

## Destination Review: NOLA

New Orleans is one of the most vibrant and active cities in the country. Known as the Crescent City, the Big Easy, or more simply NOLA, it has a Southern heritage unlike the rest of the South, a well-deserved



reputation for fun, and some of the best cuisine on the planet. New Orleans was originally formed in 1718 by the French. It derives its name from Phillippe II, Duke of New Orleans and regent to King Louis XV of France. It has a storied history as the center of early French society and the city was abuzz with activity each year as the local social calendar played out. Land owners who lived on their plantations during the growing and harvest seasons invested in elegant town houses within what is now known as the French Quarter. These town homes gave them a place to enjoy a respite from plantation work and to show off their status to the rest of the town.

France ceded New Orleans to Spain under the Treaty of 1763 and the nascent French Creole culture of New Orleans would be significantly influenced under Spanish rule. New Orleans' diverse cultural heritage, including their architecture and cuisine, have made it a fun destination for vacationers across America. It offers price points for all budgets and jam-packed fun for all ages.

### When to Visit

New Orleans is best known for the two weeks of unabashed revelry that take place every spring, also known as Mardi Gras. There are no fewer than 34 parades during the days leading up to Fat Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday and the pinnacle of the Mardi Gras season. Each parade is sponsored and paid for by a social club with deep roots in New Orleans tradition and history. While 32 of the 34 or so Mardi Gras parades culminate in the French Quarter, they all originate outside of the French Quarter. One of the best family friendly areas to see the parades is along Canal or St. Charles Streets. Things will be far less risqué and more appropriate for families without sacrificing any of the festive nature of the season. If you want to experience the full on frat house insanity that marks Mardi Gras, be sure to head for Bourbon Street in the French Quarter. Just be prepared for the sights, and smells, that come along with total drunken debauchery.

Many people mistakenly think things in New Orleans calm down after Mardi Gras, but New Orleans is always a hopping city. As one local described to me there are times during the year when the party is rocking, and there are times when it is really rocking. There are also times of the year when the city is less crowded. But there is never a time when things are quiet. Visiting New Orleans during the season of Lent means fewer visitors to compete with, and the weather is as cool as it will get making it a more comfortable time to visit. Of course that only works if you have the flexibility to travel when you want. For many families summer is the only time when both parents and children have time to travel, but a summer visit to New Orleans means dealing with stinking hot and muggy weather. Basically no different than a visit to Disney during the same time of year. The main difference is that in New Orleans most of the action takes place after dark when it is at least marginally cooler than the heat of the day, and families visit New Orleans in droves during the summer season.

Janet and I chose to visit in mid-September and if we had to find one season less desirable to visit than any other, it would be mid-September through November. It isn't that the city is any less vibrant. It just happens to be the time when preparations for the next Mardi Gras season are in full swing. Or so we were told. For us that meant public works improvement projects on just about every block in the French Quarter, with building maintenance, renovations and refurbishments everywhere else. We got first-hand experience with all of that, complete with jack hammers, noisy maintenance vehicles, painters squeezing ladders onto narrow sidewalks, and construction workers hauling building materials from the street to the property they are working on. Our visit was further complicated by the horde of Floridians who evacuated to New Orleans seeking refuge from Hurricane Irma, but we still had a great time which just proves the point that there is no bad time of the year to visit NOLA.



## Districts

New Orleans is subdivided into 13 discrete neighborhoods or districts, and we spent the bulk of our time in three of those districts. The first and best known district as mentioned is the French Quarter. This



area is the oldest part of New Orleans, having been settled by French colonists in 1718. Not long after France ceded control of New Orleans to Spain in the late 1700s, the French Quarter suffered two major fires...one in 1788 and another in 1798. Only a handful of the original French structures survived the devastation of the fires, giving Spanish settlers license to put their own stamp on the area. Between the few remaining French structures, the Spanish rebuilding efforts, and the spreading influence of American style buildings following the Louisiana Purchase, the French Quarter became an architectural hodge-podge. That eclectic combination of styles was accompanied by a parallel blending of cultures, contributing to the quirky, Bohemian atmosphere that comes to mind for most people today when they think of the French Quarter.

Though the French Quarter is the best known part of New Orleans, it isn't the only reason to visit. If you are interested in the architecture of the region, be sure to include a visit to the Garden District. The easiest way to experience the opulent homes of the New Orleans rich and famous is to take the Magazine Avenue Street Car which you can easily identify by the green color of the cars...the rest of New Orleans' street cars are red. The Garden District came about in the aftermath of the Louisiana Purchase when affluent people moving into the new American territory didn't want to mingle with the Creole and Cajun who lived in the French Quarter. Architecture throughout the Garden District consists of Italianate, Greek Revival and Victorian styles. Homesteads included generous plots of land which allowed the residents to plant the beautiful gardens for which the area came to be named, and that you can still enjoy today. There is a small pocket of shops and cafes within the Garden District, in the area of Prytania Street and Washington Avenue. The Garden District is also home to another popular tourist spot and the best maintained cemetery in New Orleans, Lafayette Cemetery #1. No trip to the Garden District would be complete without stopping for a meal at Commanders Palace Restaurant, a well-known establishment that has been in continuous operation since 1893 and ranks as one of New Orleans' best restaurants.

Janet and I opted to stay at a hotel in the Warehouse and Arts District. The Warehouse District isn't home to the party, but the French Quarter is within easy walking distance so you can go to the party and



stay as long as you want. When you are done, you can escape back to a less frenzied atmosphere to decompress. The Warehouse and Arts District is home to a number of well-known restaurants such as Emeril's flagship restaurant, and there are several popular beer establishments. It is also home to the Louisiana Children's Museum, the Contemporary Arts Center, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, and the National WWII Museum. The latter is a sprawling complex with multiple buildings highlighting specific areas of the war. You will come out of a trip to the WWII museum having learned something you didn't know before.

### Getting Around

I am used to renting a car to get around cities when I visit, but that is actually not a good idea in New Orleans. Parking at hotels is expensive, running between \$35-50 per night depending on where you are staying. Streets in the French Quarter are narrow and hard to navigate, with parking that is nearly impossible in the off-season and totally impossible during the busy seasons. Depending on when you visit you will be dodging tourists, drunks, or construction vehicles. If you are going to spend more than a few days in New Orleans, consider renting a car only for those days you plan to leave the city. Other than that walk or make use of NOLA's public transportation system. You can get just about anywhere with a short walk to a bus stop or streetcar station, and you can get an all-day pass on both for just \$3. It can take a little work to figure out how to get from one spot to another on the streetcar system, but the lines do all eventually interconnect.

New Orleans is a very logically laid out city with streets running in a standard grid. There are quite a few one way streets particularly throughout the French Quarter, so a good GPS app that offers options for walking directions is a must. You can always carry around the tourist map that they give you when you check-in at your hotel, but then you mark yourself as a tourist. At least with a smart phone GPS app you can pretend to be checking social media while you are actually getting your bearings.

### Lodging

There is a wide range of lodging in New Orleans suitable for any budget and taste. Because of the unique nature of the neighborhoods, and so many expectations regarding the New Orleans experience, it is best to consult with a travel professional to ensure your lodging is in the area you want and the level of luxury or down home comfort you are willing to pay for.

### Food and Entertainment

I love love love Southern Louisiana cooking. And jazz. What a combination, and together they are THE reason to visit New Orleans. What surprised me though was the variety of cuisine that New Orleans has to offer beyond traditional Creole and Cajun cooking. It is truly a melting pot. We were inundated with recommendations for restaurants when family and friends found out we were visiting, but with a

trip of just three days we were barely able to scratch the surface. Still...I thought it would be useful to share some of their recommendations along with the venues Janet and I were able to visit.

There are numerous restaurants, shops and bars throughout the French Quarter, but there is one that comes to mind for just about anyone planning a visit to New Orleans. Café Du Monde. This place has become something of a Mecca for tourists wanting an authentic New Orleans cultural experience. Personally, after experiencing it firsthand I don't see what all the hoopla is about. Spoiler alert...you won't find anything remotely "authentic" about the place, except perhaps the beignet recipe. For starters, the entire kitchen and wait staff during our visit were Asian. Anybody who knows me knows of my love for Asian people and their cultures, but in the New Orleans French Quarter...well let's just say they seemed oddly out of place. Maybe it was the outfit our server wore, which looked like it hadn't seen the inside of a laundry tub in several weeks. Or perhaps it was her rude manner, something I might have expected in a bustling French café but not in New Orleans. I'm sure the overall atmosphere of the place didn't help. It was bare bones with little by way of embellishment. Most of the tables spilled outside of the establishment and were covered by an awning that has seen better days. In fact the entire place had the feel of an outdated 1950s era café...minus the tableside juke boxes. Speaking of which, the only thing on each table aside from several layers of left-over powdered sugar resulting from the wait staff's appalling lack of interest in cleaning tables between orders, was a single napkin dispenser that doubled as the menu holder. Literally. The menu was a dirty, barely readable card pasted to the side of the napkin dispenser. I suppose it was more than adequate though since Café du Monde's menu offerings are limited to beignets, coffee and sodas.



Between the two of us, Janet is the expert on beignets. To me they are donuts without the hole and without the all-important glaze, which is to say an unappealing, tasteless glop of fried dough. Not so for Janet, who thinks of beignets as powder-covered raindrops from heaven. Sadly that was not the case at Café du Monde, where the quality of the beignets was consistent with the overall dingy atmosphere of the place. Janet declared their beignets to be just OK...way overrated and far from the best she has eaten. The one authentic NOLA experience we did enjoy during our brief time at Café du Monde was listening to the "ad hoc" Dixieland jazz-styled performance from a group of street musicians. I have a feeling it was anything but ad hoc, but for me as a tourist it was the most enjoyable aspect of our time at Café du Monde, and that's all I have to say about that!

We are our first lunch in the Big Easy at Galliano's, a short walk from our hotel and still within the Warehouse District. The hush puppies were the best I have ever tasted...light, savory and rich. Of course



we had to try the shrimp poboy, served with crawfish boil potato chips and garlicky lemon pickles which I opted to accompany with a local IPA. The poboy comes in both a traditional and nouveaux version with the main difference being a Creole aioli for the former and lemon aioli for the latter. Janet opted for the nouveaux version and I chose the traditional, and if I am being honest I can't pick a favorite...both were scrumptious and surprisingly light. The restaurant is named after Executive Chef Ricky Cheramie's hometown of

Galliano which is situated on Bayou La Fourche (pronounced La-Foosh). Chef Ricky's menu offers a wide range of authentic Southern Louisiana cooking and if the poboys are any measure, this place is worth a revisit to sample more of their Southern Louisiana specialties. Talk about authentic!

There was no way I was going to visit New Orleans and not eat a meal at Emeril's, so our first night's dinner was my opportunity. I have to say the meal was hit and miss with the highs being very high and the lows being really low. I wrote a blog article detailing the experience if you are interested in more details. Since our visit to the Big Easy was so short, the only other restaurant of note we visited was Manning's in the Harrah's casino. Manning's is a father and sons joint venture between football greats Archie, Peyton, and Eli Manning. This was Janet's choice...she is a huge fan of Peyton's and I think she was secretly hoping he might put in an appearance. We didn't run into Peyton, but we did walk right into the middle of a sports radio show featuring the head coach of Tulane University's football team (Tulane is located in NOLA). It was almost as good as seeing Payton Manning since Navy had beaten Tulane the previous Saturday at Navy Marine Corps Stadium, and we were there for the victory. What made the radio talk show so amusing was that if you listened to the coach, and watched the video clips they projected on the video screen, you would have thought Tulane kicked Navy's butt. Knowing that discretion is the better part of valor, we kept our thoughts on the game to ourselves. Aside from that, the food was pretty good...standard sports bar fare but well prepared.

Restaurants that others recommended and that are on my list for the next time we visit include Mother's, a family-run café in the Warehouse District that has been in business since 1938. You won't get any snooty foodie dishes here...just a hearty serving of whatever grub you order and for a reasonable price. Which of course even a foodie can appreciate. Mother's serves breakfast throughout the day and evening as well as New Orleans classics for lunch and dinner. The restaurant is known for having the best ham in the south and as a restaurant catering to the working class. It is also a restaurant with a long affiliation with the USMC, having established itself as a haven for Marines during and after WWII. It is a tradition that remains strong today. If you order the beef pobo, be sure to ask for "debris" on your sandwich. You'll be treated to a pobo with ample meat that is also slathered in juices and left over bits of meat scraped off the bone (aka the debris).

One of the places high on my list to try is Snug Harbor. It is one of a number of restaurants that offer nightly jazz shows to accompany your meal during the dinner timeframe. The Maison is another restaurant offering a nightly jazz show, and if you go be sure to order their signature dish, the Cochon de Lait Pobo which is a pulled pork BBQ pobo topped with jalapeno slaw. Other restaurants on my list include The Court of Two Sisters, the Three Muses, Irene's, and Commander's Palace which I previously noted is located in the Garden District. I am even intrigued by several of the beer houses we ran across, particularly Jax Brewhouse or World of Beer both located near our hotel.



If you have a rental car, be sure to head to the edge of town where you'll find an interesting confluence of styles at Middendorff's, a restaurant run by a German family. The house specialty is fried catfish where the catfish is locally caught each day from Lake Pouchetrain. After cleaning, the catfish filets are sliced thin...I mean REALLY thin...battered up, and fried just right. If you are more partial to Italian food be sure to eat at Café Giovanni, a Sicilian family restaurant specializing in Creole-Italian dishes like Pasta Jambalaya. I had no idea Creole-Italian was even a thing. Who knew? Other restaurants on my list:

Gallatoire, Pat O'Brien's, Dragos...oh heck, the list is too long. I'm just going to move there. The best thing is to decide what specific style of cuisine you are interested in experiencing as well as the price point and the ambiance of the venue, then hit the internet. There are so many good restaurants in New Orleans you have to work hard to get a bad meal.

#### Plantation Life and Creole vs. Cajun

Janet and I spent half a day touring a Creole plantation about an hour outside of New Orleans. The plantation was named Laura and I highly recommend the tour. It is a great way to get a sense of the heart of New Orleans as well as where the Creole and Cajun cultures arose and how they have blended into what we see today. Our tour was run by a fourth or fifth generation Cajun who was incredibly knowledgeable of his heritage and the Creole environment within which the Cajun culture developed. He patiently explained the difference between the colorful Creole "shotgun" houses, so named because interior walls were positioned such that they wouldn't interfere with the free flow of air from windows and the door at the front of the house to those in the back, and the more sterile, white-painted plantation houses that were built by Creole families trying to assimilate into the American culture which was starting to take hold after the Louisiana Purchase.



Aside from building styles, the actual difference between Creole and Cajun is something that has perplexed me for some time so at one point during the tour I asked our guide if he could explain the difference. I could tell it was a question he had gotten many times, and that it was probably his favorite question to answer. He waxed eloquently for some time and I came away with a clear understanding of the difference between Creole and Cajun cultures, how they first developed and how they have progressed to where they are today. It is too lengthy to repeat here...just be sure if you plan to visit New Orleans you allow time for a visit to the Laura plantation and ask for tour guide Alex.

#### Summary

There is no doubt New Orleans is one of the most interesting cities to visit in this country. It offers something for everyone, and best of all it is a trip that you can make without breaking the bank. Carnival Cruise Lines operates several ships out of the Port of New Orleans making a cruise with pre or post stay an attractive vacation option. If any of this strikes your fancy, or whets your palate, give us a call. We'll help you create your lifelong vacation memories!