



Orkney Today travel writer **LUKE WATERSON** discovers the human side of the Big Apple.

I WAS in a bad mood before I got to New York.

A few days of living it up in the Big Apple, that was the idea.

However. Complications with Continental Airlines had meant paying for an extortionate ticket at the last minute. By the end of my stay in Connecticut, where I'd spent the previous week, I was so near the end of my dollars my friend felt sorry enough to buy me the train fare down.

"Don't worry," he called as I left. "I busked in New York for years – you don't need much to get by."

Yeah right. Whether it was the jazz of Miles Davies or Frank Sinatra and 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'-type films that came to mind, when you imagined the place, you imagined glamour. As New Yorkers say, "Money talks and bullshit walks." What was New York without indulging the department stores and breakfasts in Manhattan with freshly squeezed fruit juice?

I was about to find out. New England fall quickly became never-ending suburbia. Big houses, big cars, big factories. I read 'The Great Gatsby' to console myself. It doesn't work. 'This is a valley of ashes' the narrator comments bitterly on this approach to downtown, 'ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air'.

Then Manhattan hits you. Bright signs, flowing over buildings in ever-changing sentences. Bright shopping bags from designer shops carrying tissue-wrapped gifts. Everyone has one and swings it slightly as they go. "People," simpers the driver, "put your baggage above your heads." I try but



cannot. Two fat security guards with flabby necks approach, gravely. They cannot either. "Mighty heavy, son – what you got in there?" He wants to know, item for item.

I enquired at the Port Authority bus terminal, "So, nowhere in this whole big city to leave my rucksack?"

"Nowhere," the desk lady said sullenly.

"Why not? What could possibly be of threat in my bag?"

"I am not at liberty to say."

Outside, another fire truck screeched to a halt. Some catastrophe? No, three firemen leaped out into the arms of some teenage girls to pose in a photograph.

My hotel's in Little Italy. It had a fan that kept me awake when the traffic didn't, a wobbly desk and little else. Well, I thought, I can have some Beatnik writer experience at least, poor

but colourful. Then I thought, the Beatniks had friends.

"You make sure you have a really great night now," the receptionist smiles at me with pearly teeth.

It's such a nice smile, I try to do just that. And I soon realise, as I wander the lively streets of Little Italy, old Italian in suits, singing the merits of their restaurants, that my friend was right: you didn't need big bucks to enjoy New York because people were so friendly, they would make it their mission to ensure you had a good time.

A pizza-maker in my chosen eatery strips off his vest (spattered with tomato, sweat) kneeling on the counter before one of a group of obese Chinese students.

"Am I not a hard worker?" he addresses the most attractive female in the group.

"Yes!" her friends jabber (she smiles,

embarrassed).

"Yes! I am a poor Italian with only this café for a home. Is this not sad?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then I ask this one favour from you. A single kiss. One juicy French kiss on these poor lips!" he touches his lips, covering them in flour. "Per Favore! One kiss – and all Italy is yours!"

The cigar bars, the colourful fire escapes draping even the dullest buildings like tinsel, the sixty-foot billboard of a Broadway fashion shop frequenter puffing on a Camel Light with real smoke coming from his mouth, the break-dancing at Grand Central Station, the miles of dusty books at the Strand bookstore you would think could only exist in a scene from Ghostbusters.

New York is a city for seeing, I found, as much as doing. Once I had discovered the fact that if you walked into a Jazz concert half way through, you skipped the cover charge and the boring support bands, there was little I wanted my resources couldn't stretch to. I ate my take-away bagels in Central Park and felt decadent as any city businessman, because the atmosphere alone was so rich and varied. There was always something going on, an argument between yellow cab-drivers at lights or a mad preacher predicting the apocalypse.

On my final night there, I didn't go to bed but walked down to the Brooklyn Bridge to where the mornings catch had just come in. Fishermen scratched their stubble waiting for the fancy restaurant owners to choose their lobsters and leave. Their day began at dusk and ended soon. Everything was a confusion of broken crates flapping cellophane and shrimp juice.

I shared a coffee in the port café with ravenous Chinese fishermen. It wasn't a Park Avenue restaurant; indeed you wouldn't know it was there at all. But those at our table were the most welcoming people I had met yet; the rough workaday New Yorkers the glitz of the city often covers up and forgets but that make it the incredible diverse place it is.

It's funny, I thought, looking back from the Staten Island Ferry, seeing the black Manhattan skyline framed in pollution pink. It was the most commonly exported New York image and I hadn't looked up at it the entire time I was there.