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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2001

New York ♡ America

With each concerned phone call, each urgent e-mail to New Yorkers, the question surfaces — How can we help? The answer now is different than it was last week, when the city needed gloves and bottled water and blood donors. Now New York City needs its visitors, tourists bumping along Times Square, going to the theaters, eating at its restaurants and buying its postcards. When asked what the nation could do to help the city, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani replied: "Come to New York, go to a play . . . spend some money."

People in the metropolitan area need do nothing more than jump in a car or train and head for Times Square, where they will find plenty of theater seats and restaurant tables available. They will also discover that the city is much more intact than the horrific pictures on television might lead them to expect. There are wounds, of course, and memorials — the posters of missing World Trade Center workers, the flags, the flowers left in front of empty firehouses. Almost everyone who lives here now shoulders a sense of the loss that is so visible in the southern tip of Manhattan. But the people who come to visit are a bright and welcome connection to life in the rest of the country.

Tourists do more than pump money into Manhattan's businesses. They add a critical essence to the city's spirit. In normal times, New Yorkers admire the way the tourists stand patiently in line to buy tickets, and we complain about the way they slow down pedestrian traffic on Times Square. But their enthusiasm makes the district throb. Right now, we need their energy as well as their money.

The idea of fighting terrorism by going to a Broadway musical may seem counterintuitive. But the arts can heal, in this case helping both viewers and the artists. The city is trying to recover from a blow that not only took lives and ripped into its powerful skyline, but also eliminated the jobs of thousands of low- and moderate-income workers. Tourism employs 280,000 people in New York City, many of them supporting families on wages they make cleaning hotel rooms, working in restaurant kitchens or clerking at shops.

On Broadway, theater experts are beginning to worry about financial disaster. Of over two dozen major productions, six have announced they are closing and a half-dozen more are said to be in serious trouble. If audiences fail to return soon, some of the street's veterans foresee a Broadway with lights on at only one or two shows besides "The Producers." Many productions both on Broadway and off are run as such small businesses they might as well be candy stores, with large expenses and little reserve. Even the most compelling shows can slip altogether too quickly into the dark.

New York is not alone in suffering from a drop in tourists, of course. Airline vacation travel has stalled, and hotels and restaurants around the country have been deluged with cancellations. But for New York, the loss of so many visitors is like a second body blow coming at a time when the city needs help in returning to normal. Right now, New York is far too uncrowded for its own good.

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