Welcome to the Big City. Beware the Dinosaurs.

By MAREK FUCHS

New York can be a tough place for a couple of college kids from Tulsa, as Brian and Chris Harms learned this summer.

After arriving here from Oklahoma to help with research at the American Museum of Natural History, the Harmeses, who are fraternal twins, took a few wrong turns on the subway, which left them no choice but to pay a stranger for directions.

"He was an unseemly fellow," Brian Harms said, "so we just gave him the cash." The directions proved to be good, however.

Brian and Chris Harms were among the 21 students who took part in the museum's Research Experience for Undergraduates program this summer, which is financed by the National Science Foundation. The program allows college students to work with the researchers at the museum, on Central Park West between 77th and 81st Streets. It is a heady enough experience for those with specialized interests in biology and the physical sciences, but for the dozen students who come from out of state, spending a summer in New York City is equally attractive.

Students are given a $3,500 housing stipend for the 10-week program, and sometimes a museum researcher would put them up for a night or so, until they could find their own place.

After much searching in newspapers and online, Brian and Chris Harms, who attend the University of Oklahoma, ended up in International House, a residence for students on Riverside Drive in Harlem. Another student, Andrew Fleming, insisted that he wanted a studio on the Lower East Side.

"I was speaking to a landlord," Mr. Fleming, 21, said, "and he laughed at me and said, 'You're not tough enough for the Lower East Side, you'll never make it.' Luckily, he had an apartment for me in the West Village."

Mr. Fleming, who goes to school in the lightly populated Upper Peninsula of Michigan, at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, said his first days in the city were a bit intimidating. "The town has 7,000 people, and it shrinks to half that when school's out," he said. "I figured out that the entire town could fit into Central Park. It was a little overwhelming."

Even the familiar proved somehow unfamiliar. Chris Harms likes to play basketball back in Oklahoma and began playing at International House, where residents play with people off the street.

He noted with a smile that there was a discernible difference between the way the game is played back home and in the city. Could he be more specific? "They foul a whole lot more here."

The study program is selective, with an acceptance rate of about one in four. Museum staff members are asked to write summaries of their studies to be posted on the museum's Web site, where applicants can see them. The applicants then write essays about which two studies best suit them.

Eric Sahm said he made the case to come from the mountains of Utah to study rocks, specifically the properties of jadeite.

"It's just been a great springboard to graduate school," he said, though he noted that the $1,500 a month he paid to sublease a small one-bedroom apartment at 106th Street and Columbus Avenue would pay the mortgage "on a pretty nice house back home."

In addition to his research, Mr. Sahm, who is married, enjoyed Shakespeare in the Park and a romantic first anniversary dinner at a revolving restaurant atop a Times Square hotel. "It was great.
and something I'd like to do again next time I can afford it, like in 10 years."

For the Harms brothers, there have been operas and Broadway plays and, for Brian Harms, a big surprise.

"I thought I was going to be studying rocks in a lab the whole time," he said. Shortly after the program started, he found himself in Greenland, looking for evidence of microscopic life in ancient rock. He stayed there for a month, bringing back 150 kilograms of rocks to study.

Speaking only days before heading home, the researchers seemed hesitant to let go of their summer.

Cataloging his social life as well as his work, Mr. Sahm just shrugged. "What didn't I like?"

Nathan Costello from Chicopee, Mass., who came to study meteorites, did have a complaint. He often had to work late, which meant walking by the various taxidermy figures in the dioramas and the dinosaurs, all in a darkened museum. "Eerie," he said, shaking his head. "Spooky."

For Chris Harms, who spent many nights at International House getting fouled by homegrown New York basketball talent, the summer was a great one.

Though he is normally soft-spoken, the prospect of no longer walking by the museum's dinosaurs on his way to work makes him sentimental.

"I can't believe I walked past those fossils every day," he said. "I used to fantasize about those dinosaurs every day when I was a kid." Working at Natural History while living in New York City, "was like living a childhood dream," he said.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Chris Harms, left, and his brother, Brian, from Oklahoma, spent a 10-week internship at the American Museum of Natural History. (Photo by Lucian M. Read for The New York Times)