

SEP-7 -80



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The Secret To N.O. Tourism Success: The Hare Krishnas?

At long last, I have learned the secret of New Orleans' mushrooming tourist industry.

I have discovered why all those Yankees, Germans, French, Mexicans, Canadians and Japanese/Nikons are attracted to this historic, filthy city that's too broke to trim its trees and cut its grass, that spends millions of dollars building breathtaking fountains in ethnic plazas and then can't afford to pay for the water to turn them on; and that sports roads that are without question the lousiest in the Western Hemisphere (But remember, we have poor load-bearing soil here. Never let it be said we don't have an excuse for everything.).

Yet, with all those minuses, with only the French Quarter and the Superdome and heavy sauces going for us, something draws the foreigners. What?

Why, what else but New Orleans' unofficial greeters — the friendly Hare Krishnas at New Orleans International Airport?

Yep, I think they're it. The Hare Krishnas. They are the first and last New Orleanians encountered by tourists

upon arriving and departing the city. They are of incalculable value to our New Orleans — good will ambassadors all, you might say.

They are bright and happy young people. Leaving their tambourines in airport lockers and wearing wigs to hide their shaved heads, they work the entrances to the three concourses at the airport, exhibiting a persistency that would make the most zealous life insurance salesman appear a sniveling quitter by comparison.

One afternoon, upon seeing Yamamoto Osaki — the Japanese tourist — striding by, Nikon dangling, a Krishna beams a good-hearted smile and a cheery greeting:

"From out of town, sir? Can I have a moment of your time, sir? I'd like to tell you about our work with underprivileged children and the camp we run for them and the hungry people we feed and, God bless you sir, have you got any spare change? It would greatly help us in our work with . . ."

At this point Mr. Osaki is still heading for the baggage claim area, but our ambassador is hustling right along with him, heeling like an obedient dog.

Finally, Mr. Osaki digs into his pocket and produces an American quarter.

"Thank you very much," says the Krishna, "but I wonder if you could spare a little more? A dollar perhaps. For the children."

"Have only tens and twentys," says Mr. Osaki, never wishing to offend.

"Ah, but I can make change," smiles the Krishna, eyes gleaming.

In making change for the \$10 bill, the Krishna counts slowly, very slowly, one dollar at a time:

"One. We could really use as much as you can spare.

"Two. We're doing wonderful work with children and the underprivileged.

"Three. God bless you. Our work costs money, but little children are worth it.

"Four. Could you spare more than a dollar? The hungry . . ."

Unable to bear the torture, Mr. Osaki stops the count at six, leaving the Krishna with four, and stumbles off to claim his baggage, his visit to New Orleans off to a stunning start.

And that's how it often happens, says Aviation Board Director Paul Stoulig. "When they stop you, don't ever let them see more than a \$1 bill. Once

they see a five or a ten, they'll ask you to let 'em make change. Then they'll give you the money back a dollar at a time with a spiel going on until you finally say, 'Gimme my damned money,' or until you give them more than a dollar.

"One of our policemen estimated they're making \$3,500 to \$4,000 a week out here," adds Stoulig. "And they're here to stay because we're under a federal court order. Right now we're thinking about putting them in a booth like they do in Atlanta. They'd still be able to talk to people away from the booth, but once it came time to give the donation they'd have to go back to the booth with the person. And that would kill 'em. Right now, they're only allowed to approach people in areas of free movement. They can't come up to you when you're standing in the ticket line. You have to be able to get away."

Funny thing is, though, for all the 'God bless yous' they give out while hustling people, their tune can change, as I found out.

Walking toward Concourse A, I was accosted by a female Krishna. She began the regular spiel, and I cut her off:

"No, I don't want to give anything."

"God bless you. Not even a quarter, fifty cents?"

"No, nothing."

"But God bless you, for the children

"

"No."

Her smile vanished, she wheeled around and made a beeline for another mark. By the time she'd glued herself to his side, she was beaming her "God loves yous" once again.

If a federal judge says these people have a right to hustle money at the airport, then so be it. I would suggest, however, that other groups begin doing the same thing. Give the Krishnas a little competition. I'd suggest that high school kids collecting for their charities and proms descend in droves on the airport lobby, shaking tin cans full of change. I'd recommend that the Salvation Army take up a post there, too, with a small brass band, perhaps. Certain church groups would fit in nicely, too.

Until the others show up, though, I'll let you know that a Krishna's life can be rough. It's not all incense and brown rice. Sometimes the people they take for easy targets turn out to be just the opposite:

I know this because I have a friend

who invited his parents to visit him from their home in Pennsylvania. My friend is almost fanatically devoted to his parents, and he was determined to show them a good time on their visit to New Orleans.

Their first night here, he took them for a stroll on Bourbon Street. As they walked, a Krishna in full regalia fastened himself to my friend's side and shoved a handful of incense sticks in his face.

"Please, brother, buy some incense. Help the little children."

"No, thanks, don't want any."

"But it's the best incense."

"Don't want any!"

"It would really help us if . . ."

"If you don't get away from me, I'll have to hit you," said my friend, who means what he says.

"People are starving and you can't spare . . ."

Wham!

And my friend and his parents had walked another block when a policeman grabbed my friend's shoulder, wheeled him around and asked, "Did you hit that man back there?"

"Yes," said my friend.

"Congratulations," said the cop. "Great punch."