

United Nations guides: **ambassadors to the public**



For further information on the UN guided tours, requests for photos or to interview a UN guide, please contact Helene Hoedl at
Tel: (1) 212- 963-3242,
Fax: (1) 212-963-0071,
e-mail: hoedl@un.org; www.un.org/tours

The UN Guided Tours

37 million visitors

United Nations guides have been conducting tours for visitors through the New York Headquarters since November 1952. In these fifty years, 37 million visitors have been introduced to this fascinating centre of world diplomacy. The first corps of 10 guides was hired by the American Association for the United Nations which ran the tour operation until 1955 when the guided tour operation was incorporated into the United Nations Office of Public Information. The United Nations buildings were, at that time, a new addition to the New York City skyline, and had quickly become one of the city's most popular attractions, on a par with the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and the Rockefeller Center.

Traffic on the tour route reached its peak in 1964 with over 1.2 million visitors. The attendance now fluctuates around 400,000 visitors a year, with May usually being the busiest month due to the large number of school groups.

The number of tour guides – and number of nationalities represented – has varied over the years. In 1953, the operation included 50 guides. In 1969, some 41 nationalities were represented among a staff which conducted tours in 37 languages. Today, the Guided Tours Unit employs between 40 and 60 guides, who give tours in 20 languages and come from nearly 30 different countries.

The original \$1.00 fee has increased and the United Nations membership has grown from 52 Member States, but many aspects of the tour remain the same. People come every day from all over the world to see the place where world leaders meet and global issues are discussed. The tour covers the main council chambers and exhibits on peacekeeping, decolonization and disarmament and finishes in the General Assembly Hall, the room where all Member States gather at once. Throughout the one-hour lecture tour, the guide explains the functions, composition and current actions of each council, as well as the activities of the United Nations system. The tour route also highlights the rich architecture and artwork of United Nations Headquarters. Some favourites among the visitors include an intricate Chinese ivory carving ("one hundred men worked on it for two and a half years..."), a large Belgian tapestry ("contains enough thread to go around the world twice...") and a colourful mosaic of a Norman Rockwell painting depicting people of every age, race and creed.

Who are the guides?

The United Nations tour guides are called "ambassadors to the public", because of their direct contact with the people who visit its Headquarters every day. The guides play an important role in shaping people's perceptions of the work of the United Nations. They must provide accurate and timely information about the activities of the system of the United Nations and help dispel popular misperceptions that people sometimes hold. They are young people from all over the world with different backgrounds, sharing a common interest in international issues and eager to serve an Organization that works for world peace and understanding among peoples.

Since the early years, guides have represented a mix of nationalities and backgrounds. They often have lived in more than one country or travelled widely abroad, giving them linguistic skills as well as a personal commitment to international cooperation.

The position of United Nations guide has always attracted a large number of talented young people from all over the world. To become a United Nations guide, an applicant must be fluent in English and at least one additional language. It is not unusual, for instance, for some guides to give tours in three or four languages in the course of their day. College education and public speaking skills are also required. The job used to be limited to women between 20 and 30 years of age. The first male guide was hired in 1977. Today, men account for approximately one fourth of the total number of the guiding staff.

***Being a UN guide:
A trying but rewarding experience***

Once recruited, the guides go through an intensive training period, during which they learn about the history of the United Nations, the functions of its main organs and the activities of the United Nations system and become thoroughly familiar with the principles of the Charter. There are no preset lectures. Each guide puts together her or his own presentation. Throughout the year, the guides are briefed every morning on the latest developments regarding the work of the Organization in order to keep their presentation current to the very day of the tour and ensure that they can respond to the many questions about UN activities from visitors. Specialists on such topics as landmines, global warming, children and armed conflict brief the guides on a regular basis.

A guide must have tact, patience and political sense, having to present the role of the United Nations with clarity and precision. She or he must be able to respond diplomatically to sometimes critical comments from the visitors, hopefully providing the questioner with a new perspective on an issue or a more realistic sense of what the Organization can or cannot do.

Every day the United Nations guides enrich their own experience by meeting groups of people as varied as sixth-graders from the Bronx, Yanomani people from the Brazilian Amazon, West Point Cadets, Girl Scouts and New Zealand cattle breeders.

Even though it may often be frustrating and difficult, most guides find the job a rewarding experience, as they become well-versed in United Nations affairs and have the opportunity of working in an international environment with colleagues from many different countries.

***The uniforms:
Changing fashions***

Most uniforms worn by the United Nations tour guides have been provided by internationally renowned designers. The uniform worn by the first UN guides was a tailored suit reminiscent of the style worn by flight attendants in the 1950s. It was the only time when a hat was part of the United Nations guides' outfit, as well as epaulettes, giving the guides a strict but elegant look. The conservative style remained until 1969, when Evan Picone created a daring new look, featuring a miniskirt and a two-colour scheme. Hemlines fell again in 1977 when the guides donned a uniform created by Hollywood designer Edith Head, consisting of a skirt and a jacket in the recognizable blue colour of the United Nations, with navy trim and a scarf adorned with the Organization's emblem.

The beginning of the eighties ushered in an era of renewed conservatism, reflected in the style of the guides' uniform. A sashed navy blue suit designed by the French designer Christian Dior was introduced in 1982 and three years later, the American designer Harvé Benard created a tailored navy uniform. Both, in fact, looked very similar to some of the earliest uniforms worn by the guides in the fifties and early sixties. In 1988, the Italian company Benetton designed and donated a new uniform, a departure from past styles, with a lightweight wool suit in black and white houndstooth check pattern combined with a royal blue knit top. In 1995, a classic navy blue suit from Jones NY was introduced, complemented with a pale yellow top and a scarf with the United Nations emblem.

The new uniforms, designed and provided by the Italian fashion house Mondrian, combine classic elegance with versatility and comfort. The tailored navy blue suits for women and men are matched with light-blue blouses or shirts and a scarf or tie adorned with the United Nations emblem. For the first time, a maternity outfit will be included in the line. Also for the first time, shoes, provided by the Italian footwear company Valleverde, will complement the new uniforms. The shoes come from the company's classic line and meet all the requirements for comfort and style.

As an alternative to the official uniform, guides will continue to have the option of wearing their national dress, thus adding colour and diversity to the look of this group of "ambassadors to the public".

Photos featuring the guides are available upon request. Please check our web site at www.un.org/tours/pages/new.htm

