Bus tour aims to rally support for New Orleans

By Stacy A. Teicher | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

NEW ORLEANS—

For months, they’ve watched New Orleans through the lenses of news cameras. But these visitors - from as close as Centreville, Miss., and as far away as Providence, R.I. - want to see it with their own eyes. They’re gladly paying $35 each for a local guide’s perspective on the catastrophe and the city’s nascent recovery.

On this Sunday afternoon, a number of passengers on the new Gray Line Hurricane Katrina Tour recall growing up visiting the Crescent City. Now it’s as if they need visual confirmation of the sadness they’ve already internalized. “New Orleans will never be the same again,” says Ouida Roy of Lafayette, La., even before the bus rolls out from its riverfront base in the French Quarter.

Others are more forward-looking. Heather Foley is researching post-Katrina commemorative landscaping for her thesis at the Rhode Island School of Design. During her three-week trip, she’s also volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. “I’m trying to get my bearings on the city...I feel a little voyeuristic doing this,” she confesses.

Indeed, controversy has surrounded the start-up of for-profit tours in the midst of the Gulf Coast recovery. Some residents are offended to have their personal loss on display. And there have been scattered reports of rude tourists trespassing on property or callously taking close-up pictures as people sort through the rubble of their former lives.

But many give a thumbs up to Gray Line, a company that employed 65 people here before the hurricane. Temporarily down to six employees, it’s been filling its buses since it started the Katrina tours last week. They do not stop in front of homes or let passengers off to take photos. The buses also bypass the Lower 9th Ward, where the flood surge was particularly strong and the rebuilding prospects are still unknown. The primarily African-American residents waited months before being allowed in to see what little is left, and some have complained of feeling exploited and gawked at by tourists. At least one tour company was taking vans through the Lower 9th Ward until the City Council passed a law last week that prohibits for-profit tours east of the Industrial Canal.

Greg Hoffman, vice president of Gray Line of New Orleans Inc., says he initially resisted the idea of a Katrina tour. After all, he lost his own home in Lakeview, one of the neighborhoods now included on the bus route.

But “we kept hearing that congressmen from other states were not in support of our rebuilding effort unless they came and saw it with their own two eyes,” he says, and they realized the tours might help rally the support of people from all over the country. “Certainly we’re doing it in a very
tasteful and sensitive fashion," he maintains.

Three dollars from each ticket will go to charitable groups helping New Orleans to recover.

"Anything that brings people closer to some understanding of what it's like to be in [the victims'] shoes ... is a good thing," says Rich Harrill, director of the International Tourism Research Institute at the University of South Carolina. "Given that they're donating some of the proceeds ... it's a great example of the power of tourism to enlighten people."

As the bus rumbles down Canal Street, tour guide Julia Gorney points out watermarks and some shops still boarded up after looters smashed their windows. She gives a dramatic narration of the Katrina timeline.

It's a sunny day, and from the bus windows, the Superdome looks untainted. But passengers sit somberly as Ms. Gorney describes how more than 25,000 people sought refuge there and then became trapped without lights, air conditioning, or adequate food and water.

Signs of readjustments appear as well: A cruise ship still houses police officers and others; construction workers are busy at every turn.

The interstate provides a good view of the landscape speckled with blue tarps covering damaged roofs. But most people don't pull out cameras or crane their necks until the bus pulls off the highway into Lakeview. Here, everything seems brown where it was once green. The first houses visible are just one story high. A dirty line near the tops of the doors marks where floodwaters crested. A tattered curtain flaps in the breeze.

Gorney explains the red spray-painted "X" markings made by emergency workers. The number in the bottom part of the X designates how many people were found dead. There are zeros on most of these homes. Passengers can see block upon block of similar destruction.

"I had tears in my eyes.... I feel very sorry for them," says Nancy Miller. She went to college in New Orleans and drove about an hour to take the tour.

"What makes it worse is there's so much of it," says Pat Roy, Ouida's husband. On the tour, Gorney mentioned that about 80 percent of the city was flooded.

In another neighborhood, deserted except for a few work crews and people living in trailers, someone had propped up a sign: "Goodbye N'Awlin's. We'll miss you."

The drive along the lakefront, with a military escort, reveals remnants of boat slips and the small homes built above them. Another painted message on one brings a needed humor break: "For sale. Needs 'some' work."

When the bus makes its way through City Park, there are more signs of life: children playing, a few joggers, and a bride who waves to the delighted passengers.

During the nearly three-hour tour, Gorney packs in plenty of information about everything from wetland conservation to how the city's port and local seafood industry impacts the US economy. She circulates a voluntary petition urging Congress to continue to support Gulf Coast rebuilding.

It's the small, hopeful moments in the revival of her city that enable Gorney to face the destruction each day - both on her work shifts and at her mother's flood-damaged house in Slidell. "The human spirit can only wear sackcloth and ashes for so long," she says. "What makes me happy is seeing the progress that's been made."
ON THE BUS: Rev. Judith Kelsey-Powell of Chicago takes a photo. She and her husband, Keith, came from Chicago to tour New Orleans.

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Deadline Aug 17, 2009

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