

The Big Easy

Jazz, ghosts and alligators are all par for the course when you visit the USA's party capital, New Orleans in Louisiana. Rowena Carr-Allinson reports. Photographs by M. Frere



Here and right: happy snapper, an alligator surfaces; the swamps of Louisiana are mesmerising. Far right: typical Louisiana architecture



When travelling, it's always useful to be well-informed, but keeping a touch of the mysterious is crucial: I like a bit of a surprise. Once again, I wasn't disappointed: so many clichés and preconceptions – some justified, but many unfounded.

Having always imagined New Orleans as a sleepy town with a jazzy soundtrack, I was taken aback when the Big Easy appeared to be the Big Party.

Lost, we navigated our way down Bourbon Street at twilight. As first impressions go, it was quite a shock. Party happy people carrying "huge-ass to-go beers" flooded onto the tarmac, while frenzied music echoed from the bars, a riot of colour and noise.

Was it Mardi Gras already? No, just an ordinary Friday evening in New Orleans, party capital of the USA. Luckily, it isn't all about drinking and debauchery.

Just beyond the infamous Bourbon Street, the French Quarter hides its quieter side, where antique shops and boutiques are crammed into glorious Creole houses, with their distinctive Spanish-style balconies wrapped in doily-like, lace-trim ironwork. Royal and Chartres Street are quiet havens, without the mayhem and sleaze.

Tucked away in residential Chartres Street, far from the madding crowds, is the Soniat House hotel. The interior courtyard, with its ginger lilies, magnolias and hibiscus is a breathe of fresh air – literally. The flagstones and running water create a cooling oasis amid the muggy heat.

The 33-room hotel is a charming hideaway. Each room is more charismatic than the next. Canopied four-poster beds and antiques mixed with contemporary pieces give a unique atmospheric twist. At night, crossing the twinkling courtyard back up to your room adds to the romantic ambience, while the delicious home-baked breakfast makes for a welcome cosy feel.

Aside from the French Quarter, New Orleans is still a large American city with its glitzy malls and overactive traffic. However, the legacy of French, Spanish and African people has left behind a unique aura that is kept alive thanks to striking architecture, voodoo folklore, jazz music and ghost stories.

A cruise by steamboat down the Mississippi, imagined as a Tom Sawyer picturesque trip, turned into an industrial extravaganza. Not to be recommended unless you enjoy oil refineries, factories and hordes of tourists in close proximity.

Moseying down the river bank, no visit would be complete without a stop at the famous Café du Monde and the French market. Souvenirs and goodies range from jewellery, feathered masks and gaudy carnival beads to southern snacks like 'gator sausages on a stick.

There is more to New Orleans eating though, which is just as well. The Creole cuisine has given the area a gourmet reputation for its Gumbo, Po-Boys, Jumbalaya and Etouffé.

For a cheap and cheerful meal, the Chartres House Café provides a cosy atmosphere and hearty portions of traditional food, but for haute cuisine head to the Windsor Court's New Orleans Grill. Another good surprise. The presentation and innovation from this kitchen is simply extraordinary. It isn't just food anymore, it's a study in food. The daring and novel combination of hot and cold duck foie gras with mango and ginger bread is quite astonishing: total indulgence.

For breakfast there is no other option but the illustrious Brennan's. The restaurant is set in a building built in 1795 by Edouard Degas' great grandfather. The breakfast here is an institution. Kick off with an 'eye opener' of brandy milk punch with a glorious southern baked apple appetiser, followed by a choice of poached eggs. Who knew there were so many options? Eggs owen, eggs sardou, eggs

hussarde? Though dessert isn't on your mind, the friendly staff will no doubt convince you, like they did me, to sample the scrumptious Bananas Foster, a creation they are exceptionally proud of.

Leaving New Orleans behind, the setting changes from sprawling city suburbs to the mythical swamp. Gum trees emerge like the shadows of giant praying mantis, while clumps of 'Spanish beard' hang in eerie tufts.

Delighted, I had visions of tracking down Shrek's cabin in the deepest, darkest marsh. Swamp tours, advertised everywhere, promise close encounters of the scaly kind, but I wasn't falling for all the hype – surely we wouldn't get close to real live alligators? I was wrong.

Joining Captain Sam of Airboat Adventures, I was totally unprepared for what lay ahead. The swamp really does suffer from bad PR; its beauty is mesmerising. Sam, our guide, was wonderful: straightforward and funny. Fooling around with 'his' 'gators, feeding them 'marshmallows', he brought alive the bog with his special Southern story-telling: "Them alligators ain't aggressive... me, I got bit five times this year... An eight-footer put his tooth through my finger. Boy did that hurt."

The entire adventure was entrancing, aside from the mud spray... Little did I know I would become one with the swamp.

The Louisiana landscape is vast and lonely. Aside from the swamp, acres of sugar cane and greenery cover the

luxuriant banks of the Mississippi where plantations, established in the late 1800s, still function today.

Tours to see the oldest plantation, Destrehan, or the largest, Nottaway, are a must. The majestic homes, restored to their former glory make it easy to lose track of time and get absorbed into the past's Southern grandeur.

The stunning Oak Alley is one of the few to offer accommodation. The grand 'big house' is a picture perfect plantation house complete with ghost stories and a glamorous past – including being the location for *Interview with a Vampire*. At night, the grounds take on a supernatural disposition and one can almost see a Scarlett O'Hara-style spook hovering through the mist down the ancient oak alleyway. However, you are more likely to see one of the camera-shy armadillos.

The cosy, wooden cottages are a peaceful escape and the welcoming staff, like Beverly at the giftshop, make sure you have everything you need including more hearty cuisine. Southern hospitality lives on. Beware though, the restaurant on site is open for lunch but finding dinner is a challenge. The rural communities are dotted with Baptist churches and not much else. Local diners shut by 7pm. And, yes, people do stop talking when you walk in.

Although they may take a while to thaw, the locals are friendly and it's their turn to look surprised when the response to their standard "where y'all from?" is "London, England". They sure don't see many of us folk out here. ☺

Getting there

American Airlines fly to New Orleans daily from the UK via Chicago, New York or Dallas. For more information, visit www.aa.com or call 020 7365 0777.

The Soniat House. For more information visit www.soniathouse.com or call 001 (800) 5448808.

Oak Alley Plantation. For more information visit www.oakalleyplantation.com or call 001 (225) 265-2151