

LAS VEGAS — The notice on the door to the hotel-casino was emphatic. “The Westin Casuarina is a Smoke Free Environment. Thank you for not smoking.” Just beyond, four people were hunched over slot machines the other afternoon, wisps of cigarette smoke swirling around them as they happily puffed away.

And it was perfectly legal. “This is good,” said Ray Wan, a

flight attendant from Hawaii, lighting up a cigarette as the slot machine beeped and whirled before him.

At a time when much of the rest of the nation — indeed much of the rest of the world — is on a crusade to banish smoking in public, the casinos of Las Vegas have emerged as a smokers’ oasis, perhaps the last place free from the restrictions that have spread from restaurants to bars to malls to cars carrying children. Nevada law trumps Westin policy.

No matter that Nevada voters overwhelmingly approved a ban on public smoking four years ago: the powerful gambling industry made certain that it included an exception for casinos. Blackjack dealers and croupiers, alarmed about second-hand smoke, are pressing a \$5 million federal class action lawsuit filed against the Wynn Las Vegas, to force the hotel to protect casino workers who have to sit in smoke-misted rooms. But the most the plaintiff’s lawyers expect from the case is the installation of high-technology air cleansing devices.

Even the ominous warning [labels](#) for cigarette packages proposed by health regulators on Wednesday seem unlikely to make a difference here.

This being Las Vegas, a place that has made an industry out of excess and risky behavior, smoking seems here to stay. Civic leaders, who might be uncomfortable enabling a habit that has, shall we say, its demonstrable downsides, point to evidence that a ban would hurt casino business, arguing that smoking is as integral to the Las Vegas experience as free drinks, playing the slots at 7 a.m. and escort services. Atlantic City banned smoking in 2008, and rolled back the ban a month later because of complaints from casinos.

“There’s been a link between smokers and gamblers for years,” said Billy Vassiliadis, an advertising executive who represents the city’s tourism industry. “A lot of people do things here

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that they don't do at home. It's part of the overall appeal of Las Vegas. You have choices here."

So it is that in an era when smoking has become taboo in the rest of the country, smokers seem downright liberated when they step onto the Las Vegas Strip: Finally, there is someplace where they have nothing to be ashamed of as they romp through their bastion of freedom.

"I mean, where else can you come in from outside smoking a cigarette, walk straight in and keep it lit?" said Andrew Garcia, a Las Vegas native.

The other evening, a uniformed woman brandishing a tray loaded with packs of cigarettes and cigars (yes, a cigarette girl: only in Vegas) roamed the aisles of O'Sheas Las Vegas Casino. At the Bellagio, a gambler rolled her eyes at a seatmate who tried to clear the air with a wave of her hand, while up the street, at the Flamingo, a couple, with almost theatrical defiance, lit up cigarettes and thrust them in the air as they marched under pink neon tube lights down the main hall of the casino.

"A woman sat next to me and started fanning the smoke away with her hands," said Kelli Lee, 41, of Los Angeles, as she worked her way through a pack of Marlboro Lights while playing the slots at the Imperial Palace Casino. "Can you believe it?"

"If cigarettes were illegal, then I would say not to smoke them," she added. "But they're legal. Tobacco is natural. I wouldn't come here and gamble if I couldn't smoke."

Paul Hynes, 36, of Toronto, hoisted a lit cigar as he and three friends, also puffing on thick cigars, walked among the croupier tables at the Bellagio. "This is part and parcel of the environment here," Mr. Hynes said.

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