

# THE MORNING CALL (Lehigh Valley, PA)

## Asians at Sands Bethlehem casino 'ride bus to live'

**Every day, hundreds of Asians sell their Sands Bethlehem casino free-play cards moments after stepping off the bus from New York — a phenomenon that has brought cultural change to the Valley.**

The endless hum of whirling slot machines washes over the food court at the Sands casino in Bethlehem, as Yuli Cui of Flushing, N.Y., reads a Chinese newspaper.

Huddled at a table with her friends, Cui, 50, plucks a tangerine from the bagged lunch she brought from home. She's been to the casino hundreds of times over the past three years and, like almost every other time, she's doing her best to kill five hours until her bus returns.

Sometimes she walks the scenic path through south Bethlehem or visits the bookshop at [Lehigh University](#), and sometimes she window-shops at the Sands outlet. But one thing she almost never does is gamble.

Instead, she and her husband sell the \$45 free-play cards the casino gives them for making the 100-mile bus trip, and they spend the rest of the day absorbing what the Christmas City has to offer until they return home.

For them, riding the casino bus is a job — the only one they can find.

"We can sell our cards for about \$1,200 a month," Cui said in Mandarin through an interpreter. "I cannot find a job in Flushing. This is our only income. We come every day. Every day."

Cui is among thousands of bus riders who flood into the Sands on more than 50 buses a day from heavily Asian-populated New York City neighborhoods in Flushing, Chinatown and Brooklyn. Lured by the best casino deal in the region — \$45 in free slot play for the price of a \$15 bus ticket — hundreds sell their casino cards every day on the underground market moments after stepping off the bus. Many are low-income and some are even homeless, revealing that for some, riding the bus to the Sands is not only a way of life but a way to live.

Others are recently emigrated senior citizens who followed their children to America and find the green spaces surrounding Bethlehem's waterways, the canal path and even Lehigh University's campus a daily respite from their busy concrete neighborhoods in New York.

Some simply like to gamble, and the deal the Sands is offering is better — and closer — than what they can get at casinos in New Jersey or Connecticut.

A few are there to turn the casino odds in their favor. They buy the cards, sometimes dozens a day, at a \$5 discount from people like Cui, in the hope of riding back home with a wallet full of winnings.

The steady flow of buses has brought with it a cultural change of sorts on both sides of the route. Back in New York, the urban neighborhoods whose populations are dominated by Asian immigrants have quickly become casino bus towns, where downtown streets are clogged by idling tour buses boarding people en route to Atlantic City, Connecticut and, most frequently, Bethlehem.

On the Bethlehem side of the route, a gentle culture shift has begun as thousands of Asian visitors find the city each day by casino bus, many of them fanning out across the South Side to while away the hours until they return.

It's a phenomenon that's happened quickly, since the Sands casino opened in 2009, and one that becomes more noticeable by the day. It's evident in a handmade shelter with its intricately laid stone path to the Lehigh River, built, according to city police, by Asian bus riders.

It's evident in the group of men who walk a mile from the casino each day to perform tai chi in the park next to the Steelworkers Memorial.

So evident that south Bethlehem's Touchstone Theatre's latest project is "Journey: Dream of the Red Pavilion" — a stage performance portraying how the surge of Asian visitors to Bethlehem is changing the community.

And among the most recent additions to the Lehigh University curriculum is a credited class that partners with Touchstone to follow the emerging trend.

The shift is perhaps most evident in the workforce at the Sands, where more than 425 Chinese-speaking workers have been hired to help welcome a new population of visitors who speak primarily Mandarin, Cantonese or Fujian dialects.

"It's very noticeable on the South Side, and quite interesting, but in a lot of ways it's also rather hidden," said Dongning Wang, a Lehigh adjunct professor teaching a "Journey from the East" class related to the Touchstone production. "Eventually, if it is to continue, they're going to need churches and groceries and maybe even a school. I'll be interested to see if that transition is ever made."

So much change brought on by the pursuit of a tiny plastic card loaded with free casino money.

### **Coveted seats**

The buses pour in seven days a week from neighborhoods in Chinatown and Brooklyn, but the flow out of Flushing, in Queens, has become a deluge.

The [2010 Census](#) says its population was 44 percent Asian, but in the bustling downtown business district where the buses depart, it's not uncommon for a visitor to walk for blocks without seeing a non-Asian face.

The smell of Chinese and Korean cuisine wafts across Main Street, as bumper-to-bumper traffic tries to push through the crowds of people hurrying into crosswalks from bulging sidewalks. Rows of shops with names printed in Chinese are broken by a few familiar chains such as Burger King and [McDonald's](#).

A block from Main is the Fay Da Bakery. During the day, the spacious, nondescript shop has some of the tastiest pastries and cakes in the downtown, but at night it becomes the unofficial outlet for casino trips to the Sands, organized by bus companies with such names as Golden Mega, Lucky 9 and Baccarat 88.

There's no ticket booth, no Internet presence and no bakery employees who have anything to do with filling the buses.

But that's where bus hosts like "Bobby" sit and sip their coffee for the hour before each motor coach is ready to depart. Bobby works entirely through word of mouth, and on this February day his cellphone rings almost constantly. In between calls, he's approached by people wanting a seat on the 7 p.m. trip. The bus is full, he tells them in Mandarin, but they can stand by and hope someone won't show up or will give up their seat for the right price.

That's the position Stephen Petho, 66, of the Bronx is in on this chilly night in January. The disabled former construction worker is one of the few non-Asians catching the Sands bus to Bethlehem. He's been making the Bethlehem run for more than a year and he's a nightly regular, but his inflamed tonsils kept him from his regular seat the previous week. Still, Bobby had to keep every seat filled, so now Petho is back on the waiting list.

Once he gets back on the bus, Petho will be able to reclaim his regular seat, so long as he rides, and tips, every day. That's because on every return trip back to Flushing, Bobby — or one of the dozen other bus hosts organizing daily Golden Mega Enterprise bus trips from Flushing to the Sands — will walk the center aisle and collect his \$5 tip.

Moments later, he'll walk through again and sell tickets for the next day.

"If you don't tip, forget about getting a ticket for the next day," Petho said. "He'll say 'No. No. VIPs coming tomorrow.' Kind of funny, actually. You ride every day and you tip every time or you don't get a ticket."

As the 7 p.m. bus pulls up 40 minutes late, the 63 people who have taken up every seat and piece of floor space in the Fay Da excitedly surge toward the door to get on the bus.

Petho and a handful of others are left behind without tickets. Maybe they can find a seat on one of the four other Sands buses that will leave by 11 p.m., Bobby tells them.

"I doubt it. The 8 p.m. bus is already full," Petho says. "Maybe I'll try tomorrow."

By the time the bus arrives in Bethlehem after 9 p.m., Petho has been shut out of three consecutive full buses back in Flushing. He gives up and goes home.

That's never a problem for Dongbi Jin, a 60-year-old immigrant from the Fujian province of China. Wearing a plaid shirt, a sideways Yankees cap and a smile that appears to touch both ears, he rides the bus twice a day. At 8:15 a.m., he catches the first of seven morning Golden Mega buses that leave from a block away, in front of the Su Jung Sauna and Massage parlor. Jin plays his \$45 — he said he never sells it — and his bus returns to Flushing about 5:15 p.m.

That gives him just enough time to grab dinner and get to Fay Da for the 7 p.m. bus back to the Sands. Another \$45 free-play card and another return trip to Flushing around 4 a.m.

"I like to play," he said in a Fujian dialect. "Maybe, too much."

At 8:15 a.m., the cycle begins again for Jin.

It's not a cycle that New York Assemblyman Ron Kim, whose district includes downtown Flushing, is comfortable with, but it's one he acknowledges he has little power to change. The free-play giveaway by the casinos and the high-demand ticket system promoted by the bus companies surely encourage gambling abuse that seems to take advantage of the elderly and low-income, said Kim's chief of staff, Yuh-Line Niou. But stopping it could make matters worse.

A spectacular vantage point from Kim's 10th-floor downtown office includes a bird's-eye view of the more than 50 casino buses that leave Flushing every day. Kim has urged local police to crack down on idling buses that pollute the air and clog streets, and he's seeking legislation that would give tax breaks to local business owners willing to provide space for senior citizens to socialize.

But in the end, there's only so much he can do.

"We're seeing people spend their whole day riding the bus. A part of you knows it's not acceptable and a bit predatory," Niou said. "It's sad that people are selling these vouchers to survive. We've got elderly men paying \$350 to stay in a tiny apartment with seven other elderly men, and this is how they pay that rent. We're not going to do something that cuts off their only income."

Kwang S. Kim, president of the Korean Community Center, still tries. He sees 20 to 30 community center members a year — most of them elderly — who are addicted to riding the casino bus. Many are homeless men who prefer spending their time on the buses than going to a shelter. For some, their immigration status and lack of English make it difficult to find work.

So they ride every day.

"Some don't like the shelter. As soon as they enter the casino, it's a status change. They're big shots for a little while," Kwang Kim said. "Some like it, but for others, it's a sad, vicious cycle that they can't seem to break. They're riding the bus to live, and living to ride the bus."

Those are the people Kwang Kim tries to help with rental assistance grants, job training and social programs at the community center 2 miles from downtown Flushing.

But to get those benefits, they have to agree to stop riding the buses.

"Once an immigrant gets off track, it's not easy to get back on. Once they start riding the buses, it's hard for them to stop," Kwang Kim said. "We try to help them. I'm sorry to say, most go back."

Dr. Timothy Fong, director of UCLA's gambling studies program, said little study has been done on gambling among Asians, but his surveys show that it's more prevalent than in the general population. His most recent survey showed that even though Asians make up less than 14 percent of California's total population, they account for more than 30 percent of the patrons in the state's casinos.

"It would take a lot more study for us to understand why, but it appears that it's just more culturally acceptable," Fong said. "It's not uncommon to see entire families of Asians gambling together. You don't see that in other cultures."

### **Cultural clash**

Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem is arguably Pennsylvania's most successful gambling hall. The \$800 million casino is the only one in the state with a hotel, an outlet mall and a concert venue. Collectively, they attract more than 8 million visitors a year.

Only Parx Casino, benefiting from a much larger population zone outside Philadelphia, brings in more gambling revenue. But there is one place where the Sands is unmatched: at the tables.

Games like blackjack, craps and roulette helped the Sands rake in \$165 million last year — or nearly 50 percent more than second-place Parx pulled in at the tables. And the Sands can credit that dominance to all those buses streaming in from the east.

In Bethlehem, a city with an Asian population of 2.9 percent, roughly 50 percent of all the players at the casino's 194 tables are believed to be of Asian descent, most of them bus riders arriving daily, said Robert DeSalvio, who resigned this month as Sands president to take a casino job in Boston.

DeSalvio has said the casino welcomes the diverse player makeup and is proud of the diversity in its workforce.

Fully 20 percent of the Sands' more than 2,100-member workforce is of Asian descent, more than doubling since 2009, according to the casino's annual diversity report filed with the

Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board. The Sands has the highest number of Asian workers of any casino in Pennsylvania, and virtually all of them are fluent in Mandarin — a necessity to provide good customer service to the casino's wide-ranging clientele, DeSalvio said.

All those Chinese-speaking workers help the casino welcome the visitors on the gaming floor, but out in the city, not everyone is so accommodating.

Nestled among the trees along the north side of the Lehigh River is the hand-built shelter with a prime view of the [Bethlehem Steel](#) blast furnaces and enough bench seating for 10 people. Built with tree branches, wood and a canvas tarp for cover, it sits just 30 feet from the canal path used by joggers and bikers, and yet it's completely out of view behind a thick patch of trees.

With its expertly laid floor made from river stones embedded in the dirt, and bag of rice hanging from a branch, it has a distinctly Asian style. It was clearly built by someone with time to be meticulous in constructing a winding stone path that leads to the river.

Bethlehem police say it was built by Sands casino bus riders who, in good weather, use the shelter daily to relax until their buses return to New York.

It's a physical sign of the Asian culture that quite literally rolls into Bethlehem each day.

But with that arrival comes a double-edged sword that often accompanies such change. On one side is a casino and city embracing a new population, but on the other is a veneer of hostility from some not as welcoming.

On Facebook and [Twitter](#), some complain about Asian bus riders napping along the greenway, sleeping on top of picnic tables or resting atop pieces of cardboard and newspaper, often with their shoes placed neatly to the side.

A photo of people resting beneath the Fourth Street bridge was posted on Twitter last July with this comment: "If these were 18-year-old kids loitering on the #Bethlehem greenway would the police still look the other way?"

Another Twitter user, Michele Ryder of south Bethlehem, wrote: "So many comments about how 'sad' this thing is with the people on the Sands buses. What about how sad what they are doing to Bethlehem is? I mean really. Being poor does not give you a free pass to ... litter, loiter, and trespass."

New Bethany Ministries Executive Director Diane Elliott said she's noticed an increase in non-English-speaking Asian clients at New Bethany's South Side shelter and soup kitchen, but she didn't realize they were likely Sands casino bus riders.

Ryder said she believes the Sands has a "social obligation" to deal with the bus visitors.

"I feel like their solution, instead of dealing with these people, is to just get them off their property," she said. "They are part of the problem with busing people in who are trying to make a couple of bucks off their vouchers."

For this story, Sands officials declined all comment, saying the company does not discuss internal company business.

Ryder said she's concerned about loitering and littering. She said she's seen visitors leaving newspapers, remnants of their lunches and bottles behind.

"When you are in a big group and there are six people sprawled out and napping on benches, that shows they have no care that they are hogging up the resources that others may want to also use," Ryder said. "It's a quality-of-life issue that I think residents don't want to have to deal with."

Bethlehem police officials said any calls involving the Asian visitors have been minor — mostly complaints about loitering in public areas and littering.

Police have responded to some calls from perplexed homeowners who found strangers in their garden taking a handful of vegetables or others lounging on porch chairs. In all of those cases, police said they believe the visitors were unaware they were on private property and no criminal charges were filed.

Chief Mark DiLuzio said some bus riders banned from the casino have been cited for defiant trespass, but he knows of no other criminal cases.

"When police ask them to move along, we've never had an issue," he said. "It's been very, very minor stuff."

DiLuzio said police also investigated a complaint about some of the visitors taking fish and frogs out of the canal. Police are convinced wildlife was taken from the canal, but no criminal charges were filed.

The complaints are not limited to the South Side.

Just across the Minsi Trail Bridge, new employees at the Bottom Dollar grocery store are taught a single phrase in Mandarin, "limit of two." And the limit on certain sale items is sometimes listed in English and Chinese, according to a grocery supervisor, who said it's an effort to keep bus riders from trying to buy dozens of sale items like 78-cent eggs.

"We're happy to serve anyone, but they try to use the language barrier to take advantage of our sales," said Lisa, a supervisor at the grocery store a half-mile from the casino who declined to give her last name. "When I have to call the manager to keep a brawl from happening because I won't let someone take 12 cartons of eggs, that's a problem."

But others on the South Side have grown accustomed, even fond, of seeing their visitors each day.

Roger Hudak rather likes the culture shift he's seeing in his beloved south Bethlehem. Yes, the longtime chairman of the South Side Task Force has heard about visitors wandering through the city, picking food from gardens and plucking wildlife from the canal.

But he's seen this kind of migration before — and the discomfort that comes with it — and he believes it is what's kept Bethlehem vibrant.

"In the '30s and '40s, immigrants from Eastern Europe came to work at Bethlehem Steel, and Hispanics from Puerto Rico followed in the 1950s," Hudak said. "And now look at us 80 years later. The South Side is full of ethnic churches, social clubs and bars. It's what makes it such a great place to be. I look forward to a chance to add to that diversity."

No one expects the Sands to have the impact of Bethlehem Steel, which once employed 30,000 people in Bethlehem — more than 10 times the number working at the Sands. But quietly, a more subtle change is happening. On Hudak's block along Fifth Street, in the shadow of the casino entrance, three homes once owned by steelworkers' families are now owned by Asian casino dealers, including two who have brought their families from New York, Hudak said.

"The shift is quite noticeable since the casino opened," Mayor Robert Donchez said. "We're talking about people who seem to love our city and want to buy homes here. Why wouldn't we welcome that?"

Unlike Bethlehem Steel, which dominated the Lehigh Valley economy for a century, the impact of the Sands is far more tenuous. There's no reason to believe the casino won't be a South Side fixture for generations to come. However, the promotion that feeds that stream of buses from New York could end any time.

If that little plastic card worth \$45 in casino money disappears, so too, presumably, would the need to keep hiring such a high number of Chinese-speaking workers.

"Then I hope they keep doing it," Hudak said. "No area is better equipped to handle the new immigration than we are. Keep it coming."

At least a few times each week, a group of men perform tai chi at the plaza surrounding the Steelworkers Memorial. On a recent sunny day, the group of four men gathered in the plaza, reading newspapers and listening to a radio someone had brought along.

One man, who only identified himself as Huang, drew the smiles of passing motorists as he moved to a nearby traffic berm near West Second and Northampton streets. As some motorists slowed to watch him, Huang vigorously stretched his arms and touched his toes.

Huang, who said he only spoke "a little" English, smiled as he talked about tai chi, saying he and his friends gathered for fresh air and exercise.

After a few minutes, the group waved goodbye and began the walk back to the casino.

Inside the casino were people like Nuiqiang Zhou, a 53-year-old Flushing bus driver who immigrated to New York in 2008 but only found the Sands casino bus in January. He catches the Lucky 9 Enterprises bus behind the Hong Kong Supermarket in the morning and does his best to convert the \$45 free-play card into cash that he can use at the blackjack tables.

The free money can only be downloaded in slot machines. The cards are programmed so that the player must make at least \$45 worth of slot-machine wagers before he can cash out whatever is left. Statistically, the Sands' slot machines give an average payback of 90 percent, meaning a typical day would leave Zhou with about \$40 to play blackjack.

"I play until it's gone or maybe I win some money. Usually, I lose," Zhou said through an interpreter. "Almost everyone else [on the bus] sells their card, but I can pay my bills. I play my card."

Selling that card has become a cottage industry at the Sands, where the bus center, food court, slot-machine seats and even South Side walking path are thick with bus riders like Cui and Zhou who are killing time after they've sold their card or lost its proceeds.

State Gaming Control Board attorneys say that underground-market card trade is not illegal, board spokesman Richard McGarvey said.

"It's part of promotions," he said. "We look at it as a private deal between the casinos and the bus companies. What they allow to be done with those cards is their business."

Sands officials would not comment specifically on its deals with the bus companies.

The buses begin rolling into the Sands around 10 a.m., arriving every few minutes into the mid-afternoon, before a nighttime wave begins arriving around 9 p.m.

Moments after the first morning bus has arrived, the 150-seat, concrete-block, outdoor bus center is already filling up with people who never go into the casino.

Each is given their free-play card as they step off the bus, but some discreetly pass their card to a regular buyer within a few paces of the bus. For those who don't have a regular buyer, they can find one standing just inside the doors, behind the Molten Lounge, or near the Sic Bo table games that routinely stand four deep with Asian players.

"It's easy to sell your card. Every bus has one or two buyers," said a man calling himself only Mr. Ni, a 60-year-old former farmer who immigrated from Fujian province in 2008. Ni came to America to be with his son but lives in a tiny Chinatown apartment with several other men.

"My son works, but I can't find a job. I come seven days a week," Ni said, noting that selling the card helps him pay the bills.

Not every bus rider is in Ni's and Cui's position.

Golden Mega operator Phillip Chan said he's careful that his buses have enough real players. Chan has his hosts make sure at least half the riders have personalized Sands player cards, and he does his best to make certain that at least a handful of riders are known to spend a lot — those VIPs Bobby was talking about.

"The seats are very hot, but we make sure there are enough real players," Chan said. "If 59 [out of 63] people don't play, we have a problem. We have to keep a certain rating for the casino to keep us."

Ernest Innocent of Flushing probably helps raise that rating. Innocent said he is a 57-year-old former stockbroker who made it off the 45th floor of [One World Trade Center](#) just before it collapsed during the Sept. 11 attacks. But he hasn't been able to escape diabetes and heart disease. His medical problems forced him to give up his hectic job in 2007, and he's been riding the casino bus since 2009.

Almost daily he boards a bus, sometimes to Atlantic City or Foxwoods in Connecticut, but most days to the Sands. He converts his free-play card to whatever money it will yield and heads straight to the craps tables, where he's likely to add his own cash to the mix. He still has the suits he wore to the trading floor, so he wears one to the Sands every day.

But he's quick to point out that he feels fortunate compared to most of the people on his daily bus. He knows that whether he wins or loses, he'll get back on the bus in five hours and return to his wife, Barbara, and home.

"I just come to forget the pain in my leg for awhile, but most of these people are caught in a vicious cycle. They'll spend five days saving up free-play money and then lose it in an hour. It's sad," he said, subtly pointing to a man a few seats away at the Sands bus center. "That guy was crying, 'I lost everything in my pocket.' I feel terrible for him."

Even as he shakes his head, his phone rings, reminding him how lucky he is.

"Did you forget what today is?" his wife of 17 years says through the phone. "It's the anniversary of our first kiss. How could you forget?"

"Oops," Innocent says sheepishly. "I'll make it up to you later."

Chenghua Zheng will never be the kind of rider Innocent has to feel terrible for. Standing on the second floor of the Outlets at Sands Bethlehem mall, the 71-year-old former businessman from Hunan province reads a Chinese-language newspaper and sports a wide smile as he explains why he makes the two-hour bus ride six days a week. He followed his restaurant-owner son to Flushing in 2011, but he's no big fan of gambling and he doesn't need the money.

He just likes Bethlehem.

"The environment is clean, there isn't a lot of pollution and people are polite," he said in a Fujian dialect. "[In Flushing,] I have nothing to do all day."

So, he comes to Bethlehem to breathe the fresh air, talk with friends and sell his card to someone like Nian Zheng, a 60-year-old Manhattan businessman who gets someone else to run the restaurant he owns because he spends most days at the Sands.

On a cold day in January, Nian Zheng is doing leg lifts on the Sands parking-lot barriers as he waits to board the Baccarat 88 bus back to Chinatown. He enjoys gambling and always plays his free card. Some days he'll buy a few cards from other people, but occasionally he'll spend as much as \$1,000 buying 25 cards, he said.

"It's fun inside," he said in Mandarin, as he rushed for his departing bus. "You should go inside."

As he's joking about buying cards, a woman calling herself Mrs. Lin, standing a few paces away, mistakenly believes Zheng's acquaintances are in the market to sell their cards.

"How many do you have? Two?" Lin says in Mandarin as she begins to peel four \$20s from the wad she pulled from her pocket. "I'll pay cash."

### **Underground market**

That underground card-selling system happens primarily on the buses from Asian communities. With almost every other bus coming from places like Kutztown or the [Port Authority](#) in New York, when the riders step off, a Sands worker swipes their personal player's card through a machine that loads their free money.

If players don't have a player's card registered with the Sands, they're given a voucher they must take to the desk, where they get a player's card with their name on it that is loaded with free-play money. The personal cards require a personal identification number to use. It not only allows the Sands to track the player's bus-riding habits, but it prevents the cards from being bought *en masse*, because the buyer wanting 25 cards would also need 25 PINs — a fatal inconvenience.

Only with the Asian buses do Sands workers simply hand out a stack of identically marked cards loaded with money. No names, no PIN and no identification necessary.

"They could stop the card-selling trade overnight if they wanted," said Ron, an Allentown man who declined to give his last name who used to buy as many as 30 cards a day. "They look the other way for the Asian buses. They've sold their souls for the few big baccarat players that come in on those buses."

When asked why its policy for Asian buses is different, Sands officials reiterated that the casino does not discuss internal company business.

The math behind those little plastic cards makes it clear why there's such a market for them.

For a seller trying to make a few bucks, it's a chance to get paid to ride the bus. Each ticket is \$15, and to ride the bus consistently, another \$5 must be invested to tip the bus host. But the ticket can easily be sold for \$40. That's a profit of \$20.

That may not sound like much for spending more than eight hours riding a bus and walking around Bethlehem, but it's tax-free and consistent. For a family like the Cuis, who can get two or three people on the bus, it might even be enough to pay the rent.

For the buyer, it's a chance to defy the old adage that the odds are always with the house. By getting \$45 in casino play for \$40, the buyer is essentially playing at an 11 percent discount. The slot machines at the Sands, and most Pennsylvania casinos, return roughly 90 percent of the player's money — a 10 percent house edge.

That means the underground discounted cards completely eliminate the house advantage on the standard slot machine. A player who pays \$1,000 for cards gets \$1,125 in slot-machine play. In that case, statistically he can expect a return of \$1,012.50 — a \$12.50 profit for his troubles. Not exactly a lucrative living, but for people who like to gamble, they're able to do it free, with money left over for lunch. And it gives them plenty of chances to hit that big, life-changing jackpot.

But that's not where the real money can be made, because there's one type of slot machine where the casino edge is much smaller than 10 percent. Poker machines, though considered slot machines and thus eligible for free-play card use, follow the standard rules of poker and come with the standard odds. A skilled poker player making all the right moves can cut the house odds from 10 percent to less than 2 percent.

But if that player has an 11 percent discount with the free-play cards, all of a sudden he has a 9 percent advantage. Now, the same buyer with \$1,125 in free-play cards, for which he paid only \$1,000, can expect to walk out of the casino with \$1,102.50 — a \$102.50 profit.

Ron said he usually did better than that.

"You're eliminating the house edge, plain and simple," said Ron, a self-proclaimed compulsive gambler who played poker machines to convert his cards into cash. "I was buying about \$1,500 worth of cards a day, and making an average of \$150 a day, but I wouldn't call it easy money. It was actually a lot of work."

Others play the free cards just enough to cash out and take the money to the table games, where a skilled player can cut the house advantage to less than 1 percent. Again, this allows the person to play free and maybe even make a few bucks.

Michael Shackleford, a mathematician who helps manufacturers set the odds for their slot machines, said the effort to beat the system is nothing new.

"Las Vegas is full of people sponging off the promotions," said Shackleford, whose alter ego, the "Wizard of Odds," runs a highly respected website on the cold, calculated math behind casino gambling. "I'm not at all surprised that it's being done in Bethlehem, too. A smart casino will consider it the price of doing business. It's all part of the game."

Read more: <http://www.mcall.com/news/local/bethlehem/mc-sands-bethlehem-asian-bus-20140329,0,846212.story#ixzz2xUQhsagp>

Follow us: [@mcall on Twitter](#) | [mcall.lv on Facebook](#)