

LIGHTS. **VEGAS** ACTION.

Vegas Classifieds

HELP WANTED

Wanted. Someone who is willing to dress up in costume, handle live animals, get others wet or scale tall buildings. Must be hands on. Must not be afraid of heights. Must be able to carry up to 40 pounds. Must be willing to relocate to Las Vegas.

Vegas is a conglomeration of unique and exciting experiences, so a slew of unique jobs just naturally go along with the territory. Showgirls, Elvis impersonators, lounge singers. It's all commonplace here.

But there's also a lot of unique Vegas jobs you've probably never dreamt of. For instance, when's the last time a mermaid gave you her business card or an anime character served your martini? Here's just a sampling of some of our city's unique employment opportunities.



Heather Carrasco, a mermaid at the Silverton aquarium, interacts with a young fan during a 15-minute show.

Photo by Aleza Freeman

THE LITTLE MERMAID

Your eyes aren't fooling you if you happen to see a mermaid floating through the aquarium at the Silverton Casino Lodge.

Throughout the afternoons and evenings, women dressed as mermaids join the 4,000 tropical fish, including three species of stingrays and three species of sharks, in the 117,000-gallon, curved acrylic tank, for a 15-minute show.

"We try to look natural," said mermaid Heather Carrasco, a 1996 Olympic gold medalist for the U.S. synchronized swimming team.

"Though with goggles and a nose clip," she added, "I don't know how natural we look."

Apparently, they look natural enough. Hotel guests, especially the kids, are amazed and entertained by the mermaids' appearance in the aquarium.

The mermaids can see out of the glass and into the casino perfectly, and oftentimes they see kids with signs and drawings for the mermaids, and even "Little Mermaid" dolls.

That's not to say that all kids are fooled. Carrasco said she can read lips and often has the following conversation:

Kid: "Are you real?"

Mermaid: "Yeah!"

Kid: "Then why do you have a zipper?"

Most of the mermaids at the Silverton have competitive swimming backgrounds. They spend about 15 minutes in the 78 degree water, which they enter from above via a specially constructed swing on a pulley system. Underneath their nude colored wet suit with requisite

shell-bra and multi-colored mermaid tail, they wear a second wet suit to keep them warm and a 15-pound weight belt to help them stay near the bottom of the tank. While they swim between hookah ports with long tubes in order to get air, an ability to hold their breath for long periods of time is important.

Once in the water, mermaids interact with hotel guests by playing games like patty cake against the glass, blowing kisses and doing spins and backflips.

They also interact with the fish, some of which are friendlier than others.

"They're like our pets," said Carrasco. "We can touch them, we can pet them. Some of them have quite the personality. They [aquarium staff] tell us not to get attached, but of course we do. It's hard not to."

HAVE NO FEAR, THE SIGN PATROL IS HERE

At the Young Electric Sign Company, it takes two service technicians to change a light bulb — one to operate a boom truck that reaches upwards of 160 feet, and the other to brave the heights and screw it in.

On the other hand, it only takes one light bulb to change a man.

Just ask Robert Atkinson, a YESCO service technician. Atkinson has been hooked on servicing signs since the first time he rode in the basket on the end of the truck's crane. Service technicians ride in cranes as well as scale down the sides of buildings using a type of rope ladder and harness designed for rock climbing.

"There's nothing like it," said Atkinson, a brawny but friendly man whose hands were blackened by grease. "It's scary the first time, but once you get your legs it's a ball. It's kind of like being Spiderman."

YESCO has designed, produced and maintained a majority of the brightly-lit, iconic signs that line the Las Vegas Strip, downtown and beyond for a good portion of the company's 80-plus years, from historic relics like Vegas Vic, Silver Slipper, Stardust and Golden Nugget to modern marvels like Mandalay Bay, Rio, Palms and Wynn Las Vegas.

Neon, fluorescent, LED and iridescent signs hang from the rooftops of 50-story-high mega-resorts and run up and down the sides of those same buildings. Enormous marquees distinguish the properties from the street. Signs also fill the insides, marking everything from slot machines to restrooms.

Members of the YESCO Sign Patrol scour the city for burned-out bulbs and other sign-related damages. The team then reports back to the service department with their findings, typically outages or broken panels.

"Every once in awhile someone shoots at the sign or throws beer bottles at them," said Charlie Rundquist, service department foreman. "It's a party town, so you know."

Like your friendly, neighborhood mailman, the service technicians show up rain or shine to make the repairs.

Over the years, things have gotten safer for the technicians. Historically, most of the signs have been built with pegs or other access points to allow technicians to climb on them.

But until more recent years, they didn't even use ropes or harnesses to climb on those pegs, no matter how high the building.

"They were just rappelling," said Mike Richards, interior service manager for YESCO, "like crazy monkeys."

LOBSTER LADY



Photo by Alex Karvounis

Yasmin Tajik at work.

As the lobster tank specialist for Wynn and Encore hotels, it's Yasmin Tajik's job to keep the large volume of live seafood that comes into the hotels alive and healthy until it's time to be killed, cooked and served in the restaurants.

It's a job Tajik describes as sort of bittersweet. However, this animal lover is also a self-professed sushi lover.

"It doesn't bother me to eat what I see in my tanks," said Tajik. "I take more of a scientific approach to it and I don't get emotionally attached. We go through so much it's hard to get attached to anything."

Tajik, a marine biologist with a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's degree in business administration, works in a warehouse beneath Wynn and Encore, where she maintains several tanks, including a large three-tiered tank for Maine lobsters and several smaller specialty tanks. She is entirely responsible for all the live seafood that comes to the hotel, some from as far away as Australia, Africa and Italy. The volume of products is enormous — 4,000 to 5,000 Maine lobsters a month (just for the restaurants) — not to mention, spiny lobsters, slipper lobsters, Mediterranean blue lobsters, langoustines, king crab, prawn and geoduck.

"I do everything A to Z on the tanks," said Tajik. "We want to make sure we're only putting the healthiest stuff in. I maintain everything — water chemistry, temperature, salt, pH balance, ammonia level every day — and do regular maintenance on the tank and pumps, changing the filters. Each species has different holding requirements, different salt levels, different water temperatures, things like that. In the end it's being able to provide the highest quality product to our end consumer, our guests who are staying here and eating."

Tajik formerly worked with marine mammals, including dolphins and whales, in San Diego and Hawaii, and first came to Las Vegas to work at the Dolphin Habitat at the Mirage. From there she moved onto the lobster tanks at the Bellagio and was eventually recruited by Wynn.

"I really enjoy working with the chefs," said Tajik. "It's its amazing what they can do — To be able to provide here in the desert of Las Vegas what you only would be able to get in a coastal town in Italy is a really amazing thing."

SEE MORE PHOTOS

Go behind the scenes of the 117,000-gallon aquarium at Silverton, and see more photos of the mermaids.



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ANIME-NIACS



Heidi Haldeman, center, actually sews her own costumes, including her work uniform, which is modeled after the anime character Rukia Kuchiki.

In the United States, dressing up as an anime character is a hobby. In Japan it's a way of life.

For Heidi Haldeman, it's a combination of the two. As a bartender at the Dragon Noodle Co.'s Cosplay Lounge at the Monte Carlo hotel, Haldeman's uniform is that of an anime character. Anime is the term for Japanese animation, a popular art form throughout the world.

"Cosplay is short for costume play," explained Haldeman. "It's dressing up as the characters from anime."

A real life anime fan for many years, this is a dream job for Haldeman, who sews all her own costumes and attends anime conventions all over the United States. "It brought my hobby into the job choice that I like," she said. "I actually wear my own costume at the bar."

Cafes with staff dressed as anime characters are commonplace in Japan, but the Cosplay Lounge is a first for Las Vegas. The lounge is decorated with a Japanese flair, including posters depicting anime characters and anime books.

Since the female characters from anime are typically short-skirted and voluptuous, it's a perfect fit for Las Vegas.

"Everybody wants to be something different when they come to town. They want to see fun stuff," said Haldeman. "Even people who don't go in to our restaurant, when they walk by, you see them smiling."

Haldeman serves up specialty Asian-inspired cocktails such as the Mango Dragon, while dressed as Rukia Kuchiki from the popular Japanese anime series, "Bleach."

"I like her character a lot because she's very strong-willed," said Haldeman. "Most of the characters I dress up as are very strong-willed. Kind of that syndrome of, I don't need a man."

Haldeman knows her hobby can be perceived as a bit geeky, but it's a quality she has learned to embrace.

"Usually don't that side of me hidden away, you keep that really off," she explained. "But now it's at work, so everyone's going to know I'm a nerd."

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT

With professionally choreographed musical routines and rushing water that soars as high as 460 feet from a total of 1,214 water-emitting devices, the \$40-million, 8.5-acre Bellagio Fountains have been celebrated in countless films, television shows, photographs and articles on Las Vegas.

Behind the scenes, a staff of 30 front feature engineers work seven days a week, 365 days a year to clean and maintain the fountains and make emergency repairs in between shows. Inside their shop, they work with several different types of shooters, compressors, purification equipment and a fog system so intense that it's been said it could literally blanket Las Vegas Boulevard and turn Paris (the hotel across the street) into London, in less than five minutes.

"We're up to about 56,000 shows, and we've never missed a show due to a mechanical failure," said Gene Bowling, front feature manager. "The only thing we ever cancel shows for are special events or weather."

While shows are pre-programmed and computer operated, Bowling said it's the engineers that make the magic happen. "Without the crew that I have this show would not run," he said. "It doesn't matter if its 110 degrees or 30 degrees, these guys

are out there making sure this show is in perfect condition."

Everyone on the crew is dive certified and has a background in a field such as industrial maintenance, electronics, pneumatics, show lighting or hydraulics.

"There's not a school or class you can go to learn how to work on the fountains at Bellagio," said Bowling.

During their daily maintenance, from about 5 a.m. to 1 p.m., some of the crew can be seen floating around on the water on either a maintenance or cleaning barge. The water temperature fluctuates between 80 degrees and the upper 30s, so those who venture out onto the water wear different types of wet or dry suits depending upon the season.

"We maintain the lake just like you would a swimming pool," said Bowling.

Engineers are joined by several feathered friends who call the fountains their home. "We have a whole family of ducks that live here," said Bowling. "They come in and they spend time in our shop, swim on the lake — they've actually become aware of the show. When we start a show the nozzle shields come up and they'll swim away from the structure because they know it's about to start."



Front feature engineers float atop the Bellagio Fountains on a maintenance barge.

Photo by Aleza Freeman