image, but soon filled up much of the inside of the dome, wrapping around most of my field of vision – except for the pesky cellphone screens at the bottom.

I was glad to have seen it, but I probably won't be back. Something like *Star Wars* might have been a cool movie for this type of presentation environment, but I prefer small indie movies, and I don't need to pay a premium for a live concert just to have lots of giant images thrown at me (for one upcoming concert, the better seats are \$300-\$550 for the show).



After I left the Sphere, I headed over to the Strip to get some dinner. Looking south down the Strip.



Caesar's Palace



The Flamingo

Frank Sinatra. Gone. Don Rickles. Gone. Elvis Presley, Sammy Davis Jr., Liberace. Gone. Steve Lawrence & Eydie Gormé, Milton Berle, Mel Tormé, Dean Martin, Andy Williams, Siegfried & Roy. All gone.



But 127-year-old Wayne Newton is still playing the Las Vegas Strip. Danke Schoen for that.