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Touring Harbor and History by Boat and by Audio

By JOSEPH BERGER

The Circle Line may have Marilyn Monroe - she had an apartment near Sutton Place, its guides point out - but a new boat tour of New York Harbor has Elvis Presley. In the 1950's, he reported for military service at the waterfront Brooklyn Army Terminal, the husky voice of the actress Kathleen Turner informed bobbing passengers on yesterday's shakedown cruise.

The new boat trips, which will open to the public Oct. 15, are meant to call attention to some of the 22 parks and historic sites operated by the National Park Service in the New York area. The originators hope the five-a-day excursions will eventually become as much a fixture of New York tourism as, well, the Circle Line cruises.

On a radiant day for an outing on the water, a group of National Park officials and rangers and executives of the agency's fund-raising arm, the National Park Foundation - including the philanthropist David Rockefeller Jr., its citizen chairman - took a 75-minute cruise on a yellow catamaran operated by New York Water Taxi.

They set out from Pier 11 at Wall Street, hooked around the sierra-like tip of Manhattan, passed the doleful void of ground zero, then headed south. They sailed by some park service sites - the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and Governors Island - and reached as far south as the 341-year-old Fort Wadsworth in the shadows of the stately Verrazano-Narrows Bridge before returning as a haze gathered over the skyline.

All along, the 45 passengers and park rangers - some on the windy top deck and others ensconced on cushioned seats inside the boat's cabin - listened on headsets to the voices of Ms. Turner, Mr. Rockefeller and the historians Kenneth T. Jackson and David McCullough.

They learned that Lower Manhattan was a seasonal home for the Lenni Lenape Indians, who granted the Dutch land-use rights to Manhattan but did not actually sell it for \$24 in trinkets. They learned that it was the Erie Canal that turned New York into the country's largest seaport for more than 100 years, and that in 1850 P. T. Barnum sold 6,000 tickets at Castle Garden in Battery Park for a concert by Jenny Lind, "the Swedish Nightingale," even though the castle did not hold nearly that many people.

They were delighted by a snippet of Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as "crested and scallop-edged waves" frolicked around them. They heard the architect Daniel Libeskind, who drew the master plan for the new World Trade Center site, describe his refugee family's bedazzled glimpse of the Statue of Liberty "out of the mist and the fog."

Mr. Rockefeller said he was pleased with the narration, known as the Gateway to America tour. "It's like an audio guide in a museum, and if you're in a museum taking the audio guide it's because you want to be educated," he said.

The narration was broadcast to the tourists' receivers from an MP3 player designed by Antenna Audio. At times, though, the reception was muffled by the wind or by dips in volume, and when the narrator pointed out the ventilator building of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel it was moments before passengers could actually see it. The operators hope to correct such problems.

The tours are the first major project of the National Parks of New York Harbor, a new entity created a year ago to place the National Park Service's 22 sites under a single umbrella that might entice more visitors. In addition to sites as familiar as the Statue of Liberty, there are also many lesser-known places, like Fort Wadsworth and the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Marian S. Heiskell, a member of the family that controls The New York Times Company, was a leader in the campaign to create the Gateway National Recreation Area, which includes the refuge, and took yesterday's tour.

The tours, priced at \$20 for adults, are a product of a contract between the National Park Foundation and New York Water Taxi, which runs six catamarans that take commuters daily between Manhattan and Queens, Brooklyn and Jersey City. Part of the tour revenue will go to the National Parks of New York Harbor Project, according to Marie Salerno, the project's president. The public tours will leave from Pier 17 at the South Street Seaport, not Pier 11.

Yesterday, the air was already crackling with the fresh rivalry of an upstart and a long-established veteran. Tom Fox, president of New York Water Taxi, said that the Gateway tour reached many places in the harbor that the Circle Line did not, and that the Circle Line tour "offers a guy squawking over a box saying, 'Marilyn Monroe lived here.' "

Andreas Sappok, general manager of Circle Line Sightseeing Cruises, said he had never heard of the new tour but pointed out that his organization uses live guides. "I'd rather have narration from a human being than out of the can," he said.