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## The Amma Will Hug You Now

By [Grace Wyler](#) | NEWSWEEK

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Last week a [Manhattan](#) convention center was the scene of a literal love-in when an estimated 15,000 people lined up to get free hugs from [Mata Amritanandamayi](#), better known as "Amma" or the "Hugging Saint." The 54-year-old native of [India](#) has hugged 27 million people worldwide, say her followers, and has gained a fan base in the West, where she's wrapping up a 10-city North American tour. Accompanied by white-robed groupies who caravan behind her tour bus, Amma, considered a saint by her acolytes, spends upwards of 18 hours a day giving hugs. "I am not like a battery that needs to be recharged, I am eternally connected to the power source," she says through a translator. (Amma speaks only Malayalam.) Hindu by birth, she does not affiliate with a specific religion—"My religion is love"—and encourages people to find faith through service. Amma is a trademarked brand with nonprofit status and volunteer projects that include a hospital in India and soup kitchens in the United States. She's funded by donations and proceeds from DVDs of her chanting, swimsuits and saris sold at events.

But despite the mysticism and the mobile gift shop, most just come for the good vibes. "I believe in God and I'm religious," says Mike Daniels, a city employee. "But I just wanted to get my hug."

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