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Hey Big Spenders, A B'way Giveaway

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vacationing couple from Australia were among the first to cash in on the city's latest attempt to boost its sluggish economy yesterday, turning their shopping spree into free Broadway tickets.

"Spend Your Regards to Broadway" gives two tickets to anyone who spends at least \$500 at stores, restaurants and museums by Jan. 16 (starting Jan. 1). In this case, Rachel and Matthew Bentley of Sydney opted to see "The Tale of the Allergist's Wife." The couple's spending spree included dress shirts at Macy's and cosmetics at Bloomingdale's.

"The purpose of this program obviously is to support Broadway, but [also] to support the entire tourism-related industry," said Cristyne Lategano Nicholas, president of NYC & Company, the city convention and tourism bureau.

January is traditionally a slow month for both retailers and Broadway shows, but both industries are expected to feel the pinch even more this year because of the Sept. 11 terror attacks and the economic downturn, officials said.

Many restaurants, especially those below Houston St., have seen revenues plummet by up to 50%, said Tim Zagat, publisher of the restaurant guide.

"The next month will be very crucial for all the tourism industries in New York," said Jed Bernstein, president of the League of American Theatres and Producers.

Shoppers must rack up \$500 in receipts by Jan. 16, but have till Jan. 31 to redeem them for tickets. Bring receipts to the Visitors Information Center, 810 Seventh Ave., between 52nd and 53rd Sts., Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m.-6 p.m. and Saturday-Sunday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Tickets to performances through March are available for for the following shows: "Beauty and the Beast," "Cabaret", "Chicago," "Contact," "Les Miserables," "Proof," "The Full Monty," "The Phantom of the Opera," "Allergist's Wife" and "Urinetown."

Tourism officials expect to give away about 34,000 tickets out of 50,000 that the city bought as part of a \$2.5 million bailout for ailing Broadway shows. About 16,000 tickets were given to various charities and Ground Zero rescue workers last month.

Some advocacy groups have criticized the expense when the city is looking to slash its budget by \$766 million.

But tourism officials said the latest campaign is expected to generate \$10 million to \$15 million in sales.

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