

For millions of immigrants, New York's Ellis Island was their first experience of the United States. JANE MEMMLER finds out how they made their way into the New World

THAT FIRST glimpse of America's symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty, must have put the broadest of smiles on new immigrants' faces. After spending weeks, sometimes months, in appalling conditions in the dark depths of ships, the sight of Liberty and land could not come soon enough.

Mooring at the elegant, brownstone immigration station on Ellis Island was only the first part of the journey for those desperate people who wanted to become Americans. They still had to endure a thorough medical examination, with doctors testing for up to 30 different conditions.

Today, you can follow in the footsteps of 12 million people who were processed at Ellis Island, just across the Hudson from Manhattan, between 1892 and 1954. A museum tells the story of the life of the new arrivals through interactive displays and memorabilia. It is a fascinating insight into how millions of people became US citizens.

There is no better guide than Mr Ellis Island himself, Tom Bernadin. After 28 years working there, there is not a tile or bench that he cannot tell a story about.

We began the tour in the cavernous arrivals hall, which was once full of cattle runs. The uncertain foreigners, mostly from Europe, no doubt felt they were being treated like cattle as they waited, sometimes for up to eight hours.

Most would be clinging to their possessions, often little more than a few meagre belongings wrapped in a sheet. For the lucky ones with trunks, the baggage helped to disguise a limp or a missing finger, which at least got them to the next stage – the strict medical examination.

Behind a massive glass case are dozens of examples of their luggage, from elaborate Turkish carpet bags to rudimentary baskets and trunks. Most, however, had their possessions wrapped up in a comforter – part of Russian girls' dowries.

The arrivals then climbed a staircase to undergo their medical examination. The main disease that infected so many was trachoma, a highly contagious eye infection. Those affected were sent to isolation wards before being sent back whence they came, their return passage paid for by the steamship companies.

"Most immigrants travelled in steerage with no light," Tom explained. "No wonder they got sick. Generally, there was only one sink for up to 100 people. When they arrived they were sick, tired and frightened."

We passed room after room of crude metal bunks, ugly-looking surgical implements, crockery and cutlery – everything you need to make a "hotel" work.

But the exhibition is not just about the processing. It's about the immigrants' life, once accepted on to US soil. Dozens of



Tread the footsteps of the new Americans

PORT OF CALL: Ellis Island, the first sight of the promised land for millions of immigrants

photographs show the neighbourhoods that became their new "home away from home" – children playing in the streets, women dancing, sports events and shopping. There are original metal street signs, many with names that reminded of home, such as Suffolk Street. A collection of 35 original newspapers in dozens of languages provided news and useful advice in the immigrants' own tongue.

"Bet you don't know where the word WAP came from?" Tom asked me. From what I knew, it was a derogatory term for Italians

but it meant "without papers". This was how many immigrants arrived.

Most faces that stared down from the huge black and white photographs looked happy and resigned in their adopted country, happy to become part of the great American dream.

LAST stop on our tour was Central Railroad Station, on the New Jersey mainland, from where successful immigrants were transported to their life in the New World. Blown up in 1916 by an explosion in the ammunitions stored in 78 railway cars (an act of sabotage by German sympathisers), it has now been restored. Today, you can see the original signs listing destinations for the immigrants, such as High Bridge and Somerville.

Not everyone was so lucky. Some had to make another long journey back home.

● **GETTING THERE:** *Bon Voyage* (0800 316 0194/www.bon-voyage.co.uk) offers three-night packages to New York from £1,450pp (two sharing), including room only at the London NYC Hotel and return flights on Silverjet, the all-business airline (valid for travel until May 31, 2007).

Tom Bernadin, former National Park Service ranger at Ellis Island and author of *The Ellis Island Immigrant Cookbook*, offers private and group tours of historical Ellis Island (www.ellislandtours.com). A three-hour tour of Ellis Island and Lower Manhattan costs \$US25pp (£12.70).

New York Tourism: 020 7202 6368/www.nyecvst.com.



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