



Tourist spending defies terrorism

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

In a cross-country display of patriotism and economic support, nearly 800 Oregonians are flying to New York this weekend as a small colony of tourists — an organized response to Mayor Rudy Giuliani's plea that Americans can best help his wounded city by spending money there. Among them is Gary Fuszek, 48, who arrives Friday with his wife, Kimberley Rockwood, and their two children — and a measure of emotional trepidation after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. "I'm not sure what to expect, to be honest," says Fuszek, a program manager for Hewlett-Packard in Corvallis, Ore., who has never seen New York. "It's really a mixed bag. We're excited. We're nervous with anticipation. And I guess we're in sorrow. It's a thrilling mix."

Portland-based volunteer organizers are calling it the Flight for Freedom. They've cobbled together discounted air and hotel rates — one example is \$434 for a round-trip ticket and three nights, double occupancy, at Hilton's Waldorf-Astoria.

The venture was dreamed up two weeks ago by Sho Dozono, chairman of the Portland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and owner of Azumano Travel, which is making the arrangements and waiving its commission. "Meet us in New York! This isn't a time to be afraid," urges the agency's Web site (www.azumano.com/flightforfreedom).

"It's a symbolic gesture on our part," Dozono says from his Portland office, where volunteers are wearing "Portland loves New York" buttons. "Taking back our lives — that's what it's called."

With a splash of local media coverage and the support and participation of Oregon dignitaries such as Portland Mayor Vera Katz and Oregon congressional representatives David Wu and Darlene Hooley, hundreds of people have signed up. Among them are retirees, teachers, social workers, merchants and high school students with chaperones. They've signed up for a long weekend of dining out, shopping at Bloomingdale's and FAO Schwarz, going to Broadway plays and visiting the Statue of Liberty. The travelers are booked on 62 flights, including connections.

Katz says that an overriding goal is to encourage others across the nation to start flying again and reinvigorate an ailing travel industry.

"We're making this trip because the mayor of New York asked us to," she says. "This is a way for many of us to connect to New York, especially those of us who lived in New York, and to share their pain and grief."

Tourism officials in New York say that here and there, groups of citizens or conventioners are mobilizing in response to Giuliani's call, a plea later echoed by President Bush. Among them, the American Society of Travel Agents, which canceled a convention slated for Seville, Spain, and rebooked in New York with 2,500 people; and the American Federation of State, County

and Municipal Employees, which moved a women's conference of 1,500 from Boston to the Big Apple.

Some 89 senior citizens from Rochester, Minn., organized something they called the Patriot Tour and spent last weekend in the city. And a planeload of about 150 Jamaicans, many of them tourism and business officials from the island, arrive Thursday for a long weekend.

"Because Jamaica is a tourist destination for Americans, particularly from the New York metropolitan area, the feeling among industry leaders there was that it's really time for us to show some support for New York," says Alison Ross, a spokeswoman for the island's tourism industry.

Symbolic value aside, these efforts can hardly stop the travel and tourism free fall that the city has endured since Sept. 11. Analysts say hotel occupancy in the city remains half what it was a year ago at this time (40% to 45% vs. 89%), and every day the city is losing \$6 million to \$7 million in hotel revenues and an estimated \$20 million a day in restaurant income.

"We have a long road ahead of us. But in the short term, we're really doing our best to really stop the bleeding," says Cristyne Nicholas, president and CEO of NYC & Company, the city's official tourism marketing arm. "Everybody is looking for something to do and be helpful, and what we're telling folks in the USA and also the world is: 'Come to New York for a visit. We'd like to thank you personally.' "

Amid the shopping and sightseeing this weekend, the organizers of the Oregonian trek have scheduled a wreath-laying at Union Square for Sunday. That place has become an ad-hoc shrine with its clusters of burning candles and montage of the fliers that carry the faces of those missing in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

That is where Fuszek's and Rockwood's daughters plan to bring and post their banners. Ashley Fuszek, 17, has one created by classmates at Crescent Valley High School in Corvallis. Stepsister Amanda Martinez, 11, has another from her fellow students at Highland View Middle School.

"I know it's going to be emotional," says Rockwood, 34. "I know we'll be seeing the effects of what's happened. I'm looking at it as a very positive experience. But it's going to be hard."