

# trumpeting **NOLA's** return

A New Orleans newbie tours the Big Easy and finds the city back on its feet, groove intact.

BY J.B. BISSELL

Before the late summer of 2005, there was little need for an article like this. New Orleans was easily one of America's most recognizable and famous cities. For the French Quarter and the Garden District. For mouth-watering Cajun and Creole cuisine. For decadent nightlife and Mardi Gras, the annual anything-goes festival that rivals Rio's Carnival in terms of all-out, all-night revelry.

But then, as everybody knows, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina came ashore. She dumped up to an inch of rain every 60 minutes and pushed 100-mile-per-hour winds through the heart of the Big Easy. Lake Pontchartrain and its offshoot canals swelled and breached the overmatched levees charged with keeping dry a city that already sat partially beneath sea level. And everything changed.

Except, it hasn't. While it would be difficult to overstate the destruction caused by the storm and its aftermath, the places that veteran New Orleans vacationers love and first-time visitors yearn to see weren't among those most affected. They didn't escape unscathed, but they've recovered. The French Quarter is as lively as ever. The Garden District just as beautiful. NOLA (New Orleans, Louisiana) is back.

Don't get me wrong: The city's residents aren't trying to forget what happened; reminders of Katrina are everywhere, from inspirational billboards to informational displays and T-shirts. Instead, it seems as though they're ready for the storm to be a *part* of their history — another chapter in the long and fascinating narrative of the Crescent City.

#### A TOUR FOR EVERY OCCASION

It's this storied past that makes New Orleans so ripe for guided excursions. These tours afford visitors the chance to examine exactly

what makes this place so compelling, so unique.

That said, I have a confession to make: I'm not a huge tour guy. I'd rather study a guidebook, pick up some local literature, talk to a few residents, and then explore a destination on my own, at my own pace.

But when I walked into the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau Information Center on St. Ann Street in the French Quarter, I quickly realized that I was going to need to push aside my penchant to go solo, because of the sheer quantity of tour offerings.



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I began to peruse the brochures. There were city tours, plantation tours, neighborhood tours, voodoo tours, cemetery tours, Mississippi River tours, swamp tours, and even cocktail tours. Some were walking affairs, others took place aboard a bus or an authentic steamboat, and a few played out to the clip-clop soundtrack of a horse-drawn carriage. Amid all the choices, one thing became perfectly clear: Tours are all but compulsory when selecting vacation activities in New Orleans.

Prior to actually setting foot in the Big Easy, my fascination with the area had been fueled primarily by Anne Rice and the literary musings of her creatures of the night, so it wasn't a surprise when my eyes gravitated toward the more eerie of available expeditions.

Glossy pamphlets — black with red Gothic lettering, and peppered with bats, skulls, and other macabre imagery — advertised various tours that focused on ghosts and vampires. Some even featured guides who dressed in full costume and acted out the ghoulish legends they were recounting.

I chose Historic New Orleans Tours' Haunted French Quarter Walk, an after-dark stroll along the streets of the Vieux Carré that promised to focus more on the facts than the fantastic.

Our guide, Leonce, a seven-year veteran of the tour trade and full-time resident of the French Quarter, may or may not have believed in the ghosts, but he was text-book-scary when it came to the pertinent history of the neighborhood.

"I took an intense eight-week course so I could be a guide at the state history museums," he told me during a break in the action. Then, with an impish smile, "But this is more fun."

During our two hours together, Leonce managed to work in details about not just the French Quarter and New Orleans, but the entire Louisiana Purchase. His stories referenced Napoleon, Acadia, and the pirate Jean Lafitte, and included region-specific architecture lessons, such as the difference between a gallery and balcony (support for a gallery runs all the way to the ground) — all while creeping us out with legends of lost lovers, wounded soldiers, and forgotten children.

The climax came at the intersection of Royal and

**TOP: Delectably decadent beignets and café au lait tempt the taste buds at famed Café du Monde. LEFT: Bourbon Street beckons with the promise of endless revelry.**

Governor Nicholls streets. "This is generally believed to be the most haunted house in the Quarter," Leonce said as we approached. "The Lalaurie Mansion, home to Dr. Louis Lalaurie and his wife, Delphine, in the early 1830s."

The Lalauries horribly mistreated dozens of slaves until flames engulfed their kitchen (a blaze most likely set by a cook as a means for escape or rescue) and exposed their hideous crimes to the responding fire brigade.

Leonce kept the graphic details to a minimum, but as we stood on that corner listening and staring at the mansion's beautiful and innocuous exterior, a gathering of midnight-dark clouds collected above us and blacked out what had previously been a near-full moon.

Dr. Lalaurie and Delphine fled the French Quarter by horse and carriage when a frenzied mob bent on vengeance gathered in the streets. They were never heard from again, but that's just the beginning of this ghost story.

The house has seen many transformations, though no long-term tenants. Mixed with years of abandonment here and there, it's been a school, an apartment complex, a saloon, and a furniture store, each ending its tenure with tales of nighttime screams, mysterious sightings, and worse.

"Currently," Leonce said, "it's a private residence, has been for about four years — a second or third home for the family so they're not here very often." He pointed above the garage. "That's a rental apartment now, separate from the main house."



**TOP: Its unassuming presence notwithstanding, the Lalaurie Mansion is believed to be the most haunted house in the French Quarter. ABOVE: Historic landmark Jackson Square sits at the very heart of the French Quarter.**

that had been so dark moments before were now silver-tinged, glowing, and the moon had almost broken free, but Leonce had one more goose bumps-inducing tidbit for us:

"In the four years that the current owners have rented that apartment," he finished, "nobody has ever renewed their lease. Can't say why for sure."

He didn't need to.

## DAYBREAK IN THE QUARTER

I'm a sucker for classic Hollywood-esque hauntings, but I soon discovered that ghoulish legends are only about half as unsettling as walking through the French Quarter during the morning hours. It's a veritable ghost town. There were a few places open for breakfast (if you're anywhere near St. Louis Street, try Petunias, where I had an everyday three-egg omelet, but the menu also includes crêpes and intriguing dishes such as the eggs melanzana, with its fried eggplant, grilled ham, hollandaise, and parmesan), but the restaurants, kitschy souvenir shops, and watering holes that were buzzing with activity the night before had gone the way of the vampire, retreating behind wooden shutters and locked doors at the first threat of daybreak.

Instead of waiting for the Quarter to rouse itself from its morning slumber, I decided to take advantage of the downtime.

Gray Line offers a number of excursions, and their Super City Tour is a perfect primer for New Orleans newbies. It begins at the Gray Line ticket office in the French Quarter and makes a big loop



Jackson Square, the public grounds that have served as the city's heart-and-soul common area since its inception as a trading camp, was abuzz with lively musicians and fanciful street artists.

through the city. Drive-by points of interest include the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain and the Pontchartrain Causeway, City Park (with a stop for snacks at the Botanical Gardens), Loyola and Tulane universities, and the Garden District.

Sylvester was our driver/narrator, and as impressed as I was with the Botanical Gardens' magnificently vibrant flora and the engineering of the 24-mile-long causeway, I was equally amazed that Sylvester could so effortlessly steer our bus down some impossibly narrow streets while providing a wonderful nonstop blend of New Orleans history, miscellany, and humor.

"... And so the Canal Street median was neutral ground for the constantly feuding French and American neighborhoods," he said at one point, adding, "but not today, today all New Orleanians love

to have a conversation, just don't ask us for directions."

"You use terms like north, south, east, and west. Those don't mean anything here." Then a pause. His voice would lower an octave, and slow a beat: "Upriver, downriver, lakeside, riverside. Yeah." The words would hang in the air and he'd chuckle into the microphone,

his infectious laughter filling the bus as it came within inches of the cars parked on the side of the street.

#### LAISSEZ LES BON TEMPS ROULER

By the time we got back downriver, the French Quarter was alive again. Shops had materialized from what I swear were vacant buildings when I boarded the bus. Restaurants had opened their doors, transformed from darkened dining rooms to inviting bistros. And Jackson

Square, the public grounds that have served as the city's heart-and-soul common area since its inception as a trading camp, was abuzz with lively musicians and fanciful street artists selling their wares.

Bourbon and Royal are the famous streets here. And they deliver on the promise of their renown — the former with its generous helpings of hedonistic



Discover hidden treasures and funky finds in one of New Orleans' charming boutiques.

nightlife (Have you ever heard of three-for-one cocktails? I hadn't either.), and the latter with boutique after boutique



NOMCVB, J.B. Bissell

(antiques, artwork, collectibles).

Still, they are hardly the only two roads worth a visit. The entire French Quarter is infinitely interesting — both for the shopping and the architecture — and seemingly endless. It's easy to navigate, but also easy to skip entire blocks if you don't keep track of where you've already been or still want to go. Window-shopping is especially pleasing, but take it from me: Be sure to jot down the names and addresses of the stores to which you'd like to make a return visit. I missed out on at least two art galleries and a praline stop because I simply couldn't find them again after being sidetracked by other eye-catching storefronts.

With twilight further enlivening the French Quarter, I waited in line at the Acme Oyster House, one of the neighborhood's most popular dining spots. It's the kind of restaurant where

you, well, wait in line to get in. When seats become available, it's go time.

I had a spot at the bar next to Giselle, a Colombian-born artist who moved to New Orleans in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina.

I asked her why.

"I had a friend who lived here; she told me to," Giselle said, as if it were really that simple. "It seemed like a good time to come. Maybe to help in my small way, or to just experience it all. My work's been good."

I nodded and concentrated on my fried shrimp and catfish. We enjoyed our separate dinners mostly in silence, but when I paid my tab, she had one more thing to say.

"Katrina is history, you know. She's gone. There are places that still need work, but I'm ready — *New Orleans* is ready — to *laissez les bon temps rouler*." Giselle raised her drink, flashed a smile, and winked at me. "To let the good times roll," she translated, and we clinked glasses.

And with that, I made my way into the French Quarter night. ■

## FASTFACTS

**RESORT DIRECTORY:** IntervalWorld.com or pages 71 to 72 and 91

**CLIMATE:** New Orleans has four seasons, but the city typically escapes extreme highs and lows in terms of thermometer readings. Summer is humid with temperatures reaching 90°F. Even during the winter months, the average high is in the 60s.

**DON'T MISS:** Café du Monde is about as don't-miss as it gets. Sit down anytime (it's open 24 hours) and order a plate of beignets and a café au lait to help wash them down. One order consists of three delightfully fried French doughnuts smothered in mountains of powdered sugar.

#### INTERVAL TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS:

IntervalWorld.com or 800.235.4000

**RENTAL CAR:** Not recommended. Parking can be difficult, so unless you're planning to explore beyond the city, taxis and public transportation may be more practical.

**CONTACT:** Historic New Orleans Tours, [tournorleans.com](http://tournorleans.com); Petunias, [petuniasrestaurant.com](http://petuniasrestaurant.com); Gray Line, [graylineneworleans.com](http://graylineneworleans.com); City Park, [neworleanscitypark.com](http://neworleanscitypark.com); Acme Oyster House, [acmeoyster.com](http://acmeoyster.com); Café Du Monde, [cafedumonde.com](http://cafedumonde.com)

#### VISITOR INFORMATION:

New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau  
800.672.6124  
[neworleanscvb.com](http://neworleanscvb.com)

[neworleansonline.com](http://neworleansonline.com)