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Still Scant, Tourists Find Way to Site

By Hugo Kugiya
STAFF WRITER

They gave themselves away, sometimes, by the clothing they wore, tidy but impractical. Or sometimes by the company they kept: Teenagers cheerfully abiding their parents in New York couldn't be anything but tourists.

But what mostly gave them away — these visitors from West Virginia, Ohio, Canada and Ecuador — were their expressions: sympathetic, but not stricken; moved, but not shell-shocked.

There are few of them, judging from the empty hotels and theaters. But those who found the will and the way to visit did what just about every recent visitor — from President George W. Bush last week, to Attorney General John Ashcroft Friday — has done. They visited Ground Zero.

"I just needed to experience this for myself after watching it on TV for so long," said James Wile, a young man from Chicopee, Mass., with a still and video camera, who still was clearing the sleep from his eyes at Grand Central Station when he was jolted fully awake by a wall of pictures of missing people. Although much of Manhattan looked about the same, he knew right away something about the place had changed.

"There's no honking," he said.

Wile's friend Daniel Sullivan, visiting New York from East Canaan, Conn., said he wanted to gather just a little bit of ash so that on Sept. 11 of next year he can scatter them "somewhere peaceful."

"I can imagine that some small part of that ash is human," Sullivan said.

For the second consecutive day, the general public was allowed astonishingly close to the ruins of the World Trade Center. Just one block away, along lower Broadway, pedestrians took sideways glimpses of the grotesque pile, oblivious of the jackhammers and concrete saws running nearby. Police prodded anyone who stopped on the street or sidewalk, but did allow quick photographs, taken by many residents and visitors alike.



Newsday Photo / Mayita Mendez

With the devastation reflecting off a window behind her, a woman takes a picture of the ruins of the World Trade Center Friday.

Perhaps the city has never been so appreciative of tourists, whom New Yorkers often make condescending sport of. In the past several days, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani openly beseeched them to visit. They are not just a revenue stream. In a city starved for normalcy, tourists are a precious sign of it — even if their friends call them crazy.

Carrie Hamm and Merilee Leason are Jehovah's Witnesses from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in Canada. They left Sept. 13 on a bus against the wishes of more than a few relatives. But they had planned the trip months ago and did not want to scuttle their plans. After 50 hours and almost a dozen stops, they got to New York. At each stop, a clerk checked their tickets, and often laughed.

"From the minute we boarded the bus, people thought we were crazy," Hamm said. "They would shout, 'Who are the girls going to New York?' "

Some of their plans, to see the Statue of Liberty and the view from the top of the World Trade Center, had to be abandoned. But the mayor would be happy to know the two women, staying with friends in Brooklyn Heights, plan to do a lot of shopping. That and take photos of Ground Zero. The images of New York they have seen in Canada, they said, are less graphic and the stories more vague.

"Everyone back home will be shocked to see this," Hamm said.

Even in death, the World Trade Center draws the awe and curiosity of tourists.

"We have some 10- and 15-story buildings in Saskatoon," Leason said. "I can't imagine a building more than 100 floors collapsing to the ground."

Not intimidated by the news, the Sonksen family from Dublin, Ohio, Craig and Melissa and their youngest daughter Stephanie, drove to Baltimore Thursday to meet their oldest daughter Kimberly, a college sophomore in rural Idaho. The same day, Kimberly boarded an America West jet in Salt Lake City, nervous but not swayed. She flew to Phoenix and then to Baltimore, where she joined her family for a short trip to New York. The Sonksens' neighbors are canceling trips as far away as next spring.

But the Sonksens do not see the sense in that. From 1978 to 1982, Craig Sonksen worked in the financial district, spending six months on the 83rd floor of one of the towers. Since then, the family has visited New York several times. After viewing the fallen towers, the family said they would probably shop on Canal Street and try to get tickets to "The Lion King" or "The Producers."

"We were not scared at all to come here," Melissa Sonksen said. "If anything, now we have more respect for the city and the people who work here."

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