

NEW ORLEANS IN SPRING

Music and Adventures in Louisiana

Written by Maria Sundeen

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When you picture New Orleans, the image that enters your head isn't of honeysuckle, yet it's the first thing that hits you as you cruise through the marshes of Louisiana and approach the city. Sweet, fragrant, light and fresh, it epitomizes the surprises New Orleans poses and is but one of the many sensual pleasures the city has to offer.

Springtime in New Orleans is like spring nowhere else. Blossoming flowers and foliage combine with the fresh, warm rains and surrounding wildlife to create an aura of romance and tranquility. It's also the time when New Orleans can be explored at its relative best—after the winter and Mardi Gras, and before the humid, sticky warmth of summer. This is also when the city hosts its annual Jazz & Heritage Festival (see related story). Although there are a fair number of tourists present for this rich and eclectic event, these are music aficionados and adventurers that light up the town at night, and it is perhaps the greatest time for the more spirited traveler to see the town at its cultural best.

We found that there are almost as many ways to explore the city as you can imagine. Before venturing out, however, it's critical to understand New Orleans from a historical perspective. The Mississippi Valley territory runs from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. It was this plot of land that was claimed by Rene Robert de la Salle for Louis XIV (hence the name Louisiana) on April 9, 1682. During the following two hundred years or so, the city served as an early shipping post for Caribbean, Spanish, French and American traders. Home to a mix of African, Creole, Native American, French and Spanish peoples, there is no singular quality or culture that dominates. There is just the "vibe," the spirit that pulses through the city like an electric current. The diversity of cultures here present an interesting menu of sights, sounds and smells, food and entertainment that could overwhelm but doesn't.

Bought for pocket change (less than three cents per acre for 828,000 square miles!) in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, it is also important to note that this is the only major Southern city that wasn't destroyed in the aftermath of the Civil War. Because of this fortunate role, New Orleans architecture is like nothing else in the South. Huge, columned homes, intricate iron grillwork, fancy shutters, doors and hinges make the city seem like home to dollhouse creators of the past. And New Orleans residents take

pride in that. Grillwork is well-maintained, decorated with lights and lush hanging plants, and homes are painted in contrasting colors that emphasize trimmed doorframes and windows. It's a world where you can imagine ladies fanning themselves on balconies under a humid star-filled sky, with cicadas buzzing and the ooze of marsh mud hanging in the air.

In order to capture the communal spirit, most travelers would be best served by leisurely touring all facets of the city—from the gentility of the Garden District and the obvious civic attractions, to the raucous and exuberant nightlife. But be warned. While the beauty of the season can be distracting, the weather can be too. April, May and part of June are typically rainy, so your explorations may be derailed or postponed. (A quick word from the wise: bring a light waterproof jacket and collapsible umbrella).

Exploring By Rail

It's important first to get oriented. The city is divided by Canal Street, which is the main thoroughfare that leads straight to the Mississippi River. Directly on the west side are the downtown and warehouse districts, and to the east is the French Quarter. But the best way to see more of the city is to take the St. Charles Streetcar. In operation since 1835, it is the oldest continually operating street rail-line in the world. Catch it downtown on St. Charles Avenue and tour through the city's Garden District. Here is where you can see and appreciate the art, history and architecture of New Orleans. Oak-lined streets testify to the history of the neighborhoods; and large, stately homes with pillars, Spanish moss-covered trees and porches, honeysuckle bushes, and silver-leaved banyon trees provide an intimacy and beauty that are at their best in April and May. While we toured past the secluded homes, everyday local life showed itself in the neighborhood churches, hospitals, synagogues, restaurants and schools (and the public library with the requisite tombstone), all of which do not seem to disrupt the tranquil and garden-like setting. It's an ideal place for an evening stroll, or a family reunion.

You can disembark as you enter the Uptown-University District and stroll through Audubon Park, which sits directly across from Loyola and Tulane Universities. Here you can picnic and get lost in the greenery. This is also where the Audubon Zoo is located—more than 58 acres and 1800 of the world's rarest animals, including the 4-foot Komodo Dragon, a huge alligator snapping turtle and the world's only white alligators. This urban zoo boasts an abundance of wildlife and vegetation native to Louisiana, as well as the award-winning Louisiana Swamp Exhibit which includes more than 100 animal species.

On the way home, stop off at Copeland's, which is right off the rail-line route. Owned by Al Copeland, a local businessman and founder of the Popeye's and Church's chains, it has the local stamp of approval. Here you can taste regional dishes such as etouffée, shrimp creole, boiled crawfish and jambalaya. Ask for Sean, a former Deadhead and Copeland lifer. You might also want to explore Maple Street if you'd like an adventure (of the nice kind). Get off on Carrollton Avenue and walk two blocks. There you can find bookstores, coffeehouses and other great food shops from Chinese to pizza.

Exploring By Foot

It is of course mandatory to explore the French Quarter (the Vieux Carré). Along Decatur Street to Jackson Square, there are a host of tourist shops to keep anyone fed, but step into the side streets and you can find hidden treasures and secret shops that reveal a deeper cross-cultural flavor.

At the end of the Square, cross the tracks and take a stroll along the Mississippi. Imagine here what it must have been like 100 years ago, when the Mississippi was at her peak as the main thoroughfare of transportation to the West. From here it's relatively easy to stroll down the riverwalk and end up on a 265-foot steamboat. The Steamboat Natchez offers daytime Harbor/Jazz cruises and a Dinner/Jazz cruise that leave right from the walk. Another option is the John James Audubon River Cruise, which offers transportation to the Audubon Zoo and the Aquarium, and offers money-saving combo packages, including an optional IMAX visit.

Across the street from the boat docks is the Aquarium of the Americas. The aquarium has one of the world's largest shark collections, including many species you can't find anywhere else in the country, and an Amazon Rainforest exhibit that includes piranhas, anacondas and stingrays.

From this point, it would be ideal take a walking tour of the warehouse district and Lafayette Square. Walking up Convention Center Boulevard, turn onto Tchoupitoulas and Julia Streets, where you enter the heart of the Arts District. Called the Soho of the South, this is Gallery Row and it's here where you can find national and local artists like Dr. Bob (whose "Be Nice or Leave" theme crops up everywhere in New Orleans). You may also want to take a detour onto Camp Street, where the Confederate Museum is located. Constructed in 1891, it is the city's oldest museum.

You'll probably be hungry on the walk back, so stop for lunch at Lucy's Retired Surfer's Bar & Restaurant (701 Tchoupitoulas). The surfboards on the wall will make you feel right at home, along with the California-Mexican fare like burritos, tacos, guacamole and tortas.

Exploring By Car

If you have the time and inclination, it's a great adventure tooling around New Orleans and the surrounding neighborhoods. In a car you can cover much more ground. Plus, with the beauty (and wetness) of the season, you'll have a finer appreciation for the scenery and environment. Home to swamps, marshes and natural bayous, the geography of Louisiana is a lush and wild landscape. Its tropical setting makes nature seem that much more profound, and you can perhaps more easily grasp the complexity of the local climate.

For a quick tour, drive down to the end of Esplanade to Moss Street and visit the St. Louis Cemetery. It's a perfect (and safe!) example of French-influenced culture, with most of the tombstones dating from the turn of the century. From there, drive straight to the City Park. The drive through the park is enough to justify a car rental. The park roads are lined with overhanging oaks covered with Spanish moss, surrounded by natural waterways and a bayou, and include a tennis court and playground. Encompassing more than 1500 acres, the New Orleans City Park is the fifth largest urban park in the United States. This is also where the New Orleans Museum of Art is located.

From there you can take Marconi Drive and cruise by the Mississippi, past modern style homes in secluded neighborhoods—a far cry from the French Quarter, but still a vital part of New Orleans culture. Homes here range from gaudy to stately, a marriage of colonial and modern '60s-style architecture that may amuse or please, depending on your taste.

Oak Alley Plantation is not far and is considered one of the South's most picturesque plantations. Another plantation home of the Old South is Nottoway. Both are a relatively easy drive from New Orleans, or contact Gray Line sightseeing for bus tours (800-535-7786).

Exploring By Night

Hitting the town in New Orleans is not for the faint of heart. While most tourists will revel in the wildness of Bourbon Street, the musical gifts the city has to offer can be experienced best throughout the

town. For a guide to what's happening in the city's wildly diverse and never-ending nightlife, there are three sources to consult: the local newspaper (The Times-Picayune), TRIBE magazine, or offBEAT magazine. All three offer club and band listings that go on for days. As spring comes into full bloom, these joints are hopping with regulars, locals, tourists and other music fans who come from as far as Denver, Atlanta and Jacksonville to catch their favorite band playing in the Big Easy.

Local favorites include Donna's (800 N. Rampart) on the corner of Rampart and St. Ann. Opened four years ago by Donna and husband Charlie, it's a festive, casual environment that features the best of the city's brass bands. There's also Benny's. Nicknamed the granddaddy of all after-hours clubs, Benny's is a cultural hole in the wall steeped in history that now boasts some of the best R&B, reggae, blues and funk in New Orleans.

For a more subdued environment, go to Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop (941 Bourbon). This is a secret little watering hole that looks like an old workshop but offers a tremendous selection of beers and cocktails. There's also O'Flaherty's (508 Toulouse), an intimate brick-walled Irish pub that hosts Irish music nightly. You may even get your own Irish dance show if the crowd is inclined to party. And some of the more well-known clubs that consistently host lively shows are Howlin' Wolf (828 South Peters), Mermaid Cafe (1100 Constance) and Funky Butt (St. Peter and Orleans).

Food As Art

Renowned as much for its food as its musical climate, Louisiana and New Orleans in particular have some of the best eating a traveler can find. A combination of many cultures and palates, this southern cuisine is unequalled. From Cajun to Creole, French and African, there are literally thousands of eating establishments. And despite common legend, the food in New Orleans is not that hot. Although most everything includes some kind of spice or seasoning, it's mellow and tasteful. Try a po'boy filled with shrimp, catfish or alligator (which actually tastes like a combination of calamari and chicken), or sink your teeth into a muffaletta, a round, breaded, torta-style sandwich.

And if you're flying out of Baton Rouge, you definitely want to stop at Mike Anderson's. A local favorite, the restaurant boasts a full bar with local Abita beer on tap, an intimate dining room, complete with moss-covered beams and twinkling lights, and the best sampling of Louisiana Southern-style fare you can find. Try The Norman, an etouffée-style casserole, or the Sampler Platter, which offers the fish delicacy of your choice prepared seven different ways.

Regardless of where you go, it is doubtful that you'll have a bad experience. Fare here is cheap, filling and fattening. In New Orleans, food is art and diet is a dirty word. Come with an appetite.

As I rewind the little movie inside my head, I can see the friendly people, the smiling faces, the relaxed, almost languorous way they stroll and lounge and interact. There were times when I felt almost alien, rough around the edges and much too shrill. There is, somewhere, some deep-seated secret, some level of confidence that assures them they have been protected from the trials of moving ahead and forging new ground. In a sense, New Orleans and its people are very much alive but oh so present. In this enclosed and protected world, they have already achieved their destiny and live fully every day. A recipe based on a proud history, a strong community and the natural and cultural trappings of exploration and beauty.

Special Places of Note

Although there are a myriad of guidebooks that offer words of wisdom, the best part of traveling is discovering your own special local haunts. For record fans, there's Magic Bus LPs and CDs (527 Conti), a local music shop located in the French Quarter that boasts a wide selection of music on LP and CD. Best for someone who knows what they're looking for. And if you want to take home a genuine New Orleans Mardi Gras mask, stop by Masquerade Fantasy (1233 Decatur). Although the masks are pricey (\$100 and up), they're beautiful and carved from leather right there in the shop. You can watch them cutting and painting in the back on busy days.

For anyone seeking killer burgers and the best waffles on the planet, go to the Clover Grill (900 Bourbon Street), a 24 hour cafe and a true greasy spoon with an amazing selection of diva music on the jukebox. Kaldi's Coffeehouse (941 Decatur) offers the best coffee and fruit smoothies in New Orleans, while Coop's (1109 Decatur) and Buffa by Phyllis (on the corner of Burgundy and Esplanade) make great po'boys.

For more eclectic and esoteric interests, the 200-300 block of Chartres Street has an interesting array of galleries, furniture and antiques. Not far from there is the historic La Louisiane restaurant. Established in 1881, it was the restaurant of choice for politicians and the socially elite. Since renovated to its former grandeur, it boasts crystal-adorned chandeliers, plush carpeting and beveled doors that reflect the antique street lamps like prisms. Start with the hollandaise-covered eggplant and try the traditional catfish or filet mignon dishes as an entree.

And the darker side of New Orleans must be a part of any cultural experience. Visit Esoterica at 541 Rue Dumaine for readings, books and other tools of the occult arts and sciences. There's also the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum (724 Rue Dumaine) and Reverend Zombie's Voodoo on Royal Street, which offers information about Haunted History Tours of the city. Take a walking tour of the city's haunted sites during the damp and musky days of spring and get goose bumps. Although the city has been associated in recent years with such luminaries as Anne Rice and the Neville Brothers, there is obviously much more than that, and the tremendous friendliness and hospitality of the locals is extraordinary and infectious. In New Orleans, it's all about experience.

sidebar

A Musical Jambalaya at the Jazz & Heritage Festival

Currently in its 28th year, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival is in the middle of showcasing more than 4,000 musicians, chefs and craftspeople on the city's fairgrounds for an estimated crowd of 400,000. Generally hosted for ten days during the last week of April and the first week of May, it runs this year from April 25 through May 4. This year's acts include: Santana, Earth Wind & Fire, The Neville Brothers, Herbie Hancock, The Marsalis Family, Fats Domino, James Taylor, Delbert McClinton, Bruce Hornsby, Alex Chilton, Al Jarreau, Blues Traveler and Mary Chapin Carpenter.

For non-purists, New Orleans is the mecca of music. With arms open to any genre, any style, in any combination, the city posts a welcome mat the size of Texas and has the heart to prove it. In no other town can you dance to a brass band, get down at a disco, groove to funky jazz, and finish off watching an impromptu Riverdance performance at a local Irish pub—all in one night. It's this kind of city that is able to host a musical extravaganza most cities only attempt to rival. And that's what the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival is. From 11 am to 7 pm, music is everywhere. Ten stages, eight hours, over ten days. A bacchanalian food and music fest with everything from rock to bluegrass, cajun, reggae, Caribbean, folk, Brazilian, samba, jazz, salsa, blues and African. Add in film screenings, an international cultural pavilion, and food booths serving alligator po'boys, crawfish bread and shrimp beignets served with etouffe, and you know it's an event worth experiencing.

But it's the music that stands out. New Orleans being a legendary music town, the Festival is able to attract the mighty, the murky and the marginal. By far the highlight of the first weekend was Cubanismo (Starring Jesus Alemany). Appearing for the first time in the U.S., the group was excited just to be there, and the crowd could feel it. Playing solid Cuban rhythms, the group created a magic blend of salsa-laced melodies under powerful, clean vocals that blended into a groovy Latin sound. Complemented by timbales, flute, classical guitar, piano, a standing bass, congas, bongos and various other percussion instruments, it was lively and infectious, and exemplified the spirit of the Festival.

Although big name stars are always a welcome attraction, the best part about attending the Jazz Fest is being introduced to new and diverse music. This year's Festival is no exception. In the Gospel Tent, The Crownseekers had the crowd clamoring for their spiritual, funky gospel songs. And although the tent got flooded midway through their set (an entire section of chairs disappeared under the mud and water), the building was packed. It was so inspiring, many people stayed to witness the wedding that came directly after their set. Romantic, if not damp.

Ellis Marsalis (of the infamous Marsalis family, and current jazz instructor at the University of New Orleans) played an inspired set of his own jazz originals beside a 6-piece band, which included Jason Marsalis on drums. Songs like "Chapter 1" offered a more traditional sound, while other selections were made up of traditional jazz with a solid hip-hop backbeat, punctuating key changes, flowery, gutsy saxophone and energetic trombone. It was a psychedelic set for the jazz crowd and probably collected a few converts along the way. And Cowboy Mouth was just that: loud, boisterous, raucous and guttural. With powerful drumming and strong vocals, they had the crowd screaming. Yep, a rock and roll legend in the making.

The next day's highlights showed the best of the Festival's international attractions. Groups like the Brazilian Escola de Samba (Casa Samba) played rough percussion to traditional Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian dance and tumbling. Also on the same stage were the National Dance Ensemble of Mali and Babatunde Olatunji & His Drums of Passion, both of which kept the crowd engaged and enraptured. These were perhaps the most inspired of shows. The natural response to a good rhythm and a solid percussion groove are difficult to deny and the crowd at the Congo Square stage was turned-on and intoxicated by it. For a break, Chris Smither offered a smooth blend of rock, folk and bluegrass that showed off some excellent guitar strumming and picking and kept the crowd contented. As the finale, Earth Wind & Fire was a fine example of true, polished R&B. Still, it's never over until you hear some zydeco, and that's where the first weekend ended. Nathan & the Zydeco Cha Chas play some of the

hippest and most energetic zydeco around, and with renowned music fanatic Beatle Bob dancing his 5/4 beat in the background, you can never go wrong. Truly, Sunday's show proved to be packed with too much of a good thing.

During the week, many of the groups play repeat performances, and others make their New Orleans debut—all at various clubs throughout the city. It's a buffet for the soul that's rejuvenating and spiritual at the same time. But the most amazing thing about the Jazz Fest is that the music is never just there. Regardless of your musical taste, it's impossible to deny the passion and exuberance exhibited on the stages. Groups played in five outdoor stages and five indoor metal-framed tents, with the tents hosting fold-up chairs parked in what became mud pits and mini mud pools. Legend has it that at least one day of the Festival is cursed by storms. Sunday was the day, and outdoor groups like Los Babies del Merengue and The Wild Magnolias continued under the torrent of rain and lightning. More than two inches of rain fell that morning. By the time Earth Wind & Fire came on stage, the clouds had dissipated.

Perhaps the worst part was this heavy downpour during opening weekend of the Festival, yet this did not even permeate the positive and appreciative energy of the crowd and the musicians. Like Woodstock Junior, most people either took off their shoes or just jumped in, dancing, diving and sinking into the pits. It was a mud fest of the highest caliber.