

# The devil in my casino

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By **Courtland Milloy** Columnist January 3

On a recent night, I yielded to temptation and paid a visit to my neighborhood den of sin: the newly opened casino at MGM National Harbor.

From my house in Fort Washington, the road to Hades is four miles. Barring traffic jams, I can be at a slot machine in less than 10 minutes. With my first dollar, I received a cash-out voucher for 50 cents and five free spins. It wasn't a win, but it didn't quite feel like a loss, either.

I played on, excited by the unexpected new chances to hit the jackpot.

I had been warned.

Living within 10 miles of a casino more than doubles the rate of problems from excessive gambling, according to researchers at the University of Buffalo.

Baby boomers like me are said to be among the fastest-growing group of problem gamblers.

"Older adults view the casino as a place where they can socialize, escape their loneliness, and escape their grief," researchers Fayette Martin, Peter A. Lichtenberg and Thomas N. Templin wrote in a journal for the National Institutes of Health. "Given that their primary choices of games are slot machines, these social needs, however, may not be getting met. . . . It may be worthwhile for church groups to assess the reasons for older adults wanting to go to casinos and helping them to determine how their social needs might be met in alternative ways."

And then there's the race factor.

As the National Center for Responsible Gaming has noted, "Gambling and gambling related problems are common among all racial and ethnic groups in the United States, but there is new evidence that African Americans are more likely to experience gambling-related problems than white Americans."

That's three strikes. Still, there is something to be said for being mesmerized.

Along with the casino, MGM National Harbor features several luxury retail stores and fancy restaurants the likes of which Prince George's County, Md., had never seen. At the Sarah Jessica Parker store, for instance, a pair of purple high heels goes for \$355. For a county more accustomed to seeing Kmart stores, the high-end goods suggest that there may be something royal about Prince George's after all.

At the opening of MGM's Marcus restaurant, chef Marcus Samuelsson cooked up a meal worthy of an establishment in the nation's most affluent, predominantly black county. The dinner included an "Obama short rib slider" along with "China Afro funk and sweet potato puree, St. Hill Shrimp N Grits with Carolina shrimp, shoe box ham and creamy grits."

Of course, these offerings also pose potential problems. Gambling is not the only behavior that can lead to addiction. Shopaholism and food addiction can be just as costly.

Nevertheless, the primary attraction at MGM National Harbor is the casino — that 125,000-square-foot cavern of iniquity.

There are more than 3,000 slots and hundreds of card and craps tables.

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I took my free spins and came close to winning each time. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, director of civil society initiatives at the Institute for American Values, has suggested that such titillation is just part of the casino con game.

“One way these computerized pickpockets milk their customers is by generating near misses, whereby the spinning symbols on the machine stop just above or below the winning payline,” she says. “The feeling of having come oh so close to a win prompts further play.”

I had spent a total of \$4 during the visit and won five free spins and a 50-cent voucher. But I have since discovered several books and articles on how to beat the slot machine.

As for my maiden voyage to the casino, I confess that the devil made me do it. However, when I learn those winning techniques, Lady Luck could make me do it again.

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