VANISHING POINT
:REDUX

With script in hand, Mopar film fanatic **Richard Truesdell** follows in Kowalski's *Vanishing Point* tire tracks in a vintage 1970 Challenger and the brand-new Challenger SRT8.


FADE IN:

DAY

IN THE EARLY MORNING

ely deserted. The CAMERA HOLDS on the
a few seconds.
orning sounds (birds, insects, breeze),

ROUND a car comes TOWARD CAMERA at
swoops up to FOREGROUND. The CAMERA
we see the car disappear in the

broadcast, static, scrambled voices.

lonely landscape while we PRINT
e if coming over teletype --

@(ST CALIFORNIA

DIB ===DATE: 04-12-70 * TIME 11:21:++

New but dusty.

looking somewhat older now--
Though he is keenly alert. It
an's kicks come from speeding
about him, an urgency, some

ABRUPT CUT TO

DAY

llision course with the
ed by a cop on a motorcycle

concentration.

NDSHIELD)-- the empty road.

DAY

ed with cars and motor.
ming traffic onto a side

FINAL SHOOTING SCRIPT

VANISHING POINT

Screenplay

by

G. CAIN

April, 1970

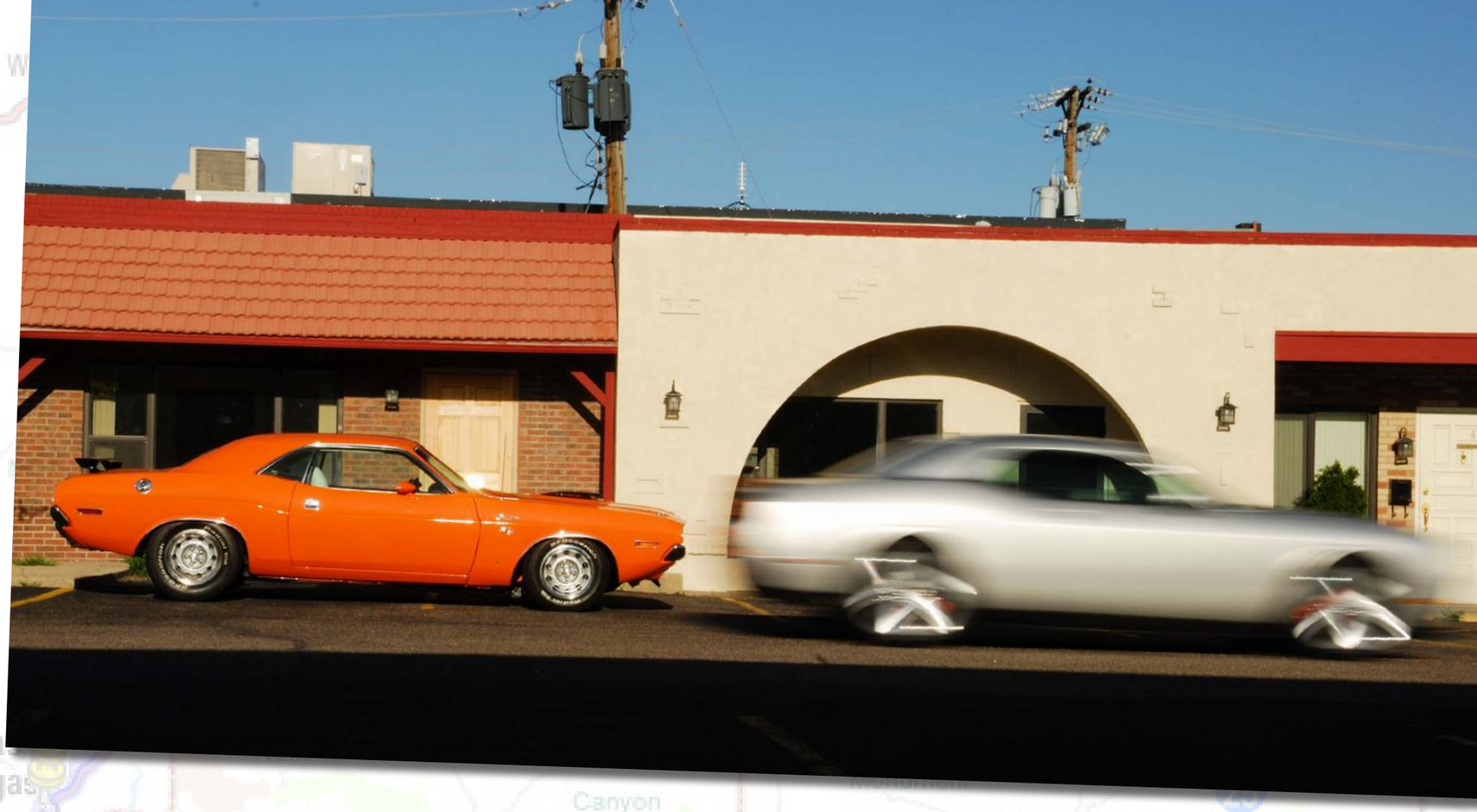
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10201 West Pico Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90

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IN B.G.
now still bar.

24 NEW ANGLE -- ROADHOOK Journalists. A
TV cars arrive. The usual paraphernalia
film camera on top.



If ever there was a specific musclecar inexorably linked to a particular movie, it has to be Barry Newman's white 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T in the 1971 cult classic *Vanishing Point* (with apologies to Steve McQueen's Highland Green Mustang in *Bullitt*).

And two and a half years ago, when I first saw the 2006 Dodge Challenger Concept in the styling dome at the Chrysler Technical Center in Auburn Hills before it was unveiled at the 2006 North American International Automobile Show, I knew that if the car ever made it to production I'd have to duplicate Kowalski's epic adventure.

It's not an original concept for car journalists to embark on such adventures. Many have made the run previously but it was my hope to be the first to drive Colorado to California in the new 2008 Dodge Challenger SRT8 along with an original 1970 Challenger. This was made possible given the support of Buzz Graves, a printing executive from Reno, Nevada, who offered up his stunningly restored 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T Hemi for the trip. While the car is restored to its original glory, Buzz is not afraid to drive it; in 2006 it participated in my Challenger Concept drive that appeared in the September 2006 issue of *Musclecar Enthusiast*, as well as last year's Muscle Car 1000. Due to other obligations, Buzz would join up with us on day two in Salt Lake City; driving the car from Denver would be his brother Holly Graves, a restaurateur from Las Vegas.

We had four other members who made up our crew, Heath Nelson of Team Performance (**TEAM-PPI.com**), a maker of twin turbo upgrades for Ford Mustangs. Heath is working on a twin turbo application for the 6.1-liter Hemi; his own 2006 Dodge Charger SRT8 is serving as a development mule for this future product.

George Gubler, a retired Oregon marshal, was invited by Buzz to join the program given that he is a Mopar enthusiast and something of an adventurer himself. And finally Buzz tapped good friend Brian Wilson, who owns a body shop in Reno, to tow the Challenger to Denver while Holly flew up from Las Vegas. The Ram tow vehicle would serve as our support vehicle.

The premise was simple. Using repeated viewings of *Vanishing Point*, research fan sites on the Internet, and a copy of the actual shooting script, we were able to connect the dots and determine the route that James "Jimmy" Kowalski drove from Denver to his intended destination, San Francisco. Dodge cooperated by supplying a silver Dodge Challenger SRT8, fresh from the press launch in Pasadena.



Day One
Denver, Colorado to Moab, Utah
360 Miles

The day started with a cross-town run in rush-hour traffic to the offices of the Auto Driveaway Company on East Evans Avenue, the spiritual successor to Argo's Delivery Agency, the car delivery service immortalized in *Vanishing Point*. Located in a non-descript industrial office building, if Kowalski was looking to pick up a driveaway for a run to the West Coast today, this is probably where he'd look.

We weren't being chased by cops like Kowalski, but driving the original Challenger in rush-hour traffic was still a harrowing experience. Buzz' car is equipped with a 4-speed manual transmission – originally it was a 383 R/T with a 3-speed TorqueFlite – so Holly had to navigate bumper-to-bumper traffic with cars and trucks dodging in front, trying to get a closer look at our new SRT8.

Heading west out of Denver on I-70, we photographed both cars at the Eisenhower Tunnel, 11,013 feet above sea level. Yes, the '70 Challenger took a bit of a time adjusting to the rarified air over two miles up but no more than the rest of our crew.

The long, three-lane downgrade out of the tunnel past Dillon gave us ample opportunity to shoot both cars with the spectacular Rocky Mountains in the background. As there was still snow on the ground, looking through the lens at the two cars was a rare and impressive sight.

In Avon it was my turn to get behind the wheel of the Challenger R/T. I drove the R/T two years ago on the Concept Car drive and it was obvious that Buzz had substantially upgraded virtually every aspect of the car, bringing it up to as-new condition. The biggest change was ditching the automatic transmission for the 4-speed, now connected to a 3.73:1 rear end.

While Buzz takes great pride in his factory-correct 8-Track, the only music I was interested in was what was coming from under the shaker hood. Getting situated behind the wheel, the car felt tight, tighter than almost any other vintage musclecar I've driven. While the 1,500-mile drive up to Denver had acclimated me to the new Challenger, it in no way prepared me for my time behind the wheel of the '70 R/T Hemi. Where the new Challenger is totally competent in every measurable way, with heavily bolstered bucket seats, modern climate control and the Kicker audio system, it felt somewhat disconnected from the road. Yet its little annoyances, such as the seat belt arrangement, didn't bother us too much.

Such was not the case with the '70 R/T Hemi. With the windows down, my vision of heading west on I-70 was fulfilled as I could almost imagine the orange exterior turning to white as I was transported back in time to the summer of 1970 when the *Vanishing Point* film team first covered the exact same route. The best part of the run was through the Glenwood Springs Canyon, the elevated roadway, which was built long after the 19 members of director Richard C. Sarafian's crew headed west on US 6. Here, I was really able put the R/T through it paces! Coming off the gas in an original Hemi is an experience that every petrol head should experience once in life, surpassed only by gunning it through the tunnels approaching Glenwood Springs, all with the silver SRT8 in my rear view mirror.

Heading west on the flat stretch of I-70 between Glenwood Springs and Rifle, where Kowalski had his first encounter with the motorcycle cops, I put in a call to Buzz back in Reno, to tell him that driving his car was a truly singular driving experience. In Rifle, when we stopped for a mid-afternoon burger break at Sonic, served carhop-style by teenaged waitresses on roller skates, I had to be pried out of the car before heading to our last photo stop of the day, the ghost town of Cisco, Utah.





Here we struck photographic pay dirt. The climactic scene in *Vanishing Point*, set in Cisco, California, was actually filmed in Cisco, Utah, and sitting out in an open field, almost calling us, was a bulldozer. As the dirt was firm, we did several drive-bys, each car alone and both together. Using a slow shutter speed in the fading light, we were able to give the illusion of Kowalski crashing his Challenger through the barriers. It was especially rewarding for Holly, behind the wheel of the '70 R/T. (In reviewing *Vanishing Point* afterwards, I was able to determine that our bulldozer was actually just 100 yards due south of the position of the two Caterpillar D8s used in the film.) The other shots were taken of what remains of the Shell station clearly visible in the film.

With spectacular light fading we picked up some static shots in front of the remains of the Shell station. The rich light really enhanced the lines of both Challengers. But parked side-by-side, the '70 R/T was really dwarfed by its modern counterpart, necessitating in almost every shot that it be placed in the foreground, closest to the camera.



Day Two
Moab, Utah to West Wendover, Nevada
370 Miles

Day two turned out to be far more eventful than anticipated, thanks to snow in the mountains between Price, Utah, and Salt Lake City. But this didn't dampen the spirits of Salt Lake City's Mopar community as more than three dozen of them met us at 2 p.m. at Larry H. Miller Dodge in Sandy, including two who braved snow to drive their own '70 Challengers to the dealership. We were greeted by Steve Hinckley, a parts advisor at the dealership, while we waited for Buzz (flying up from Reno) to arrive at the dealership sometime after 3 p.m.

And with the help of Karl Krohn of Absolute Performance (**absoluteperformance.com**), who brought his supercharged 2006 Dodge Charger police car, done up in the livery of the Utah State Police, we were able to enlist the cooperation of the Sandy Police Department, who blocked off a busy street at rush hour. Thus we captured the first video of a new Challenger and a new Charger cop car in an O. J. Simpson-style low-speed chase.

Afterwards, we caravanned westward as a passenger in Steve's '69 4-speed Dodge Polara 2-door hardtop. Others making the drive included Mike McCoy in a purple '70 Dodge Challenger R/T Hemi, Joe Bond in a Sub Lime '70 Dodge Challenger 440 Six Pack, and John Bechard in a white '71 Plymouth Road Runner Hemi, all who braved near-freezing temperatures and snow showers. By the time we reached I-80 west, the skies cleared and we were able to get some spectacular shots bounded by the Great Salt Lake.



But as dusk approached and we were finishing up shooting for the day on I-80 with the Great Salt Lake in the background, we encountered a horrific one-car wreck that unfolded right before us when the rear axle apparently snapped on a Ford Explorer sending it cart wheeling six times before ending up in a ditch along the side of the road. It was at this point that it was so fortuitous that Buzz invited George on the trip. A former Oregon Highway Marshal, George immediately took command of the scene before help arrived.

Calmly, he called in to 911 where he was instructed on how to stop the bleeding and applied proper pressure. It was around 40 degrees and the driver, Jeremy Ulidarri, who had crawled from the overturned wreckage, had already lost a great deal of blood from a severe foot injury. He remained conscious as we all tried to settle him down and keep him warm with blankets. Even though we were in a relatively remote stretch of I-80 80 miles east of Wendover, the EMTs arrived within 15 minutes and fully stabilized the situation.

The Utah Highway Patrol called in to the University of Utah medical center for an airlift and closed down I-80 so that Jeremy could be evacuated. From the time of the accident to the point when the chopper departed the scene, less than an hour had elapsed. It was almost 11 p.m. by the time we arrived in West Wendover, dead tired from what turned out to be a very long, long day.

(In a post script to the accident, Buzz spoke with Jeremy the following Monday, just before he was released from the hospital, less than a week after being admitted. His leg was amputated mid-calf, but he shared how lucky he felt and thanked everyone for helping to save his life.)



Day Three
West Wendover, Nevada, to Las Vegas, Nevada
520 Miles



As much as we thought we had seen everything on Thursday, Friday proved to be an even bigger day, as at every turn we encountered one form of good fortune after another. This was going to be our longest day's drive on the trip, more than 500 miles through Ely, Tonopah, and Goldfield before our scheduled arrival in Las Vegas about 6 p.m.

We were deep in the heart of the Bonneville Salt Flats, home of numerous land speed records, so we backtracked to get a location shot of both Challengers next to the Bonneville exit sign on I-80, as director Sarafian mentioned he shot there in his DVD commentary. Next, we headed southwest on Alt US 93 with our first stop being Chuck and Bessie's Stage Stop; the gas station/ café/grocery store in Lages Junction where Alt US 93 rejoins US 93 reminded us of several locations from *Vanishing Point* -- specifically the Mobil station with the female attendant. There, we were welcomed with open arms by Ruth Radford. Because of the great distances between gas stations, and the way that Buzz' '70 Hemi guzzles dead dinosaurs, it's always a good idea to keep the tank topped off.

Finally we had an opportunity to finally put the pedal to the metal on the new Challenger at an, er, undisclosed test location. In spite of being more than 6,000 feet above sea level and bucking something of a head wind, we were able to push the envelope up to 160 mph.

Approaching Ely (pronounced E-lee) we saw a chopper landing at a small airstrip next to US 93. We stopped in and talked with pilot Scott Sinton of Sinton Helicopters to see if we could get him to buzz our two Challengers, *Vanishing Point*-style. And to our surprise he said yes, saying that he could hover over the cars for only 15 seconds, giving us a priceless photo and some video.

From Ely we headed west on US 6 towards Tonopah, which was another of the filming locations used in *Vanishing Point*. Behind the wheel of the R/T and with the vast expanse of the high desert unfolding before me, I really felt as if I was Kowalski, as George and I had the opportunity to savor the soundtrack provided by 426 cubic inches of classic Hemi power.

We thought that there would be an Extraterrestrial Highway sign marking the northern start of Nevada 375 in Warm Springs, as there is at the southern start point north of Ash Springs but we couldn't find it. Because we were so tight on time, we decided to press on to Tonopah, skirting the northern boundary of Area 51, where we had our most otherworldly encounter on our 1,500-mile journey.

And going in the opposite direction we passed, of all things, a covered wagon. It seems that Finisa Medrano was spreading wildflower seeds (**pullingforwildflowers.org**) in a one-woman effort to rewild the American West. (It dawned on me that we are probably on the opposite end of the ecological spectrum; while Finisa rewilds Idaho, Nevada, and California, we are consuming vast quantities of fossil fuels.)















We motored in to Goldfield which was the location of Super Soul's radio station in the movie. Goldfield is just a former shell of its boom-time self but there is a beauty in its weather-worn starkness. And again, good fortune shined down on us as Sergeant Scott Johnson of the Esmeralda County Sheriff's Office had to check out what our group of four strangers was doing in town. It turns out that Sergeant Johnson is a Mopar owner as well, a '70 Charger R/T, and recognized at first glance that we had motored into town in a 2008 Challenger. He indulged us with an impromptu photo shoot where the entire team was "arrested" in front of the Goldfield Hotel, which also served as the set of radio station KOW in the movie.

Now we were coming down the home stretch, approaching Las Vegas, instead of Cisco, California, where the Mopars of Las Vegas would be waiting for us (instead of the California Highway Patrol), on the parking deck of New York, New York. As we were leaving Goldfield about the time we originally expected to be in Las Vegas, we knew we needed to get back on the road if we were to arrive before the sun set. As Buzz was running 3.73 gears, we decided to up our speed in what would ultimately be a vain attempt to arrive in Las Vegas before sundown.

As we pulled on to the parking deck at New York, New York, we were greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of more than a dozen Mopar owners who waited an extra two hours to see us end the day's leg. It didn't take long before security took notice of our gathering and we were asked to leave. Thankfully, in the continuing spirit of the event, one of the Las Vegas Mopar owners, who brought a stunning yellow 'Cuda, works at The Orleans Hotel Casino and got us permission to move our party over there. At 10 p.m. we said our goodbyes, knowing that a spectacular adventure had come to a very successful conclusion.



More photos of both Challengers on their *Vanishing Point* trip are available at **automotivetraveler.com.**



Director Richard C. Sarafian's Commentary on the *Vanishing Point* DVD

- In the film, Kowalski meets his fate in Cisco, California, as shown on the map in the command center of the California Highway Patrol. The only problem with this is that the Cisco, California in the movie was in reality Cisco, Utah.

- Sarafian had a small crew, 19 in all, much like our own crew of five, that traveled up to 400 miles per day, to each day's location.

- According to director Sarafian in his director's comments on the *Vanishing Point* DVD, eight Challengers were used in the film. Only one was left intact at the end of filming.

- *Vanishing Point* had a $1.3 million budget. It went $80,000 over budget due to the addition of a full soundtrack album. Sarafian said that he lost profit points as a result, and thus he refers to the film as *Vanishing Points*.

- In its release in Communist countries, the film portrayed America as a decadent, drug-infested country.

- *Vanishing Point* was Cleavon Little's first significant film role; he came from Broadway and wasn't used to the fast pace of making a film with a small crew and miniscule budget. It was also John Amos' first film, albeit uncredited.

- Bike crashes early in the film were comprised of actual shots spliced with stock footage.

- Gene Hackman was the original choice by Sarafian to play Kowalski; Hackman then went on to play "Popeye" Doyle in *The French Connection*.

- Cary Lofton, who also did the stunt driving in *Bullitt*, set the standard for stunt driving. He recently died, and in the opinion of Sarafian, he was the best, and died the best.

- According to Sarafian's DVD commentary, he didn't try to direct a shot while it was happening, he let his people, especially the stunt drivers, do their thing. Nothing was storyboarded, Sarafian said that it was as if the film was written by a director; it was very improvisational.

Vanishing Point Vacation

Fancy a holiday in the USA? Thinking about duplicating Rich's drive? He suggests the best way to do it.

"First book your flight into Los Angeles. Round trip airfare should run you about $1000 off-season (British Airways, American) where you can rent a car with unlimited mileage (Hertz, Avis, Budget, National, Alamo). I suggest a ragtop; for July, 2008, you can rent a V6 Mustang convertible from Hertz for 10 days for just $42 per day. (To book your flight, car, and hotel I suggest **kayak.com**.) I must tell you that I never tire of returning a near-new, unlimited mileage rental car with 3,000 miles added to the odometer."

"I would suggest a minimum three-day trip to Denver, on Route 66, via Albuquerque, New Mexico. Day one going east will get you to Williams, Arizona, the gateway to the Grand Canyon. In Williams, I can suggest two lodges. If you like trains and railroads, stay at the Canyon Motel and RV Resort ($72, **thecanyonmotel.com/**) where you can overnight in a restored railway car. Or if you always wanted to visit a bordello, stay at the Red Garter Bed and Bakery ($127, **redgarter.com/**), which is not only a converted cathouse, but it's haunted as well."

"It's a straight shot on I-40 to Albuquerque but don't forget to stop in Winslow, Arizona where you'll find the corner immortalized in the Eagles song 'Take It Easy.' While there's dozen's of chain-style hotels in Albuquerque, to get the real Route 66 experience, without staying at a dive, I suggest the Monterey Non-Smoker's Motel ($70, **nonsmokersmotel.com/**) . To get an idea of just how good each of these three motels rate, check out their guest comments on **tripadvisor.com**"

"To get to Denver from Albuquerque, it's an easy seven-hour drive but you may want to stay over a night in Santa Fe, one of the most popular tourist destinations in the United States. In Denver, we stayed at the Best Western Southwest in Lakewood (**bestwestern.com**). I called the front desk directly and scored a room for $66 when all the search sites were showing $80."

"If you follow our route exactly, you'll have no trouble visiting the ghost town of Cisco, Utah. Cisco, the highlight of our trip, is just off of I-70 on your way into the outdoor adventure and 4WD Mecca of Moab, Utah where you can easily spend a day or two off-roading in a rental Jeep or Hummer. In Moab I can suggest, if you want the rustic, historical feel, the Apache Motel ($59, **apachehotel.net**) where John Wayne stayed when he filmed many of his John Ford westerns. But if you want to stay right in the middle of WHERE John Wayne filmed many of these classics, there's only one place, The Sorrel River Ranch ($329, **sorrelriverranch.com**) Moab's only auto club-rated four-diamond resort and the choice of most vehicle manufacturers when they host press launches in Moab. Looking out the window of your room at the red rock cut by the Colorado River, you'll think you're looking at a two-page spread from a classic Marlboro print ad."

"Utah is a Mormon state, where getting a drink can seem to take an act of God, so to overnight on your second day out from Denver, drive past the Bonneville Salt Flats and stay in West Wendover, Nevada. We stayed at the Wendover Nugget, ($80, **wendovernugget.com/**) a recently renovated hotel but were disappointed by the lack of broadband access. But the rooms were huge and the casino uncrowded."

"Finally there's Las Vegas, Sin City. Rather than make a suggestion on the famed strip, for a real retro feel, stay downtown and get the Fremont Street Experience and book your room through **vegasexperience.com/**. If the area looks familiar, it's probably because you remember the chase scene from the 1971 James Bond adventure, *Diamonds Are Forever*. You should have no trouble scoring a room, with a traditional Las Vegas feel, for less than $100."











