The Tunnel People of Las Vegas

Source: Daily Mail
Photos by Austin Hargrave

A threatening labyrinth inhabited by poisonous spiders and noxious water, lies deep underneath the world-famous, sparkling Las Vegas Strip.

Surprisingly, the 200-mile network of flood tunnels is home to approximately 1,000 people who barely subsist in the dank underbelly of the city.

Steven and his girlfriend Kathryn have taken the utmost care to furnish their 400 square foot home there. A double bed, a wardrobe and even a bookshelf complete with paper-back books, occupies their small haven.

Tunnel residents salvage furniture to make their subterranean world more comfortable, but they can do very little to keep foul water from flooding the floor and stagnating beneath their feet. Some tunnel dwellers lay scraps of carpet on the concrete floor to make it more tolerable.
Steven and Kathryn have been there for five years and have fashioned a shower from a water cooler and decorated their walls with pictures. Plastic crates hold their possessions in order to keep them safe from the noxious water that floods their surroundings.

'Our bed came from a skip outside an apartment complex,' Steven explains. 'It's mainly stuff people dump that we pick up. One man's junk is another man's gold.'

'We get the stuff late at night so people don't see us because it's kind of embarrassing.'

Forced into the tunnels several years ago after his heroin addiction caused him to lose his job, Steven says he is now clean.

He and Kathryn survive by ‘credit hustling’ in the casinos, donning second-hand clothes to check the slot machines for chips carelessly left behind. Steven even claims he once found $997.00 on one machine.

Amy and Junior, were married in the Shalimar Chapel – one of Vegas’s most popular venues - and returned to their space in the tunnel.
Following the death of their four-month-old son Brady, they became drug addicted and lost their home.

‘I heard Las Vegas was a good place for jobs,’ Amy said. ‘But it was tough and we started living under the staircase outside the MGM casino.’

‘Then we met a guy who lived in the tunnels. We’ve been down here ever since.’

Reporter Matthew O’Brien, stumbled across the tunnel people when he was researching a murder case. He was so moved by the situation, he organized The Shine A Light foundation to aid them. He has also published a book on the tunnel people called Beneath The Neon.

‘These are normal people of all ages who’ve lost their way, generally after a traumatic event,’ O’Brien said. ‘Many are war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.’ ‘It’s not known how many children are living there, as they’re kept out of sight, but I’ve seen evidence of them – toys and teddy bears.’

Graffiti artists have turned this area of the tunnel network into a gallery.

Images which show the community’s way of life were taken by Austin Hargrave, a British photographer now based in the U.S. They show how the destitute and hopeless have created a community in the subterranean passages of Vegas.
Above ground: The spectacular blazing lights of the strip give no hint of what lies below them.

Entrance: The towers and buildings of Las Vegas can be seen in the background.