



A GOOD CALL

Poker player Antonio Esfandiari settles into life in Las Vegas.

By Michael Shapiro

Photography by Amanda Friedman

Taiko drummers in feathered headdresses from Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère* pound colossal drums so loudly the Amazon Room at Las Vegas' Rio hotel vibrates. One of poker's most charismatic players, Antonio Esfandiari, half dances and half skips in. He has paid \$1 million to play in the richest poker tournament ever, The Big One for One Drop, which is raising funds for water development globally. Forty-eight players entered—eight are at the final table. Esfandiari is one of the eight.

ESPN's Kara Scott pulls Esfandiari aside for a quick interview. "A million dollars to play in a poker tournament is insane," says Esfandiari. "To be at the final table is really a dream come true." A dream because one of the eight people at the final table will win poker's largest prize ever: \$18.3 million.

Then Scott asks: "If you win...?"

Esfandiari breaks in: "I have to correct you. There's no 'if'—there's 'when'—so I'll let you rephrase the question if you like."

"When you win," Scott obliges.

"When I win," Esfandiari says with conviction, "I'm just going to take care of my family, travel a little bit more and take it easy." ➔

**HOUSE OF
CARDS**
*Antonio
Esfandiari at
Jean Georges
Steakhouse.*



BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG TIME
 (Above) Fremont Street Experience;
 Esfandiari wins a tournament.

That was 2012. When Esfandiari, intensely focused and brashly confident, fulfilled his own prophecy and won The Big One for One Drop, his father Bejan and brother Pasha rushed to embrace him. As confetti rained down from the rafters, Esfandiari gave his dad the \$350,000 Richard Mille platinum bracelet that was part of the winner's prize. Friends, including many pro poker players, hoisted the barefoot champion onto their shoulders as the crowd showered him with cheers.

Though he never planned on settling in Vegas, Esfandiari has come to appreciate its allure beyond gambling. He's a self-described foodie with favorite restaurants on and off the Strip.

That was the moment Esfandiari became the King of Las Vegas. He was already a celebrity in his adopted town, but winning poker's richest prize made him Vegas' poker superstar. Which is somewhat ironic because Esfandiari didn't plan on living in Sin City. Or even the United States. "I grew up in Iran in the 1980s in a time of war," he says.

Two months after he was born the Shah was overthrown and the country became an Islamic republic; before his first birthday more than 50 Americans were taken hostage in Iran and held for more than a year.

During the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, "my dad told me that when the planes would come my little brother and I would say, 'Bomb, bomb, bomb' and then we'd go look for place to hide. One time a building four or five houses away was blown up. I thought: that could have been our house. I was 6 years old—it was pretty scary. That's when my dad decided to get us out."

Esfandiari, now 36, says he didn't know much about the U.S. before coming to live near relatives in San Jose, Calif. He just knew it was "this big wonderful place that you only dreamt of, so I felt very fortunate and lucky." Enterprising from a young age, he became a paperboy at age 9, and though he didn't speak English well when he arrived, the precocious student quickly mastered the language. But his first year in San Jose wasn't easy: "Third grade was really tough for me. There I am, a Middle Eastern kid, and Iran wasn't exactly the USA's favorite country. I got picked on more than my fair share."

Making things harder: His mother returned to Iran shortly after the family arrived in the U.S., so Esfandiari

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was raised mainly by his father Bejan who worked incessantly. “I didn’t have a very happy childhood,” Antonio recalls, “but I made the best of it.”

He focused his energy on helping his family. “At 11, I was a newspaper salesman over the phone for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It was a little office with a bunch of telemarketers. I was No. 1 in the area—I crushed it. When they found out I was 11, they let me work under my mother’s name to keep my job.”

In his late teens, Esfandiari took up magic. “As soon as I did a couple of tricks, all of a sudden I went from being the most unpopular kid to a very popular kid. Magic helped me feel like The Guy,” he says. Esfandiari’s given first name is Amir, but he changed it then because “Antonio the Magician” sounded better. He practiced relentlessly and says he wanted to be the next David Copperfield—until he discovered poker at age 20. By the time he was 22, he says he was making “pretty good money” playing the game.

A couple of years after he started playing, Esfandiari asked his father to come to a casino and watch. “That day I was so on point: I told him what people had before they flipped their cards over. I was right 90 percent of the time. And my dad—I will never forget—he was sitting behind me and he said, ‘Son, how in the world do you know what they have?’ I don’t know how I know, I told him—it’s just a process. I can sense when

someone is strong or weak or lying or honest. It comes pretty natural to me.”

Esfandiari says his father looked over at him and said, “I believe—you have my support.” This meant the world to Antonio. “My dad is my hero, so it was really important when he said he’d support me.”

By 2004, Esfandiari says he was “hungry, very hungry, to make a name for myself.” He’d finished as high as third in a World Poker Tour tournament but had never won one. “I knew that (to gain recognition) in poker you had to win a major tournament.” Playing poker the night before the L.A. Poker Classic, he’d lost \$30,000, about half his bankroll, but that didn’t stop him from playing the next day. “It just felt like my time. I outplayed and outlasted and outhustled hundreds of players. And I won it,” he says. At the time, he was the youngest player, 25, to win a WPT event.

Esfandiari drove home because, “I didn’t want him (his father) to hear about my victory from anyone but me. I showed up at his doorstep just after dawn with a backpack filled with \$1.4 million—cash! ‘Dad, there’s something I really need to tell you,’ ” Esfandiari told his dad when Bejan groggily answered the door and squinted into the rising sun. “I could sense he was worried. I really like to mess with people. I just showed him the backpack. Then I opened it and said, ‘Dad, I won.’ ”

GO EAST

The Fremont East Entertainment District in downtown.





He looked down in shock and said, "What did you win?"

"This big tournament in L.A."

"How much did you win?"

"Over a million bucks."

"I wish I would have filmed it—he almost melted," Esfandiari says. "He almost fell to the ground in shock he was so happy. He laughed, he cried, he hugged me. It took time for reality to sink in. But when he looked back down and saw my bag stuffed with packets of hundred-dollar bills, he got it. He believed, and he knew that finally our family's American dream was coming true."

After winning this tournament, Esfandiari found himself traveling from his home in San Jose to Las Vegas "all the time," he says. "I never wanted to live [in Vegas], but I bought a home here to not spend so much money living in the Bellagio, and I ended up moving here. It just kind of happened that way."

With his black-rimmed glasses, slender physique and casual style, Esfandiari has *GQ* panache—he's not a grizzled, hard-drinking, cigar-chomping poker player. "Despite his outward suave, gamblin' man appearance, in some ways I see Antonio as the antithesis of Las Vegas," says World Series of Poker broadcaster Lon McEachern. "To the people he knows, Antonio is warm, caring, genuine, vulnerable and a family man." Bejan is frequently on the rail at poker events, cheering on his son. And when Antonio goes out to celebrate, he insists

dad come clubbing with him and his friends.

World Poker Tour broadcaster Mike Sexton, who was there for Esfandiari's 2004 win, says Esfandiari now treats success differently than in his youthful years. "He was a very Vegas guy early in his career. He was partying in every club in town every night. He got the best tables, and they would welcome him with open arms. He was single, having a big time, living a big life."

He burned through a lot of money, and had a few years without much success. Now he's back with several big wins since his huge take at One Drop, Sexton says. "But I don't see him doing that (partying to the hilt) again. I see a far more mature Antonio Esfandiari, much more professional. He just recently became a father, and he just has a different attitude now."

In a post last February on the poker website Bluff Europe, Esfandiari shared his joy: "On January 7th at 8:01 am, I became a father of a beautiful son. It was a moment that truly cannot be explained, only experienced. I am shocked and transformed, and my life has changed forever. The arrival of a child into my world has given birth to an everlasting love, a nurturing love that has weaved itself into the fabric of my being. It happened instantly, and watching my child enter this world was nothing short of a true miracle." He also recently married but asked the magazine to refrain from sharing further details about his family life.

ABIRD'S EYE VIEW

(This page) Esfandiari at his condo overlooking the Strip; (Opposite) Vintage neon signs from Vegas businesses past are on display at the Neon Boneyard.



ONLY IN VEGAS

(Clockwise from top left) Binion's Casino in downtown; The Perch restaurant in the Downtown Container Park, a shopping area constructed of repurposed shipping containers and locally manufactured Xtreme Cubes; inside Eat, voted one of the city's best breakfast and brunch spots; Golden Nugget Casino; the original Hacienda horse and rider sign, now restored and on display at the Neon Museum.



Though he never planned on settling in Las Vegas, Esfandiari has come to appreciate its allures beyond gambling. Not that he doesn't gamble at home: when not traveling the world for tournaments, he can sometimes be found at Aria or Bellagio. "Those are the only two poker rooms where you can really find a big game with a buy-in of more than \$10,000," he says. He also plays at the Rio when it hosts the annual World Series of Poker Tour, between late-May and early-July. Esfandiari is a self-described foodie and appreciates that he can find innovative cuisine, from noodle bowls to Wagyu filet mignon, at almost any hour. For the latter, he goes to Jean Georges Steakhouse at the Aria. For Italian, it's Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare at Wynn.

"But really, my favorite places are off Strip. There's a Japanese grill place called Raku that I think is the best restaurant in the world," he says. "I am a huge ramen guy—I love soup. I go to Jinya for late-night soup, super good. And there's a sushi place that's dynamite called Kabuto." Though Esfandiari doesn't go out nearly as often as he once did, his go-to club is the Marquee at the Cosmopolitan, with its indigo-lighted dance floor and sleek design.

And, after years of neglect, downtown Vegas is showing signs of life, Esfandiari says. "There's a really cool little restaurant called Eat, and there are some speakeasy bars downtown; it's got a little bit of a London vibe going." Just a couple of miles north of the Strip, downtown was once the heart of Vegas. Remnants of its old hotels remain at the downtown Neon Museum, where, among other relics, you can see the sign for Binion's Horseshoe, where the World Series of Poker was held from its debut in 1970 until 2004.

Though Esfandiari is not a typical Vegas guy, he and Sin City share "a devil-may-care attitude," says McEachern. "No matter where he goes, Vegas goes with him. Whether it be his slick, quaffed Rat Pack look, his ability to be the center of the party, or his drop-of-the-hat tendency to accept a bet

on just about anything, he is one of those rare people whom everyone knows when he is in the room—and everyone wants to be noticed by him."

For the past couple of years, Esfandiari has joined McEachern in the broadcast booth for WSOP's Main Event final table. "He has treated me like a friend from the first moment we met and continues to do so," McEachern said. "He's always on time, ready to go. Antonio will use his 'cold read' on those in a hand, and more often than not, give us a pretty darn good read on the cards they hold. It's impossible to be spot-on 100 percent of the time, but he's right enough to drop the jaws of us neophytes around him and those watching on ESPN."

Esfandiari now has earned more than \$26 million in sanctioned tournaments, according to the poker magazine *Bluff*, and who knows how much more in cash games. "He wants to be best at anything he does," Bejan said.

Despite his success, Esfandiari remains down-to-earth. "Antonio is just so good with the people," says Sexton, the WPT broadcaster. "There are very few players who are really fan favorites, and he's in that elite group. He takes photos with them, he laughs with them, he jokes with them, and he gets along with them." In 2013 Esfandiari traveled to Central America to meet people benefiting from the water projects the One Drop tournament helped. "I was very touched by this trip. I will never forget those families," he says.

Esfandiari realizes how lucky he is to be playing a game he's so passionate about, and to be making a good living from it. "Antonio is one of those guys who gets it," Sexton says. He's fortunate to have found his calling, and Vegas is lucky this one-time magician has made this city of illusion his home. ♦

Michael Shapiro covers gambling for the San Francisco Chronicle and authored the travel-writing book *A Sense of Place*.

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Lee Sullivan's picks

Inspirato Personal Vacation Advisor

SKI VEGAS:

Yes, you can ski near Sin City and this year's El Niño weather pattern should sock the mountains with snow.

Las Vegas Ski & Snowboard Resort sits at an elevation of 8,150 feet and is a scenic 45-minute drive from the Strip.

ON THE STRIP:

Sit down for a French dinner at Michael Mina's latest restaurant **Bardot Brasserie**, located inside the Aria, and you'll feel like you've landed in Paris.

The **High Roller** is currently the

world's largest observation Ferris wheel, topping out at 550 feet.

The Park is a new outdoor shopping and dining area where you'll find a Shake Shack and Tom's Urban outpost.

ART SCENE:

The Strip isn't the only spot for live performances. The **Smith Center for the Performing Arts** hosts Broadway musicals, opera, ballet and a slew of family-friendly shows during the holidays.

November 4-15, 2015

SANTANA

Mandalay Bay's House of Blues hosts the legendary guitarist as he plays his greatest hits in an intimate setting.

December 3-12, 2015

NATIONAL FINALS RODEO

Every December, Vegas turns into the center of the cowboy universe with conventions, country music concerts and, of course, the best rodeo riders in the world competing in front of sold-out arenas.