




Royal Street (this page) and Jackson Square, with the St. Louis Cathedral (opposite), are key locales in New Orleans' French Quarter.



# Taking It Easy in the Crescent City

New Orleans is Alaska Airlines' newest destination  By Eric Lucas







he more things change, the more they stay the same. A millennium has turned over since I last rode the St. Charles Streetcar through New Orleans to my old high school, but the most tangible aspects of the experience remain unaltered and, for a romantic like me, unblemished.

Huge live oaks, Spanish moss draped from branches thick as cannons, line the boulevard with a presence both sturdy and graceful. Some have been here 200 years, arching over the street like neo-Gothic buttresses, fending off subtropical heat and weather. Occasional flashes of color—sapphire, emerald, ruby—reflect the Mardi Gras parades that passed by here weeks ago, when beads, now dangling high, were inadvertently tossed in the trees.

The streetcar itself, a green-and-red clackety carriage made of invincible oak and steel, is a 1920s Perley Thomas vintage car.

Elsewhere, such streetcars are in museums; here, they still do their job day after day, just as they did when they took me to school. Passengers can slide the slatted railcar seatbacks back and forth so they can face forward or aft; levered windows must be raised by hand to bring in the lush afternoon air.

Steel wheels chunk along the tracks, sounding a xylophonic reggae that lingers indelibly in your mind, unlike any sound I've heard anywhere else.

Much in New Orleans is enduring. Here, on a narrow strip of Mississippi delta, between the river and Lake Pontchartrain, an entire musical genre—jazz—claims its roots. I experienced the music's global reach when I listened to a rousing rendition of that old chestnut *When the Saints Go Marching In* on the Charles Bridge in Prague, decades after I first heard it at Preservation Hall in the French

Photos left to right: The St. Charles Avenue Line has served New Orleans since the 1830s; street musicians entertain passers-by with New Orleans jazz classics; homes in the French Quarter are an eclectic mix of styles and colors.



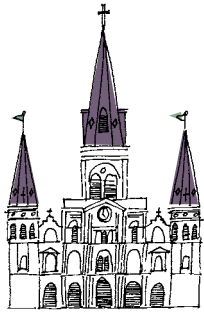
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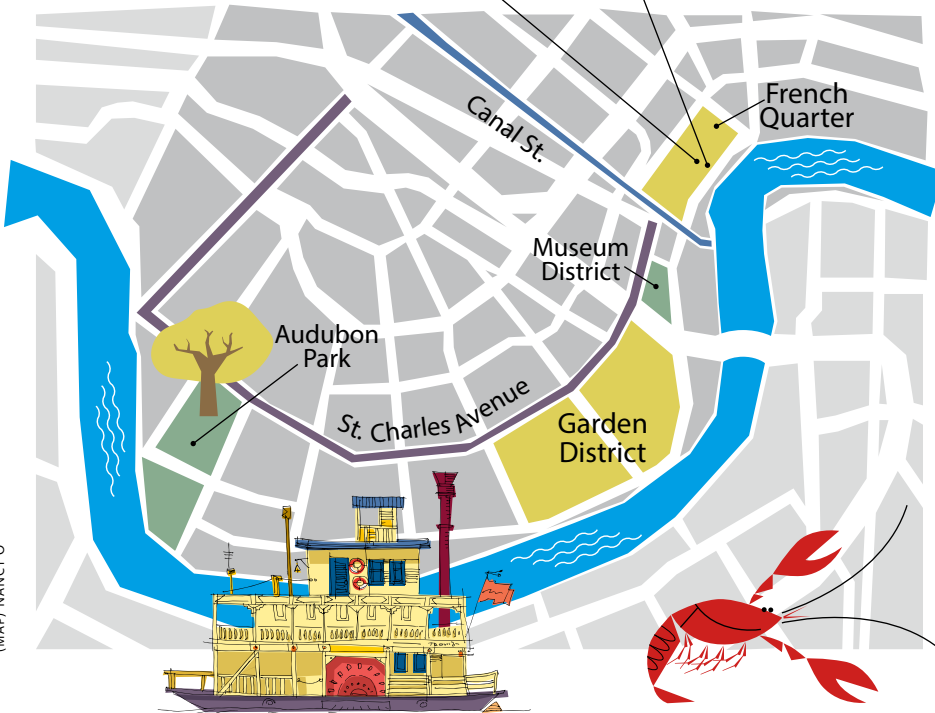
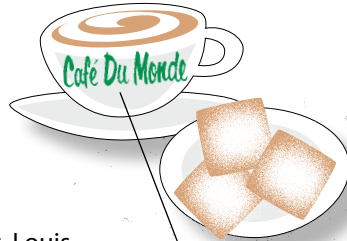
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## ONLY IN NEW ORLEANS

- **Nicknames** include Crescent City, the Big Easy and the City That Care Forgot.
- **The French Quarter** exhibits both French (street names) and Spanish (architecture) influences.
- **New Orleans was Spanish** (1762–1803) almost as long as it was French (from 1718, its founding, to 1762).
- While Cajun influences (such as zydeco) are common, the **city's cultural heritage is Creole**.
- Cajun culture predominates in what's called Bayou Country, west of New Orleans.
- **Adding chicory to coffee** dates back to Union blockades of the Mississippi during the Civil War.



St. Louis Cathedral



(MAP) NANCY O

Quarter, which came many decades after the song was first performed on these streets.

In New Orleans, where dozens of cultures have mixed and mingled, visitors can also enjoy an entire array of culinary delights found almost nowhere else: beignets, red beans and rice, oyster po-boys, shrimp rémoulade, red snapper amandine, blackened redfish, oysters Rockefeller, muffuletta sandwiches, and on and on into the night.

Here, in one of the locales most shielded from Northern weather tendencies, jasmine and gardenia scent the air; poinsettias are 6-foot shrubs; and camellias adorn hedgerows like ribbons.

I take in most of these sensory indulgences as the streetcar wends its way north. The driver wields a long-handled lever back and forth to stop and start the car. Visitors peer at antebellum mansions, cut glass windows





Bourbon Street, one of the city's top visitor attractions, radiates energy late into the night.

in the world—quite a distinction for a New World conveyance. Of course, back in the day there were no overhead power lines; the streetcars were drawn by horses.

“That’s where they watered the horses 150 years ago,” a resident tells a visitor about a stone basin in the median at the end of St. Charles Avenue, where the streetcar line turns northeast away from the Mississippi. It’s also where my old school, Ben Franklin Senior High, stands shuttered—a former 19th century courthouse, now a former 20th century school. Its Grecian columns rise 40 feet to the roof; its live oaks still shade the schoolyard; and the granite steps that were the stage for

gleaming, ranks of azaleas lining the stone foundations. The mansions reflect the city’s heyday as a cotton-shipping port 200 years ago. After being founded by French settlers in 1718, the city was taken over by Spanish authorities in 1762, and was the linchpin in Napoleon’s sale of a huge chunk of North America—the Louisiana Purchase—to the United States in 1803.

Streetcars have plied the 13-mile St. Charles line, from Canal Street to the Carrollton District far upriver, since 1835. That makes this the oldest continuously running streetcar system

my class picture remain stalwart. I squint into the past while mockingbirds sing. New Orleans does not readily bend to time.

I note that impression again while having supper at Superior Seafood & Oyster Bar in Uptown. The polished dark wood and mirrored walls hark back to early 20th-century chop-houses. I start with a bucket of boiled crawfish—which always come with a half-piece of corn on the cob and a few boiled potatoes—and finish with my all-time favorite, an oyster po-boy, ladled high with fried oysters and white rémoulade sauce on a crusty baguette. My ride

## CULINARY NEW ORLEANS

- **John Besh**, our James Beard–award cover subject, is dedicated to the traditional foods of his native south Louisiana, such as a simple platter of boiled crawfish. Find his traditional and reimagined classics at restaurants such as Luke, Borgne and Domenica.

- When **Susan Spicer** opened Bayona in 1990, her unabashedly rich takes on classic foods, such as sweetbreads and sauteed Gulf fish, reinvigorated the city’s culinary scene.



Susan Spicer.

- **Paul Prudhomme** burst on the national scene decades ago with blackened fish; that’s still the signature dish at K-Paul’s Louisiana Kitchen.

- **Emeril Lagasse’s** Delmonico is one of the icons of American dining, with classics such as oyster-crusted filet mignon and bananas Foster.

## By the Numbers

**370,000:** New Orleans population  
**9 million:** Annual visitors  
**1,400:** Restaurants  
**75,000:** Jobs created by tourism, the city’s largest employer  
**100:** River miles to Gulf of Mexico  
**68:** Number of “krewes,” the

semisecret clubs that sponsor Mardi Gras parades in and around New Orleans  
**1872:** The year the oldest Mardi Gras krewe, Rex, was formed  
**25 million:** Pounds of Mardi Gras beads tossed to parade watchers each year





## PLANTATION ALLEY

Oak Alley Plantation includes 25 acres of grounds and offers home and Civil War—exhibit tours.

New Orleans rose to economic prominence as a port in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, largely because of its importance in shipping cotton from upriver plantations to Europe and New England—half the city's \$156 million in 1857 exports. While cotton plantations were located throughout the

Mississippi Delta region, many of the best-preserved antebellum mansions lie along River Road, north and west of New Orleans on both sides of the river. Visiting these majestic icons of a past time is one of the most popular day trips from the city.

With towering Grecian columns, dozens of rooms, sweep-

ing staircases and cut glass chandeliers, the plantation houses evinced the huge wealth engendered by the cotton trade. Among the best-known are Oak Alley, with its approach lined with 300-year-old live oaks; Destrehan, which dates to 1787; Laura, whose architecture is Creole rather than neo-classic;

and Nottoway, whose original owner built two entry staircases so that gentlemen could not catch glimpses of ladies' ankles as the latter ascended.

Numerous tour companies offer excursions to Plantation Alley, as it's known, from New Orleans; for more information visit [www.neworleanscvb.com](http://www.neworleanscvb.com).



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back to the hotel on the streetcar, bell clanging, is a metaphysical dessert.

THE NEXT DAY, at Jackson Square in the heart of the French Quarter, another timeless scene plays out in front of St. Louis Cathedral. On a bench in the cobblestone forecourt, venerable jazz great Dwayne Burns is regaling passers-by with old standards, a tuba player behind. Visitors sit beside Burns for snapshots while he shifts effortlessly between his trumpet and his easy, yeasty baritone, leavening classics such as *Cabaret* and *St. James Infirmary Blues*, one of the oldest jazz-blues songs, made famous in 1928 by New Orleans native son Louis Armstrong.

A mom and her toddler girl take a turn next to Burns for the latter. Sure enough, when he gets to the line “Let her go, let her go, God bless her,” the lass gets up and wanders off (not far), to the bemused delight of onlookers, performers and Mom and Dad, alike.

Nearby, fortune-tellers are laying out tarot cards for the day's futurizing. I ask one if I should buy Apple stock.

She grins: “I know the answer, but it's worth \$20.”

I weigh the cost-benefit ratio as Burns launches into *The Saints*—almost impossible to not hear during a stay in New Orleans. Instead of seeking capital gains I head toward the river for an afternoon respite, café au lait and beignets.

Café Du Monde is where, late into the night in my teenage years, my friends and I would end up for revitalization after an evening in the Quarter. More on that in a minute; now, I find a table at the back, near the Mississippi levee, and simply marvel at the fact that the dense, sharp, chicory-laced coffee and milk, and the rich dough pastries, taste exactly as they did all those years ago.

Taste and smell and sound are the hallmarks of New Orleans. The streetcar wheels, the chicory coffee, the gardenia breeze, the trumpet's wail and the sibilant rush of rain from sudden delta showers that turn the air into velvet—these all persist. The “City That Care

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Forgot” is an early 20th century nickname for this town; time and worry balk at the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, helping explain why New Orleans is so rooted in the popular imagination.

As my own memories are so strong, it's tempting to paint them sepia, but in truth they are tangy, fragrant and tactile, as well as visual. I wander through the French Market and admire jars of pickled okra, bags of chicory coffee, sacks of pecan pralines. Heading back along Decatur Street, I look in shop windows offering voodoo charms guaranteed to vanquish care and heighten romance. I hear the strains of Dr. John singing *Gris-Gris Gumbo Ya Ya*, a five-word encapsulation of the New Orleans ethos.

When I reach the city's famous Bourbon Street, dusk is dropping; the street is closed to traffic; visitors are peering into dozens of nightclubs and bars; and the scene is buzzing. Yes, it is all for show, but what a show. In the block between St. Peter and Toulouse, Peter Rabbit (his stage name) has begun a night of performance as perhaps the world's best bucket drummer. Plastic buckets, that is, three set on the street. He uses sticks and hands to produce a kaleidoscope of rhythms, cadences circling each other and bouncing around like cicadas in full song. The climax comes when he flings his drumsticks onto the building wall, catches them as they bounce back and concludes with a nine-rhythm flourish.

ALL THIS IS AS IT HAS EVER BEEN in New Orleans, but that's not to say there's nothing new. The city continues to recover from Hurricane Katrina. There are now 1,400 restaurants in this culinary capital, almost twice as many as before the 2005 hurricane. Visitors have more than doubled to 9.1 million, contributing \$6 billion to the local economy.

Another notable new claim to fame is a burgeoning Museum District, downtown in the Central Business District, centered on two worthy facilities. The Ogden Museum of Southern Art is dedicated to paintings, crafts and photos from the South that have been widely

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overlooked elsewhere in the country. Across the street is the National WWII Museum, which opened 14 years ago and has grown far beyond its humble beginnings. Lengthy halls depict both the European and Pacific theaters of the war, and a separate hangar displays vintage warplanes.

Elsewhere, the Mississippi levee that was almost completely undeveloped when I was growing up is now a delightful promenade overlooking the city's cruise terminal. A casino stands at the lower end of Canal Street; the glitzy modern facility bears little resemblance to the long-gone gambling dens at the other side of the French Quarter in Storyville, where jazz was born.

Though these new embellishments add to the city's appeal and attract their share of visitors, the French Quarter and its boisterous streets remain the main draw. So after strolling up and down to take in the scene, after catching snatches of jazz and blues and zydeco that buzz the street like bees, after marveling at Peter Rabbit's drum wizardry, I do just as I did long ago and head back for coffee and beignets to top off the night.

Café Du Monde is a no-nonsense operation. Take a table, raise a hand with fingers up indicating how many orders—I indulge myself with two, for old times' sake—and a few minutes later the treats arrive. In all the world I have roamed, nowhere are these simple iconic delights done as well as right here, at this cafe in this neighborhood at this late hour.

And that exemplifies New Orleans. Few places live up to their iconic status as well as this city. "I'm going back to the Crescent City," sings Lucinda Williams, "where everything's still the same; this town has said what it has to say." And keeps on saying, peerless as ever. ▲

*Eric Lucas is a contributing editor.*

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