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King of Ink looks to make Vegas 'Mecca' of tattooing



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Vegas is one of the few places in the world where you will be accepted no matter who you are. The young and the old, the short and the tall, the skinny and the fat, the minority or the majority are all welcome and there is a major attraction for all of those types of people to do.

Included in that are the tattooed. And we're not talking about the hidden quarter-sized tattoo on your back. No, in Vegas it is perfectly acceptable to sport a neck tattoo while wearing a business suit – we don't judge.

Being free to express yourself is what makes the Vegas experience so unique and why tattoo artists have flocked to Las Vegas. And in Vegas, there is no bigger name in tattooing than Mario Barth.

The tattoo artist to the stars has two shops in town and recently hosted The Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth at [Mandalay Bay](#), which brings hundreds of tattoo artists from around the world to Vegas and set the Guinness World Record for the largest tattoo show last year.

"We want to make it so it becomes the industry-driven trade show," said Barth. "There's about 70 million people with tattoos and this is a big market for them where people can come check out the fashion, meet the people, meet the designers, get tattooed, see everything around it.

"There's so much in the lifestyle now. It just broke out from the underground into the mainstream ... We're right there where Harley Davidson was 25 years ago."

Barth predicts that Las Vegas will become the capital of tattooing and he is at the forefront of making it happen. He currently operates Starlight Tattoo inside Mandalay Bay and [King Ink](#), part lounge and part tattoo studio, at the Mirage. Aside from working out of Vegas about 10 days a month, he has also tattooed Snoop Dogg, Sylvester Stallone and Usher and currently has a two-year waiting list to get inked by him.

Not too bad for a guy who, in his home country of Austria, started tattooing at the ripe old age of 12 years old, while the practice was illegal.

"When I started it was all the underground, in other words, you couldn't get a magazine, you couldn't get the machines, you couldn't get the colors, you couldn't get anything," Barth said. "So you had to learn everything from scratch. You had to make your machine, you're working by hand, solid needles to it.

"It was illegal so you couldn't go anywhere. It wasn't like people would embrace you to come in, they would cross the street in front of you because you had a tattoo. You wanted to be an outcast, that's what I did."

"Now it's crazy to go up and down the Las Vegas Strip and see my picture on that marquee. It's just insane to come up from the basement to Las Vegas and from a different country in a different language in a business which shouldn't be here. The business shouldn't be that big, it's pretty interesting."



Photo by Michael Sterling Eaton: Mario Barth, center, has two tattoo shops in Las Vegas and runs The Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth, but he's still not done with Sin City.

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No one could have expected tattooing to take off as much as it has in the last 30 years. American society has gone from nearly no one having tattoos, except for maybe your grandfather who picked one up while he was in the military, to 36 percent of Americans ages 18-29 having at least one, according to the American Academy of Dermatology.

Photo by Michael Sterling Eaton

With the explosion in popularity, Barth has some ideas on what the future holds for tattoos.

“I think Vegas is very, very impulsive, very fast-paced in tattooing and I think it’s going to become the Mecca of tattooing,” Barth said. “There’s 150 tattoo shops in town, many of them are very, very great artists.

“It’s a good industry here. It has easily the capability of battling L.A. right now, which is one of the biggest Meccas in tattooing.”

Unlike most things in Vegas, the tattoo you get here actually does leave Vegas. But, so far, that hasn’t stopped too many people from stopping by one of Barth’s studios. The artists who work out of those shops are chosen by Barth himself and often fill up all available time slots daily. With Barth in such a high demand, it’s only logical to think there may be more to come from the King of Ink.

“Vegas stole my heart,” Barth said. “There’s a couple projects in the works right now. Hopefully one is going to happen by the end of this year and we’ll see what the next one says. So, I think there’s another couple coming within the next year.”