

Ramoth: This is definitely New York

by Martha Ramoth

Chukchi News and Information Service

KOTZEBUE — For an Eskimo from sparsely populated Arctic Alaska, touring New York City and visiting friends there can be a unique experience, from touring the Statue of Liberty to roaming through Chinatown.

Growing up in a small village in Northwest Alaska, all my life I had heard, for example, about the Statue of Liberty. As I stood in line on a warm, clear calm day in March waiting to board the boat for the Statue of Liberty, around me were people speaking Japanese, Spanish and German.

**Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage**

OPINION

Because the boat was so crowded, we hurried to its top to get a good view of the city. We stood side-by-side overlooking another crowd below us. Across the bay, the statue stood tall and proud on a small island. She was taller than any building in Kotzebue.

We got off the boat, bought tickets and started up the stairs inside the statue. The long line made each step like a slow motion march.

As we climbed, the stairway became narrow and the steps got shorter. About 355 steps later, we reached the top of the statue, a space so small that three of us had to snuggle together. Graffiti filled the walls. Through the tiny windows, New York City spread before us. For three minutes we took pictures, hugged each other and looked around one more time before starting back down.

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Walking down was harder. My boots were slippery and I had to hold with a firm grip on the railing. The harder I held, the more my hands became wet from sweating. So I took a deep breath and relaxed. After a few minutes, I began enjoying the walk. When we left, I was relaxing as I watched people around us and I also gazed at the statue until it was a small figure across the bay. It differed so from my village in Northwest Alaska.

The following day we looked up a friend in Soho I hadn't seen in four years. I had not told her I was coming to New York. My companion, Michael, knocked on her door. I hid in the elevator.

"Surprise!" I hollered a few minutes later as we approached for a long hug. Sue's apartment was lined with artwork and plants.

"Martha, I can't believe that you are here," Sue kept saying. After we talked for about an hour, we decided to do a casting. She poured water and some powdery mixture and stirred it together. We held our hands, clasping them together. We laughed wildly as we bent over the bucket. In a few minutes, the casting of our hands was done. We decided to get together to tour Greenwich Village the next day.

The next morning, Michael dropped me off on the corner of Canal Street and West Broadway. I smelled sauerkraut at a hot dog stand. A

singing Frenchman was making hot dogs nearby for his long line of customers. I certainly had never seen anything like him in Kotzebue.

Sue and I walked to Greenwich Village from her apartment. Black was definitely the latest thing. Some women were wearing black leather mini skirts or tight pants. Some wore colorful mini skirts or had hair sticking out with outrageous colorful earrings. "This is definitely New York," I told Sue.

One of the highlights of Greenwich Village was visiting the art galleries. One gallery was displaying some paintings of the Mona Lisa in 18 different styles.

That evening, Michael and I visited Chinatown. On the corner, I smelled an odor similar to Kimchee, a spicy pickled cabbage dish. On another corner I smelled fish. Most wore American-style clothes. Some women wore long gowns with cloth shoes.

We found a restaurant as we were getting hungry from smelling all the food. It looked very modern, clean and busy. As we approached the top floor we could hear someone singing in Chinese.

We made a turn and approached the doorway. The women wore fancy, bright-colored silk dresses. The men wore suits.

It must have been some sort of convention or ball. We looked at each

other and left the entryway immediately. "With my Inupiaq Eskimo heritage, I could have easily blended with this crowd, but I wouldn't have been able to understand anyone," I said to Michael.

Once outside again we found ourselves in a plain-looking building. The menu was written in Chinese, and we had to decide what we wanted to eat from looking at the pictures. The waiter tried talking to me in Chinese. I shook my head and tried to explain that I was an Eskimo from Alaska. He left the table confused. After eating there, we continued walking the streets window shopping.

I did not feel tired in spite of the tight schedule from morning until late at night. I was so fascinated by climbing the Statue of Liberty and touched by its magnitude as a symbol of freedom. Looking up at her made me feel thankful that I am a free American.

It was also fun seeing my friend and Greenwich Village, a place she frequently talked about when she lived in Kotzebue.

Touring Chinatown made me realize that the Chinese still continue their traditional ways in America, by selling traditional food and speaking in their native language, just as Inupiat Eskimos do in small villages in Northwest Alaska, and all within the border of the same country.

Inupiat Eskimo Martha Ramoth, who speaks her Native language fluently, grew up in Selawik and now lives in Kotzebue where she works for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. She wrote this piece in a writing class at Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.