

THE GREATEST SHOW ON WHEELS

In the dusty Californian desert, a ghost town once favoured by Hollywood starlets is set for a second act – this time as a show-stopping carnival-themed attraction. Zoey Goto joins the circus



PHOTOGRAPHS:

MAGGIE SHANNON



seated under a giant disco ball at one of Vegas' hottest new restaurants, Superfrico. The dining room is a noisy temple of kitsch, complete with zebra-print banquettes and neon artworks that can only be described as "Lisa Frank psychedelia". Just as I'm about to lift a forkful of beef cheek and shaved truffle ravioli to my lips, it's almost knocked straight out of my hand by a pirouetting acrobat in a hot-pink wig. Sat across the booth, Ross Mollison, Superfrico's owner and founder, is talking about the enduring appeal of the circus.

"People will always be fascinated by the romance and nostalgia. It's that sense of community. No one ever said let's run away and join Morgan Stanley!" He laughs. Next comes my chocolate mousse dessert, served with a side of burlesque as a dancer playfully leaps onto a nearby table and starts to peel away layers, much to the whooping delight of the Vegas diners.

Ross, who goes by the title "Impresario Extraordinaire", isn't your typical circus ringmaster. But that's the role that this middle-aged Australian business maverick has taken on since starting Spiegelworld, a live entertainment company producing spicy adult circuses across the US, two

of which – Absinthe and Atomic Saloon Show – are currently starring nearby Superfrico on the Las Vegas Strip. Although famed for his madcap ideas – his first show as a producer in the US was the risqué *Puppetry of the Penis*, in which the performers made the most of their, ahem, assets – Spiegelworld's latest passion project still managed to raise eyebrows.

That's because, in early 2022, Mollison purchased Nipton, a tiny frontier town near the Nevada-California state line, hoping to transform it into a carnival-themed creative retreat for performers and circus fans alike – the world's first Circus Town. The finer details are still being workshopped but, much like the improvised theatre performances that have made Ross his fortune, he's confident that Circus Town will come together on the

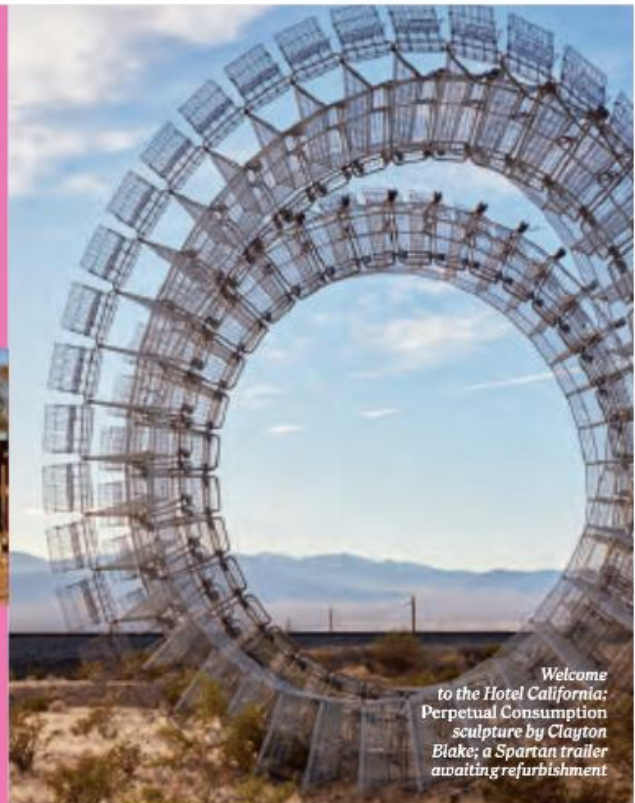


Opening page: Performers Reshma Meister, Sam Fishman, Chad Damiani, Bill O'Neill, Max Louis, Max Louis Baumgarten and Courtney Pauroso. From left: Performer at Spiegelworld's OPM show; Ski Lodge at The Cosmopolitan, Las Vegas; writer Zoey Goto and an alien at Superfrico; acrobats performing in OPM

night – or at least by the time it softens to the public this summer, with a grand opening scheduled for later in the year.

“We really had no intention of buying a ghost town,” Ross tells me. But the Mojave Desert landscape entices you to do weird and wonderful things, he says, adding that he fell head over heels in love with Nipton after visiting the outpost on a team-building excursion. Five years later, Ross spontaneously snapped up the one-time Gold Rush boom town for \$2.5 million.

“Having a business plan gives us way too much credit. We succeed through mismanagement,” Ross jokes as a contortionist works the room, bending her body into pretzel shapes and handing out helium balloons to guests. “Here’s



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what we do know: there will be performances and perhaps a trapeze. Guests could be dining with Nipton’s artists in residence. We’re also renovating some 70-year-old Spartan trailers, so you’ll be able to stay in a super luxurious version of a circus trailer. And then there’s the hotel – but this is not just any old hotel – I want it to be fun and different,” he booms theatrically, adding that he hopes it’ll be akin to a year-round Burning Man, complete with epic land art dotted throughout the 32-hectare plot.

It’s a high-dollar habit fixing up a tumbledown town, where 100-year-old buildings almost always come with leaky roofs. Ross estimates that, when all is said and done, he’ll have pumped at least \$20 million into his desert sanctuary. He’s keen to point out that this was never an investment opportunity but instead about creating a permanent base for his beloved troupe. “The town is the cornerstone of our circus company. In thousands of years, no matter where the shows are performed, everything will return back to Nipton.”

The following morning, I leave the neon symphony of Las Vegas and head an hour south to check out Nipton for myself, the casino hotels outside my window slowly melting into sage-scented desert. Tyres crunch in the sun-baked orange dirt as I pull over and disembark at my main destination. I take a stroll around the mythical town, mostly made up of a



Above: Courtney Pauroso, Bill O'Neill, Chad Damiani and Reshma Meister rehearsing their clown act; head clown Max Louis Baumgarten leads slapstick practice

handful of Old West buildings, including a rickety old schoolhouse and a disused diner with original scratched-leather banquette seats. It feels like the set of a rootin'-tootin' John Wayne movie.

Of the 19 residents who currently call Nipton home, the majority are miners who live seasonally in the onsite RV park. Today, however, there's also a giggle of clowns in town. I discover them when I ease open the ancient creaky door of the former trading post to find a rehearsal taking place for a forthcoming Spiegelworld production. But these aren't your typical red-nosed, curly wig jesters – instead, the six clean-cut performers in front of me sport vintage jumpers and stylishly sensible shoes, looking no different to your typical east London thirtysomething. They belong to a new wave of underground clown artists who prize artistic expression over gotcha gags. Director and head clown Max Louis Baumgarten, a mullet-sporting former

stand-up comedian, takes a pause from his slapstick practice to explain why he feels there's a renewed interest in the circus arts.

"Cirque du Soleil helped to make the circus culturally relevant for a new generation, and now Spiegelworld is appealing to an adult audience through edge and danger," he says above the whistle of a freight train barreling past the town. He tells me that he thinks clowning in particular is having a moment. "In LA, there's a fringe improvised clown scene. It draws on the old archetypes – Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton are



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● zippos.co.uk



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SHANGHAI CIRCUS WORLD, SHANGHAI
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● shcircusworld.com



RAMBO CIRCUS, INDIA
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● ramboircus.in

DESERT CIRCUS

excellent clowns in our canon – but it's more about the philosophy of the clown. Those wild and grotesque characters and their idiotic relationships with the audience."

Across the room, fellow clown Chad Damiani, a one-time member of the World Championship Wrestling world, straps on kneepads and a crash helmet, while comedian Courtney Pauroso warns that I may be sharing my guestroom at the Hotel California – the five-bedroom hotel next door, originally built in the early 1900s and currently being renovated – with a rather famous ghost tonight. "The last time I slept there, I stayed in Clara Bow's favourite room," she says, referring to the silent film star, widely considered Hollywood's first "it girl". Bow frequented Nipton in the Roaring 20s, when it was briefly a fashionable getaway for Hollywood upper crust. "I feel like Clara sent me a very strange and vivid dream," she recalls. After bidding goodbye to the clowns, I check in and bed down for a (thankfully undisturbed) night's sleep.

At daybreak the next morning, outside his mobile home, I bump into Jim Eslinger, the self-proclaimed mayor of Nipton. The former long-haul truck



From left: Jim Eslinger, the self-proclaimed mayor of Nipton, and Chad Damiani

"The spirit of the Mojave Desert lets you know what you can and cannot do here"

driver retired to Nipton 14 years ago, and "kind of like the song *Hotel California*, I checked in and didn't leave". He's holding a walking stick clad in scaly rattlesnake skin made from his former pet snake – which, Jim tells me, he ate after the reptile passed, sautéed respectfully in butter and garlic.

When Spiegelworld first rolled into town, Jim admits that he was initially baffled. But the troupe soon began sprucing the place up, removing 270 tonnes of garbage. "Sure, I don't want it to turn into Disneyland, but I don't feel that's really a risk. The spirit of the Mojave Desert lets you know what you can and cannot do," he says.

I finally understand why Mollison is placing his bets on this old cowboy town. Because in this little speck of desert, where freedom rings through its historic roads, he finally found a place where the circus doesn't have to leave town.

● spiegelworld.com/circustown

✈ FLY TO LAS VEGAS

