

AN UNLIKELY VACATION

McCarthy Family in NYC

April 29 to May 7, 2005

By Ken McCarthy

We were all kind of dazed and drunk from the lack of sleep as we bounced our way over the Midtown Bridge. We were working on 24 hours without sleep and by our internal clocks it was still five in the morning. But our eyes were all open and we tried our best to take in the sights. New York City, the big apple, we were there and couldn't wait to get out and see the sights.

My ski buddies, Helen Schiff and her husband Rick Congress, had met us at JFK and were driving us to their apartment in Greenwich Village in the heart of the city. They had invited us to come out and stay with them and see the sights of New York but we were really overloading their car. The two of them, our luggage, our 3 kids, (Prescott going on 16 and over six feet tall, Ria 7, Addison 5) plus my wife Jen and I, we barely fit into the Ford Taurus sedan. The tires rubbed on the fenders every time we hit a bump.

I had been to NY back in 1976 and only for a couple days. Jen was there for a summer in 1988. The kids had never been. The fact is this was not our kind of vacation. We tend to be more "woody". We go on river trips or backpacking. We drive to the ends of dirt roads to camp because we don't like the crowds in the campgrounds. But here we were smack in the middle of a city of 8 million people. It was going to be an adventure.

Whenever I meet people from New York City I wonder how do people live there. Where do kids play when they go out to play? Where are the supermarkets? Is it dangerous to go out for a walk at night? If you take your dog out to take a dump, how does it work when there is nothing but concrete and asphalt? Are the sidewalks really as busy as they show on TV? That was really why we were there; I wanted to try to answer some of these questions.



At about 900 square feet it is valued at just about 3 times what our 2300 square foot Utah house is.

We had other friends that live in the city. We visited the Cox family at their apartment between 85th and 86th on the east side of Central Park. Their place was very high end. The bedrooms were on the 4th floor and the kitchen, dining, library and living room were on the 3rd



floor. The place was gilded with gold leafed from floor to ceiling. The furnishings must have come from a European palace. At 2000 sq ft it was valued around \$8 million.

Both Helen and Rick's and the Cox's buildings had doormen who guarded the doors and screened guests going in and out. It looked to me like building staff; doormen, elevator drivers, front desk attends, etc. must provide a lot of employment in NY. Helen said they had something like 50 service people employed at their building alone. It must take an amazing amount of patience to be a doorman. The ability to occupy the brain while standing waiting for the next person to approach the door is a skill akin to meditation.

Elevators are a big part of life in the city. You step into the box, push a button and speed up, up, up. They are so fast it is hard to conceive that you have gone straight up hundreds of feet in a matter of seconds. Helen's building had a service elevator for the service crew and people with stuff; bikes, laundry or anything big. A building has more value if it has an elevator. The fact is few people could live above the 10th floor without an elevator. It would be too tiring and time consuming getting to and from your apartment. We took an elevator up 86 floors (it has 102 floors) to the top of the Empire State building, 1250 feet up, and it took only about 30 seconds. It would take over an hour and a half for the average person to walk up. The night we went up at least 5,000 other people did too.



Standing on Helen's terrace looking down at the street I got a kind of stranded feeling. I'm no stranger to the feeling of looking hundreds or even thousands of feet straight down but somehow this was different. I didn't get here under my own power. And this thing I was standing on was anything but permanent. If something happened on one of the floors below there would be nothing you could do. There would be no way down. It seemed as risky as climbing a big wall like El Capitan. But on El Capitan you have your ropes and pro that hopefully you can lower yourself off if need be. The building you have to be able to get down through it's middle.



When we have New Yorkers in Park City they tend to be very pushy impolite people. That and the fact that I was told before we went that you don't look at people in the city. People don't say hi. I had the impression that it was an unfriendly place. After spending a few days there I think I have to change my mind. It's not that people aren't friendly it's just that there are so many people you would be bobbing your head and saying "hi" every second and you still wouldn't be keeping up. But people did say "hi". They did stop to give directions. We were looking at a plack on a building discussing what it meant. A woman who obviously knew something about the building over heard us and stopped to give us the story. There were pushy people but not more then you would expect anyplace. I saw several times people on the subway get up to give their seats to someone more

in need. There were plenty of acts of kindness maybe even more then we would see at home just because there are so many more people to act.

On our second day in New York Jen, Prescott and I decided to join 30,000 other people for a bike ride around town. It is called the “Five Boro Bike Tour”. I would say it was the most people I ever done a single activity with. Helen had arranged for rental bikes at a bike shop down the street from her apartment and signed us up for the race. We all lined up along Church St. beside ground zero and the 9/11 monument. We filled the street from sidewalk to sidewalk for maybe three quarters of a mile. We stood in the rain waiting for the ride to start and as I looked around it was obvious these weren’t racers. They weren’t even bikers. They were just people who came out to do something with a lot of other people.



The mass of people finally started moving around 8:30. We started out real slow, walking in fact, but soon we were rolling along pretty well. The city had shut down the street from one end of Manhattan to the other and we quickly stretched out over several miles. Thirty Thousand of anything is a lot, thirty thousand bikers is really a lot of bikes. The people on the sidewalks who were trying to get across the street really thought so. They must have had to wait a long time for 5 miles worth of bikes to go by.

It was a little scary at times riding so packed together. Even so I had a real urge to get ahead. I had the feeling I could get out in front and not be packed in. The three of us worked at finding open space and speeding ahead, weaving in and out to the slower bikers. But there were other riders going faster still and they were weaving around us. Then something would slow the whole group and we would all pack together again so there would be no passing for a while. We had to be careful not to get separated because if would be really hard to find someone in the mob.

It was a rainy morning and the streets were wet. The tires in front were sending a spray of water into the air. It was cold at first but as we got our blood flowing we warmed up. My hands didn’t warm up until the rain stopped and they could finally dry out.

We road up Church St until it became Avenue of the Americas then we enter the south end of Central Park. We were really cruising along through the rolling hills of the park. It is about two and a half miles long and just over a quarter of a mile across. We entered the Harlem area of Manhattan before crossing the Madison Ave Bridge into the Bronx. We only road a few blocks in the Bronx before crossing back over the East River back into Manhattan. We followed the East River down to the 59th Street Bridge and across into Queens. We rode for several miles through the neighborhoods of Queens before entering Brooklyn.

The scenery was a little different in each area. The architecture changed, the faces got lighter and darker. We saw orthodox Jew in their dark coats and white shirts and strange hair do’s and hats. Some riders stopped at corner delis for refreshments but there were aid stations every five miles or so. They were packed with people and had long lines for the port-a-potties. We had only been on the road for an hour and forty-five minutes when we got to the aid station in Astoria Park and it didn’t seem like we needed food or a bathroom so we road on.

In Brooklyn I asked a policeman how far ahead the front of the tour was. He looked down the road in that direction, bobbed his head slowly and said, “A long, long way”.

Somewhere on the south side of Brooklyn the route took us onto a freeway. The whole southbound lane had been closed to cars. We rode several miles of freeway before crossing the Varizano Bridge into the Boro of Stanton Island. In a park at the end of the bridge was the official end to the ride. We arrived at the park about 11:30 am. It only took us 3 hours to ride the 42 miles but the amazing thing was the thousands of people were already in the park. They had all finished ahead of us. We knew there were still many thousands behind us.

We still had to get back to Manhattan. The tour organizers had schedule to have most of the riders shuttled back on the Stanton Island ferry. It was a three-mile ride from the park to the Ferry. We made it back to Manhattan with few delays but the news announced that some bikers had to wait up to three hours to get on a ferry. We had made it on just in time.

Helen had pre-scheduled two shows for us. The first was called "Blue Man". It was in a little theatre in the East Village and we laughed and watched in amazement the whole time. We also got to see "The Lion King" on Broadway, and the "Snow Show" off Broadway. It was all amazingly impressive.



I never thought of New York as a tourist attraction but it was obvious that there are a lot of tourists there. We joined right in with the crowds. We took a ferry out to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. We went to Time Square. We walked down Wall Street and through Chinatown. We went to the Bronx Zoo and took a tour on the Aircraft Carrier Intrepid. And we spent a lot of time wandering the streets, watched people and admiring the building and architecture. We took cab rides and rode subways. And we ate New York style food.

Helen and Rick took us out to dinner almost every night; our first day we went out to an Italian place with the Cox's. After that we did Indian, Chinese, Afghan, Moroccan, Thai, Brazilian, New York deli, and even American at Macy's Department Store.

Prescott will always be able to remember what he did on his sixteenth birthday. On Wednesday May 4th he turned 16 in NYC. He said he wanted to wander the streets and look at all the people so that is what we did. Before we left Park City I told him that he had two choices, keep his hair out of his eyes or skip going to NYC. I thought he should cut it but he said he could keep it out of his eyes. He also likes to wear his pants so low that the crotch is almost to his knees. It seems very uncomfortable and drives me crazy but I can live with long hair and low pants if he is polite and stays out of trouble.

Prescott was great with the girls the whole time. He walked the streets of city with one or both his little sisters hanging on his hand most of the time. He wasn't as excited about going to the museums and historic sites as much as just wandering the back streets and looking at the little shop and weird people. He said it makes him tired looking at in museums, I have to agree with him on that. He liked trying the



new food and he never wanted to get left behind if anyone was going anyplace.

After Prescott's day of wandering the streets Helen took us to another show. We saw "Stomp". Even though Prescott had seen it in SLC earlier I think he thought it was a good end to his day. Jen and Helen stopped at a bakery and got a birthday cake for him and after the show we went back to the apartment and had a little party; very little because we were all very tired.

Ria and Addison did really well too. I don't think that many of their peers would have been able to keep up with them. They can walk and walk with no complaints. Ria had a pair of shoes with little wheels set in the heels. They are called "Heelies" and she wheeled all over. Apparently they are not in NYC yet and everyone stared at her and asked about them. Both Ria and Addison would run down the street skipping and swinging their arms but they always stop at the corner. We didn't loose either one the whole time we were in the city.

For being only 5 and 7 they travel very well. They put up with the adults and their boring activities and they did very little "gi-me, gi-me". Even when we took the tour of the Statue of Liberty they paid attention and listened to the guide. It was much easier than when we went to Ecuador.

In October of 2004 Rick and Helen came out and did a week vacation with us in southern Utah. On that trip we found a geocache "Travel Bug". Its name was "Potato Doug" because it had started in Idaho. We sent it back to NYC with them to put it in a cache but they never got around to it. They brought it back to us in Utah. We had it all winter. So when we went out to NYC we took it with us. One morning we went out with our GPS to find the Cache on Roosevelt Island in the middle of the East River. We took a tram out to the Island then walked along the river under the pink and white flowers of the cherry trees. In a green field at the very south end of the island we found the cache.

Ria and Addison love Geocaching. They even have their own cache on the PC Hill above our house in Park City. We put Potato Doug in the cache and headed back to the city. We went to three more geocaches in Central Park and a few in other parts of the city. We found another travel bug at a cache in the park. We took it back with us to Park City and Ria and Addison put it in their cache on PC Hill.

Helen was great at finding interesting people to talk to. One day we spent half an hour talking to a guy selling his art work on the street. He painted his pictures on old newspaper copy. He had AIDS but was happy enough to talk as long as we were willing to stay. Helen bought one of his pieces for \$25.

In the East Village we stop to talk with a man sitting on the street selling his art. He was using old doors for his canvas. Ria had just bought a beautiful orange wig from an Indian man selling hats and wigs on the street corner. The paint the door artist had out just happened to be exactly the same color as her wig. The artist painted her face with polka-dots to match the wig.

We went to a little shop that sold drinks and had some kind of food that is famous in NYC. We talked with the owner for a while but we were not very impressed with the food.

Each night we would return to the 15th floor of the Brevant apartment building. Helen and Rick would walk



over to their friends place and we would spread out all over their apartment.

Late in the afternoon on May 7th we got a taxi back to JFK and got our flight back to Salt Lake. We were afraid it would be too hard on Helen and Rick's car. Everyone agreed that it was a really great vacation even if it was not really our thing.

THE END