New York looks spectacular in holiday garb

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

New York City is putting on its holiday garb.

Although I always love New York, this is a special time. So lucky you if you're planning a trip there between now and New Year's.

On the weekend before Thanksgiving, we watched the wreaths being lifted into place in perfect pattern on Bergdorf's windows.

The white wiry angels were set in two parallel rows to lead you from Fifth Avenue to the skating plaza at Rockefeller Center.

And the scaffolding was still the only decoration on the storied Rockefeller Center tree that the nuns reportedly reluctantly relinquished. It's due to be lit in early December.

Many store windows were tarpaulin-covered as window dressers readied their storied holiday tableaus. But toy soldiers already marched on the Cartier storefront. And nimble jack-in-the-boxes frolicked in the windows of Cole-Haan.

Fifth Avenue holds court over the holidays, but don't miss peeking into the lobbies of the major hotels and office buildings all over the city to glimpse their holiday decor.

New York is not just glitter and glitz on the surface these days. The effort to clean up the heart of the city reaches down deep. The Broadway-42nd Street area is much improved, with shops and hotels replacing decades of more risque offerings.

The homeless population, which the New York Times reports is still alive if not well, has been relocated away from the areas of heavy tourism. New Yorkers somehow have become more relaxed and friendly toward visitors.

And if you are one of those people worried about your safety, police are everywhere (even though the weekend we were there they weren't giving out parking tickets because they were mad at the Mayor!).

New York has even made a point of dealing with its fractious taxi drivers. As you get into your taxi at LaGuardia, you are handed a card listing sample fares to various locations, urged to take down the driver's medallion number and given the phone number to call for complaints or lost articles.

Since we lived in New York for a number of years and have managed to see the newer tourist attractions such as Ellis Island (definitely well worth a visit but make sure you allow enough time to get back since the return boats fill up fast and it seems everyone wants to leave at the same time), we tend to do other things, such as:

■ Theater: A better economy and a concerted effort to market Broadway as part of the ongoing "I Love New York" tourism campaign seems to be working.

We saw "The Food Chain" off Broadway and "Smokey Joe's Cafe" on Broadway. Both were excellent and sell-outs.

■ Museums: The Mondrian exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art runs through Jan. 23rd and you buy tickets at the door. I advise taking the audio tour and you'll never have to guess at the rhythms behind "Broadway Boogie Woogie" again.

The Robert Frank: Moving Out photography retrospective just opened at the Whitney Nov. 16. Frankly it's a little unnerving to see how his art progressed. I preferred his earlier slice-of-life photos to his recent more self-absorbed work. See what you think.

■ Shopping: Truly, Detroit has easier and as classy shopping — just not the depth. But if you decide, as we did, to venture into F.A.O. Schwarz — the museum of toy stores — prepare for long lines, to be crushed and too warm.

■ Eating: Since we go to theater each night, we frankly don't spend the time or money on real dining. But of course even New York's middle income restaurants are expensive.

We found two theater district selections we liked this time around: Le Madeleine on West 43rd (ask to be seated in the garden) and Ellen's Stardust Diner, 51st and Broadway, where the wait staff of aspiring Broadway stars sings show tunes 7-10 p.m., a model train encircles the room well above your head and the diner-style food is plentiful and tasty.

Have a great time. I'm jealous already.

Lucky reader wins trip to Las Vegas

Zeda Nathan of Farmington Hills won our "luckiest thing that ever happened to you" contest, and will be traveling to Las Vegas, Dec. 12-13, courtesy of Hamilton, Miller, Hudson & Fayno Travel Corp. in Southfield.

Here's Nathan's story.

"Last October, I was invited into the home of a woman whose wallet I had found," wrote Nathan. "On the wall was a picture of this lady, her cousin and my friend! Kay-Kay (her nickname) and I will reunite this spring. The last time I saw my friend was 30 years ago."

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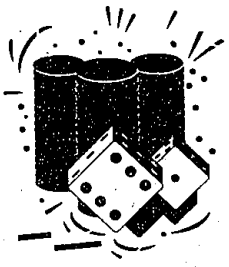

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