

# THE TOURIST OF DEATH

*Here's a recipe for an Internet phenomenon: Begin with a major disaster, create an improbable image that cuts to the core of the disaster, and then distribute the image to a stunned and gullible public.*

## **I**NBOX HORROR

Were you one of the millions of people who were e-mailed this photograph in the weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001? A young man wearing a black ski coat and knit cap is standing on the observation deck of the World Trade Center with Manhattan in the background. Behind him, a jet airliner is flying straight for the building, just seconds away from crashing into the floors below. The date stamp on the bottom right corner: "9-11-01."

By telling two conflicting stories—the blissfully ignorant tourist, and the hijacked plane that was about to take his life—the image perfectly captured the sense of security and complacency that Americans felt before the terrorists shattered it and “changed everything.” The caption on the photo drove home the point even more:

This picture was from a camera found in the wreckage of the WTC, developed by the FBI for evidence and released on the net today. The guy still has no name and is missing. Makes you see things from a very different position. Please share this and find any way you can to help Americans not to be victims in the future of such cowardly attacks.

## **WAIT A SECOND**

The photo was convincing enough at first...until people took a closer look at it. Why was the tourist wearing a coat and hat when the attack took place on a warm summer morning? Why was he on the observation deck a half-hour before it opened? Why was the plane in the photo coming from the north, when it actually approached from the south? Oh, and why was it the *wrong kind of plane*? But those inconsistencies didn't slow it down. According to columnist J. Scott Wilson: “In one day, I received no less than 150 copies of it from various readers, friends, and acquaintances. Despite the numerous impossibilities present in the photo, folks just seemed to accept it at face value.”

But not everyone. Many wanted to know: Who was this guy? Who manipulated the photo? And why?

But before any answers were found, the image took on a life of its own all over the Internet. Several Web sites sprang up, such as *TouristOfDeath.com* and *TheTouristGuy.com*, featuring shots of “Waldo” (as he came to be known) showing up in other photos of historic disasters. There he was, posing in front of the *Hindenburg* as it went down in flames! And then in Tokyo, while Godzilla laid waste to the city! And there he was back on the World Trade Center, but now, instead of a plane, he’s about to be done in by the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters!*

### WHODUNIT?

All the hype and spin-offs only added to the mystery of who this man in the photo really was. Over the next few weeks, commentators and pundits alike blamed everyone from bored students at MIT, to a “true-blooded American” attempting to stir up patriotism, to Osama Bin Laden sympathizers who wanted to gloat. And then, in early November, a 41-year-old Brazilian businessman named José Roberto Penteadó sent an e-mail to *Wired News*: “I believe that some friends planted my face onto that body.” He said he’d never even been to New York and couldn’t explain why someone would do it, but the guy in the photo looked just like him.

Penteadó became an instant celebrity. He appeared on several Brazilian talk shows and was featured in news stories all over the world. People approached him on the street and asked for his autograph, and Volkswagen’s Brazilian subsidiary offered to buy the rights to the image from him and put it in a series of TV commercials. Suddenly, Penteadó stood to profit...for doing absolutely nothing at all.

There was one problem, though: Although he resembled the Tourist of Death, why didn’t he have the original photo that his head was lifted from? And why was his jaw wider than the Tourist of Death’s? And, when people really scrutinized it, Penteadó’s face appeared to have a different shape altogether.

Meanwhile, halfway around the world in Hungary, a group of friends knew for certain that Penteadó was a fake, because they knew who the *real* fake was.

## EXPOSED

Back in November 1997, a 21-year-old man named Peter Guzli from Budapest, Hungary, had taken a vacation to New York City. While sightseeing, his buddy snapped a few shots of him on top of the WTC. Nearly four years later, shortly after the attacks occurred, Guzli found himself drawn to that picture folder. On a lark, he searched online and found an image of a plane (which was actually sitting on a tarmac in Houston, Texas, when the photo was taken) and then used Photoshop to cut the plane out of the picture and superimpose it over the background of his vacation shot. He added the fake time stamp and sent it to a few friends as a joke...never expecting that one of them would send it to *his* friends, who then sent it to *their* friends, and so on, and so on.

The more famous his doctored image became, the less Guzli wanted anything to do with it. He knew that a lot of shell-shocked Americans would take offense at his attempt at dark humor. But then, when Penteado's fame began to spread, Guzli's friends urged him to come forward and claim the money for the VW commercial himself. Guzli refused, so his friends decided to do it for him. Two months after the picture first went viral, images with and without the plane were posted onto a Hungarian news site. From there, the mainstream press got hold of the pictures, and the Tourist of Death finally had a name.

## STAYING OUT OF DANGER

When Guzli was pressed for an explanation, he admitted that he "didn't have sleepless nights" over the incident, "but I certainly didn't want people to point their fingers at me on the street. I don't think this thing has to do with empathy or the lack of it. The people I intended it for all said they had a great laugh. That's all." When asked if he planned to profit from his fame, Guzli said he'd think about it. But after Volkswagen withdrew their offer (apparently realizing how tacky it would be to profit from such a horrific event), Guzli happily went back to anonymity.

But that picture—recently named by several publications as one of the most powerful images of the 2000s—will live on in infamy, along with its hundreds of silly variations.