

New Orleans Revisited: A Fresh Look at the Crescent City

by Ben Rossi, Jr., PassPorter Guest Contributor

When my girlfriend, Amy, informed me that her annual work-related retreat would be in New Orleans this year, my reaction was one of disappointment. I'd been to New Orleans several times before as a young teen, and I had always remembered it as somewhat of a tawdry southern town. I remembered New Orleans as a place one only visits for conventions, Bowl games, and of course, Mardi Gras, all painted on a bland river landscape surrounded by oblivion. Moreover, I could not ignore the sad, dreadful images I had seen of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I could not imagine the city to have yet recovered, or at least not well enough to genuinely accommodate vacationing visitors like myself seeking to be kept amused. However, after returning home from this latest visit, I instead found myself remembering with emotional fondness a recuperating, unanticipated New Orleans far different from what my younger eyes had ever permitted me to see.

Freshly landed in the Crescent City and greeted with perfect Spring weather, Amy and I arrived at the Hotel Monteleone -- an historic and ideally located hotel in the French Quarter that served very comfortably as a home base for our entire stay. Just outside its front doors lies everything that is quintessentially New Orleans. To its right is the bulk of the French Quarter, with its narrow, intimate streets, and countless shops, bars, and restaurants. To its left is stately Canal Street, which makes for convenient access to its streetcars for navigating downtown New Orleans and beyond. Inside, our fifth floor room was tastefully appointed in a manner loyal to its age and setting. Adding to all its warmth was our view, which was a cozy, restorative scene seen from our perch above the activity on Royal Street. As though right on cue, we even began hearing live street jazz from outside our window as we unpacked. Any weeds of skepticism I still harbored about our trip were fast being plucked, if not completely eradicated.

Fortunately, Amy's retreat activities required a minimum of her time, freeing her by at least 11:00AM on each of our three full days in the city. Thus, Amy and I spent our first opportunity together meandering the streets of the French Quarter. As soon as we set out, we were immersed in that idealized New Orleans experience -- music and enticing aromas permeating the air, wrought-iron balconies at every turn, and a population of native characters who couldn't possibly exist anywhere else. Although the French Quarter is famously associated with New Orleans, I was quick to realize that it is not at all the miniature

"entertainment district" along Bourbon Street that I had recalled it to be. Instead, the French Quarter is a significant, integral component of New Orleans at large, and a rather expansive and vibrant one, too. Sure, there are the many souvenir shops, street performers, and gaudy attention-hogging attractions that cater to tourists. But they seamlessly co-exist with parks, residences, well-established restaurants, churches, grocers, museums, and magnificent statues and monuments. It is a delightful blend of Europe and Dixie, further combined with a kind of Manhattan-like energy that I simply didn't expect. I was consumed by its realism, too. There are no trendy designs, and no fake facades. The colors are muted and weathered. The buildings are wrinkled with the wisdom of their long histories.

As we walked its many blocks, we saw warmly inviting shops and courtyards in every direction, all while constantly passing the famed restaurants of one celebrated chef after another. Instead of a sit-down meal however, we had opted for grazing here and there. For lunch, we visited the Central Grocery for a classic Muffelata sandwich we bought from over the counter. Muffelatas are a contribution from the lesser-known Italian influence not usually associated with New Orleans's history. Afterward, our wandering brought us to Jackson Square, over which the striking St. Louis Cathedral stands watch. Across Decatur Street, which is as lively a street as any in the French Quarter, Amy and I shared beignets at the age-old Cafe Du Monde, providing a perfect stopping point from which to absorb all the indigenous scenery. On a cautionary note however, we were astounded to find that many of the eateries in the area do not accept credit cards. One must be sure to have a good supply of cash on hand before setting out. From Cafe Du Monde, we made our way back toward our hotel on Royal Street, but not before making the obligatory trek one block beyond, to Bourbon Street, with its eye-opening flamboyance, but with no less the regional flavor and impact. While I might dare to describe the French Quarter as theme-park-like in terms of its personality and proportion, this is otherwise a much more "real" place -- as genuine as a place can be. It is a place that has never been rinsed of its historic authenticity, or of its flaws. Its appealing sparkle comes, instead, from the unpretentious character and charisma that it cloaks you with.

On the third day of our stay, New Orleans's 26th annual French Quarter Festival began. Despite our thorough exploration of the French Quarter two days prior, this proved to be a rather distinct experience in itself. The French Quarter Festival began in 1984, growing to become the largest free music festival in the South. This year, the Festival was to include some seventeen stages throughout the French Quarter featuring an endless schedule of performing brass bands, traditional and contemporary jazz artists, R&B headliners, and much more.

Accompanying the live music would be over ninety food and beverage booths offering an assortment of New Orleans fare from area restaurants and vendors. I was excited to discover that the Festival was to "kick off" with a parade on Bourbon Street at 10:00AM. I had to see this! So, with Amy still sequestered at her retreat session that morning, I ventured out on my own, croissant in hand, to await the parade. Against the aged character lines of Bourbon Street as a backdrop, the color was in the people -- a friendly and jovial crowd of locals and visitors alike. As the parade finally approached, the excitement erupted. Everyone laughed and cheered with the parading assembly of jazz bands, "pirates," strolling antebellum couples, horses, pageant queens, and various umbrella-toting Cajuns all marching in that unique New Orleanian strut. Amy eventually caught up with me after the parade, and together we then wound through the crowded streets to the Jackson Square area, around which the largest collection of food and beverage booths was gathered. Summoned by Cajun and Creole aromas, we started to sample the various offerings -- brisket sandwiches, spicy sausage, red beans and rice, bread pudding, crawfish, and much more, not to mention the various local beers and other alcoholic concoctions that attracted their own eager patrons. It was a harmonious scene of picnicking friends and families, children with balloons, and listeners dancing to music-filled air, all sandwiched between green grasses and azure skies. It was a fitting conclusion to our stay, and one that my mind's eye continues to find comfort in recalling.

Sometimes, what we remember and perceive about a place calls for a much-needed updating. On this latest visit to New Orleans, I had cautiously hoped for merely some simple diversion. Through the prism of mature eyes, I was instead rewarded with so much more.

About The Author: Ben Rossi, Jr. is a contracts attorney from Orlando who literally grew up within the circus and theme park industries through his family's businesses. Ben and his girlfriend, Amy, are looking forward to their second Disney cruise this Fall, to the Eastern Caribbean.

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