



PETER J. THOMPSON / NATIONAL POST

National Tourism Toronto promoter Julia Dimond takes a picture of Sault Ste. Marie students by the tour bus.

Bus trip, free food, T-shirts with built-in TV screens — tourism officials will use whatever it takes to encourage visitors to come to the Big Smoke

# Honk if you love T.O.

## BUS

Continued from Page T01

"It's like Toronto is so far away to them. People say, 'I'd love to go down south,' and I think 'Florida,' but they mean Toronto. People are really excited about it."

But the pitch is not always an easy one. At Station Mall, one strapping Tourism Toronto teamster approaches a duck-tailed local and hands him a pamphlet advertising "Amazing offers inside!"

The man seems skeptical. "How much does it cost?" he says.

"Free."

"All right," he says, taking the booklet. As the teamster moves on, the man turns and says, "I'll finish my smoke and go read it. It's hard to smoke and read at the same time."

Others have already made up their minds. Toyo Eggert entered a radio contest and won a three-day stay in the city for correctly naming "the castle in Toronto." A native of Michigan, Eggert stands waiting with her sister, Dee, for a helicopter that will whisk her from nearby Bush Plane Museum to the big city.

"There's a lot of sights there I want to see," Eggert says. "I want to see Casa Loma, I want to see the CN Tower and see a couple of plays. It all sounds wonderful," she adds, before advising that the brownies must be tried.

Spokeswoman Susan Carter says the food is an opening gambit in the bid to change peoples' perceptions of the city from big and smokey to the Big Smoke. As a local radio station blasts *Safety Dance* over a loudspeaker, Carter stands in front of the bus that touts "1 city, 100 cultures, 7,000 restaurants."

"What we find is people don't really know what to expect from Toronto," she says. "When people come here they're surprised by the quality of the restaurants and the hotels, because when some people have come, they've ended up going to an American chain restaurant. Whereas we have Fred's Not Here, Tundra, Hey Lucy." Some of the restaurants contributed recipes to the tour, she adds.

And even when the bus doesn't attract a throng, Carter says it still serves a purpose.

"It lets tour operators know what's happening in Toronto. So it reaches out to a lot of different audiences. When we go to Washington, we also have a lot of meeting planners that make decisions about bringing conventions and conferences to Toronto."

Still, there will always be a few people with preconceived notions of the big city. Al Offidani spends almost an hour hanging out in the Station Mall parking lot with his buddies chatting up the Tourism Toronto staff.

"I like Toronto, but I'm used to a slower pace," he says.

"When I'm walking on the sidewalks, I feel like taking an axe to get people out of my way. They're very rude. Everybody wants to get someplace."

When asked if there are parts of Toronto he enjoys, the Soo native replies: "The CN Tower, the bands of Yonge Street.... I go to the Brass Rail when I can."

He quickly adds he enjoyed his stay once at a downtown luxury hotel.

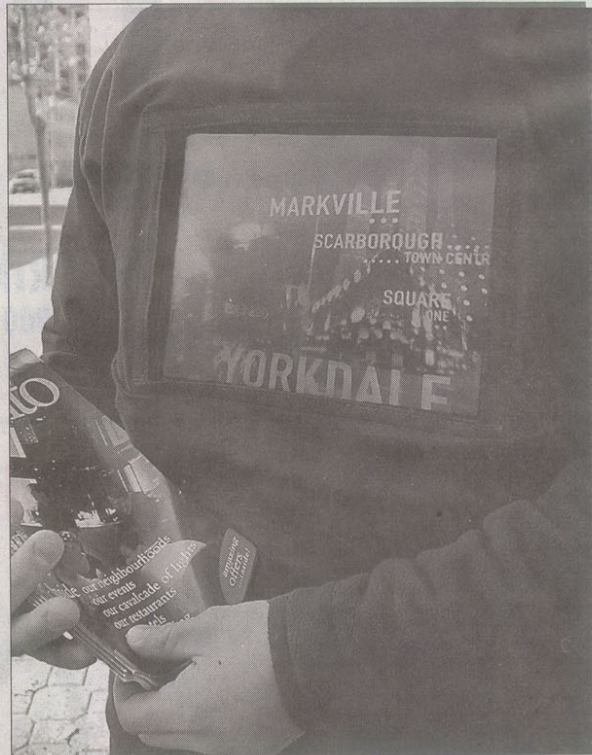
"I thought I was in Europe," he says. "They were saying, 'Hi, how are you making out? Can we tell you where to go in Toronto? Can we grab your suitcase? We've got good soup.' They were telling me everything."

Danny Wismer, by contrast, says he has never been to Toronto, but the street team might finally convince him to make the trip. Despite his apparent indifference to the sales pitch, Wismer steps through the crowd toward the gathered media. He has a message he wants to deliver, a statement that must be made.

"The ribs are nice," he says, and walks away.

National Post

jcowan@nationalpost.com



PETER J. THOMPSON / NATIONAL POST

Taylor Gordon's T-shirt has a built-in video display of Toronto attractions.