SOUTHERN OCEAN

Holiday treats

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Man robs Stafford bank with fake gun

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STAFFORD — An unassuming-looking man slipped in the back door of the Cranberry Bog restaurant on Route 9 yesterday afternoon, sat at the bar and ordered a tall Budweiser.

The man, wearing blue jeans, a T-shirt and carrying a blue-and-white cooler, sipped on his 23-ounce beer and made small talk with an employee there, saying he worked as an electrician in Atlantic City and that he was waiting to catch a bus to Lacey.

A second beer later, the man paid with a $50 bill and left two crumpled dollars and $1.80 in coins for a tip. He then grabbed the cooler and slipped out the front door, the restaurant employee said.

But instead of catching the 1:45 p.m. bus, he caught an unexpected ride to the police station.

Police believe the man, identified as Andrew Vada, 37, of Waretown, robbed the First Union bank on Route 72 yesterday at 12:42 p.m.

Vada drove to the bank in a white 1996 Nissan Sentra that was reported stolen Wednesday night from Lacey, police said.

Wearing a blue ski mask, Vada entered the bank brandishing a plastic gun painted black to appear real, and demanded money, police said.

Customers were in the bank at the time, police said, but no injuries were reported. The branch, located in the Stafford Square shopping center, was closed for the rest of the day.

Vada escaped with $4,760, which he stashed in the cooler, and headed east on Route 72, police said.

Officials broadcast a multi-county alert and within an hour police had located the abandoned car in the Cedar Run apartment complex on Route 9.

After interviewing area residents, police learned that Vada had discarded his clothes in a large metal trash bin nearby and left the area on foot.

A short time later, Detective John Reed, though who was off-duty at the time, spotted Vada with the cooler at the bus stop on Route 9 and Beach Avenue, located just outside the Cranberry Bog.

Vada was arrested without incident by Lt. Larry D. Parker Jr.

Police said they are not certain if the holdup is related to the string of robberies committed in southern New Jersey in the past year.

Stafford Township police were assisted by the Ocean County Criminalistics Unit, Ocean County Bloodhound Unit and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Detective Kurt Mehl is the lead investigator.

Vada is expected to be charged with numerous offenses upon the completion of the initial investigation, police said. Bail remains to be set.