

# THE MORNING CALL (Lehigh Valley, PA)

## Sands Bethlehem casino bus-hoppers beat odds using free money

By [Matt Assad](#), Of The Morning Call

March 31, 2014

It's 7 a.m. at the Sands casino bus center in south Bethlehem, and Malik Tahir is slumped across a chair when a security guard nudges him awake. There's no sleeping in the bus center, the guard tells him.

Then, Tahir says, the guard matter-of-factly tells him he's no longer welcome on the casino buses that come to the Sands daily. They'll be watching for him, and if he comes back, he'll be arrested for trespassing.

As the guard quietly walks away, she probably doesn't realize that she has just extinguished a way of life for Tahir, 56, a homeless bus rider who splits his time between Bethlehem and [New York City](#).

"I wasn't doing anything wrong. Why would they do that to me?" Tahir says, as he walks along a street in Manhattan. "It's cold ... and I'm carrying all my clothes in a bag. I'm a bum to them. I'm not an addicted gambler. I'm just trying to stay alive."

For this story, Sands officials declined all comment.

Until that day last September, Tahir had been among those who spend their days hopping from casino bus to casino bus, collecting the free-play cards that come with the ride and hoping to parlay them into a wallet full of cash.

Some are unemployed and looking to kill time, make a few bucks and feed their passion for gambling. Others, like Tahir, are homeless and desperate, living for the routine and relying on it to feed their basic needs.

Tahir said he has spent the past three years riding much of the day, collecting the cards and sleeping on the buses or occasionally in the bus shelter. Usually, he'd sleep in the Sands bus center when other people were there, making it plausible that he was simply napping before his return bus arrived.

But on that morning, he picked the wrong time to fall asleep. The center had cleared out and he was there alone, with no bus leaving for hours.

Tahir said he emigrated from Pakistan in 1985 and operated clothing stores in Colorado and Maryland until a failed marriage and the recession left him driving a limousine and delivering pizzas to make ends meet.

"That's when someone told me, 'If you are broke with time on your hands, ride the casino bus,' " Tahir said. "At least there's a few bucks there, they said. I wish I never started."

Tahir was among thousands of people who ride the casino bus to the Sands to collect the free slot-machine money that comes with the bus ticket. Some are day-trippers looking for an occasional afternoon at the casino. Many are patrons coming from heavily Asian-populated New York City neighborhoods in Flushing, Chinatown and Brooklyn, who use the daily bus trips to make money by selling the free-play card that comes with each bus ride.

But some like Tahir are based in the Lehigh Valley, where they take that money-making opportunity to an extreme. They hop from bus to bus, collecting free casino money along the way, sometimes going days or even weeks on the road. For them, chasing the casino card is a way of life.

Pennsylvania casinos collectively pay about \$4 million a year to the state Gaming Control Board to prevent and treat [problem gambling](#), and they're all required to post the state's 1-800-GAMBLER hotline around the casino and on most pieces of literature. They also train workers to spot problem gamblers, but treatment center directors say that while casinos often cut players off, they rarely refer players to treatment.

"When someone is in denial, they're difficult to reach," said Jim Pappas, director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of Pennsylvania. "You can put the system in place, but you can't make them use it."

For 18 months, Tahir's primary residence was the Sands bus center and the buses that arrive there. In periods when his card-collecting and gambling went well — and he says that happened frequently — he'd rent a room at the Super 8 motel on Airport Road for a few days each week.

But the days before he lost his bus privileges had not gone well. He'd lost all his free-play money and was hoping to catch another bus back to New York soon.

"We warned Malik about that," said Mark, a 49-year-old former mortgage broker from Allentown who rode casino buses for more than a year. "You can't make it obvious that you spent the night. They'll kick you every time if you do that."

Mark has never slept at the bus center because he owns a house, but he's gone long stretches without sleeping in his own bed. Jumping from bus to bus, mining free-play cards as if they were gold, Mark and his buddy Ron of Allentown spent months together on the road. Bleary-eyed and often in need of a shower, they'd sleep in the surprisingly comfortable seats of buses run by such companies as Golden Mega, Lucky 9 and Baccarat 88.

For days and even weeks at a time, they essentially lived on the casino bus — going home a few days a week to get a decent night's sleep and a few meals that weren't wrapped in a fast-food logo. Not wanting to miss that next bus, and the free casino money that comes with it, they quickly learned the best layover spots along the route — the bathrooms, restaurants and libraries — where they could find a sliver of normalcy while on the road.

They became so good at the game, they'd worked their way to the front of the buses, which an unofficial class system reserves for the most frequent riders and biggest players.

"We'd made our way up to Seats 5 and 6 [out of 63]," Ron said. "You don't want to be anywhere near the back of the bus. That's full of deranged degenerates, and it smells like you'd expect from people who haven't showered in God knows how long."

Mark, who asked that his last name not be used, said that after losing his job in 2012, he was left with too much time on his hands. He started riding the casino buses and very quickly became adept at piling up the free-play cards.

Describing a 19-hour period he said wasn't unusual, Mark detailed how card-chasing can become as addictive as gambling itself.

He started at 6 a.m. at the Sands bus center, where he caught the return bus to Flushing, N.Y. That cost him a \$5 tip.

In Flushing, he hopped an 8 a.m. bus to the New York City slots parlor Resorts World, where his \$5 bus ticket got him \$20 in free play. He played that card at Resorts, hoping to build his stash, but only long enough to get back to Flushing by noon, where he bought a \$15 bus ticket to the Sands and got a \$45 free-play card.

He was in Bethlehem by 2 p.m. and pocketed the Sands free-play card to use later, so he could quickly wrangle an empty seat on a 2:15 p.m. return bus to [Kutztown](#) — no tip necessary.

He got to Kutztown by 3:30 p.m., in plenty of time to check his emails at the local library and still catch the 5 p.m. bus back to the Sands, where his \$15 investment for a ticket was good for another \$35 in free play. Again, he pocketed the card without playing.

Back at the Sands at 6:15 p.m., he hopped his scheduled 7 p.m. return bus to Flushing, where he arrived at 9 p.m. for the price of a \$5 tip that guaranteed him the same seat the next day.

He made another quick trip to the nearby Resorts World. A \$5 bus ticket got him a \$20 free-play card again, and he quickly played the card.

Then he was back on the 11 p.m. Flushing bus to the Sands, where he shelled out another \$15 for a bus ticket that got him another \$45 free-play card back at the Sands at 1 a.m. He was careful not to miss that 11 p.m., or he'd be stuck in Flushing until morning.

By the end of his long day, he had spent \$55 to buy five bus tickets, and another \$10 on tips. For that — and all those hours on the buses — he collected five free-play cards worth \$165 in casino money.

He then spent the wee hours at the Sands trying to turn that into something much larger.

"The whole thing is to keep moving, chasing that next free-play card. Sometimes I'd ride for four or five days and end up with \$400 or \$500. Usually, I gave it all back eventually," said Mark, who is no longer riding the buses. "There are a lot of people on those buses living desperate lives."

Al, an immigrant from Egypt, understands that feeling. He shares an apartment in Chinatown, but on this day in September, he's stuck in south Bethlehem with no ticket to get back. He's been riding two casino buses a day from Chinatown to the Sands for months, usually catching his sleep on the bus. The week started off pretty well. He'd converted his cards into cash and, playing roulette and blackjack, he parlayed his money into nearly \$300.

He was feeling so good about his streak that he let the Sands bus go back to Chinatown without him. He'd just buy a \$24 Trans-Bridge ticket back when he was ready. Except his hot streak went cold fast, he lost all his money and was now stuck 90 miles from home.

Al asked that his last name not be used, saying he feared retribution from the bus companies.

"Today I'm going to quit," he said as he sat on a park bench along Bethlehem's South Side greenway. "Today, I'm going to change. No more buses."

As he limped down the path, his legs hurting from walking, he assured an acquaintance that he'd be just fine.

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I called a friend. He's bringing me a bus ticket home."

And with that, Al walked toward the South Side bus station on Mechanic Street. But he passed the station and continued for several blocks, where he ducked into 339 W

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