

The Best of New Orleans

New Orleans should come with a warning label.

No, no, not about hurricanes. Forget that. That's like solely identifying San Francisco and Los Angeles with earthquakes. No, this is about the city itself. See, there's this group of residents whom locals call the "never lefts." They are the people who came to New Orleans as tourists: came for Mardi Gras, came for Jazz Fest, or just came. And the city worked its magic on them. They listened to street musicians around Jackson Square. They danced to brass bands in clubs at night. They gazed at lush tropical courtyards hidden behind unassuming building fronts. They strolled down streets time seemed to have forgotten. They kissed beneath flickering gas lamps. They ate incredible meals and topped them off with beignets at 3am at the Café du Monde while watching the passing human parade. They found themselves perusing newspaper ads for houses and apartments, because as their trip's scheduled end date came and went, they were still in New Orleans. They came for Mardi Gras, came for Jazz Fest, just came—and *never left*.

New Orleans does that to people.

It's a remarkable thing, but even with the thick layer of catastrophic damage around it, the core of New Orleans remains as magical and seductive as ever. It should be cliché to use those words, but when even news anchors and relief workers who have never been to the city before find themselves falling into local ways and going to efforts to return again and again, you know there is something powerful about the place. The visual delights of the remarkable French Quarter and Garden District remain. Once again music flows from random doorways or is played right in the street. Jazz, Cajun, blues, whatever—you'll find yourself moving to a rhythm and wondering if the streets really are dancing along with you. There are delicious smells in the moist, honeyed air, which seems to carry a whiff of the Caribbean while caressing your skin, almost as if it were alive.

And then there's the food. Don't get us started on the food.

But New Orleans is also a city experiencing great difficulties, belying the outsider nickname "the Big Easy." Residents never call it that, for it's never been easy, and right now, it's not all that big, either. For months after the flood—while Katrina may have been the catalyst for it, the damage to the area was almost entirely because of the levee breaches—until intrepid residents from even the hardest-hit neighborhoods returned, New Orleans was shrunk to its 1784 boundaries. It remains a mass of contradictions, at once so much better than it was in the days immediately following August 29, 2005, and in other ways completely stagnant. It's sensual and joyous, decadent but not exploitative. Indulgences are many but for the right reason: They are fun. This is a city where every business entirely closes for Mardi Gras; after all, *carnival* roughly means "farewell to flesh." No one's going to say goodbye to such things (as if they ever really

do) without a big party. And yet at the same time, the mechanisms that supported all that fun—a combination of carelessness and centuries-old traditionalism—also helped institutionalize some of the worst poverty and racial disparities in the country. Katrina's floodwaters exposed those problems, but they weren't washed away. As some residents joyfully return, so many others remain stuck in exile, and still others are exiting in frustration. And if they come back, will anything be better?

Those who love it are determined to make it so. But the future, both immediate and distant, remains shaky. Lack of clear direction from any level of authority means too much of the city remains in stasis. As we write this, entire neighborhoods are still dilapidated. But, and we will stress this point over and over, this is not the case with tourist areas. The historic districts are as lively and bustling as ever, and with a few exceptions, all the major institutions have reopened (a notable omission would be the St. Charles streetcar line, which, as we write this, required a total overhaul and won't be running again in its entirety until 2008). As contradictory as it sounds, you have to go out of your way to see that something enormous happened here. True, there is still a shortage of workers in every area, particularly hotels and restaurants. Expect slower service even as these problems continue. But at the same time, expect to be greeted with pleasure and gratitude; locals are eager for tourist business and it shows in their level of hospitality. And in a city full of storytellers, they have such tales to share with you these days. Meanwhile, restaurants are doing some of their best work in a long time, and there are an inspiring number of new ones on the scene, while many hotels have taken advantage of insurance settlements to get needed face-lifts. Prices are doing some weird rising and falling; many restaurant bills have increased while hotels have come down, but both are offering all sorts of bargains in the slower winter and summer seasons to entice business. Crime is returning, which is discouraging, but again it remains largely confined to the areas where visitors do not tend to go. Clubs are hopping again, perhaps not yet back to a nightly schedule, as so many musicians lost homes and instruments and remain unable or unwilling to return to the city. But the ones who have come back are deeply dedicated and fill in the gaps with new artistic determination, while the crowds that come to hear them are equally recommitted to this vital part of their culture. And the bars? Why, some of them never closed to begin with. It is, in short, a good time to go to New Orleans.

And what can you do when you get there? Same as always. We tell people that all we do when we visit is eat, drink, listen to music, dance, and walk. That's it. In New Orleans you can do just that for days without getting bored. That's the kind of town it is. In fact, that may be the simplest way to sum up its appeal—which is not an easy task. For years, countless authors have tried to explain its gestalt. You could fill entire bookcases with New Orleans-based or -inspired literature, some written by natives, even more by authors who came for a visit and never left. But that appeal isn't for everyone. New Orleans, it must be apparent by now, is a city of flaws. And while now is the time to correct some of those, a certain amount are in the very nature of the place. It would be wrong if in renovation it was turned into something shiny and clean. That wouldn't be the natural order of things; thanks to the climate, the city began to decay the moment it was built. Buildings may be worn and shabby, but every brick has a history. You want tidy and sterile? Go elsewhere. You want history and character? Come here.

The best way to get inside New Orleans is to plunge right in. Don't just go for the obvious. Sure, we've met people who never left Bourbon Street and had a terrific time,

but the city has so much more to offer. We've also met people who went for recognizable names and quick and easy decisions and then were disappointed that their experiences were no more than adequate.

Look over the advice that follows, here and in the hotel and dining chapters, and you should be able to sidestep the inevitable tourist traps. We want you to go home having passed a real good time, as the locals say. If you want to get your hands dirty and help with some of the ongoing work, thank you. But if all your dirt comes from the powdered sugar on a beignet, then you did your trip right, too. You came. That matters a lot. Maybe you will even come back again.

That is, assuming you do go home. Remember: We warned you, so don't blame us if you come to New Orleans and one day discover that you never left.

1 Frommer's Favorite First-Time New Orleans Experiences

- **Beignets & Café au Lait at Café du Monde:** Sit on the crowded patio gazing at the action on Decatur Street and Jackson Square. Gorge on hot French-style doughnuts liberally coated in powdered sugar (everyone will know what you've been doing from the sprinkles on your shirt) and washed down with potent chicory coffee. And do it at any hour of the day—3pm or 3am. It's open 24 hours! See p. 170.
- **Jazz at Preservation Hall:** Drop your eight bucks in the hat and squeeze into one of the country's time-honored jazz institutions. Your feet will be moving and your ears will be happy, even if they never knew they liked jazz before. See p. 263.
- **A Crowded Night at the Maple Leaf:** The Maple Leaf is a very "New Orleans" club and a terrific place to hang out. On nights when popular bands fill the place to hot, sweaty capacity and the crowd spills over into the street and dances right on the sidewalk, it's sublime. See p. 272.
- **Dinner at Commander's Palace:** It took over a year after Katrina for this legendary restaurant to reopen, thanks to massive reconstruction requirements. It's romantic, gracious, attentive, and delicious. See p. 161.
- **A Cemetery Tour:** New Orleans's above-the-ground tombs are hard to forget once you've seen them, and touring these ghostly cities of the dead provides you with a unique look into the history and culture of the city. See p. 201.
- **A Stroll through the Garden District:** These elegant (not flashy) old homes, nestled among lush trees, are wonderful to gaze at and covet. At the right time of day, you might have the streets largely to yourself and feel you've slipped back in time—or into an Anne Rice novel. See p. 227.
- **A Stroll along St. John's Bayou:** Most tourists don't get much beyond the Quarter or they speed past this low-slung body of water as they head for City Park. Slow down local-style, finally away from the hordes as you meander along the bayou and admire the less high-profile but no less romantic neighborhood around it. See p. 188.
- **Bourbon Street After Dark:** Even if you end up hating it, you have to see it at least once. Music spurts and oozes out of windows and doors, drinkers reign supreme, and sex is widely available—on paper, on stage, and on video. It's wild, disgusting, and strangely exhilarating. See chapter 11.
- **Club Hopping in the Frenchmen Section:** This portion of the Faubourg Marigny (the neighborhood that

borders the French Quarter to the north and east) features at least a dozen clubs and several bars, each with its own personality and charm. Stroll from one to the other, dipping in for a bit or just listening to the music pouring out the doors before moving on to sample something farther down the street. See chapter 11.

- **Food, Glorious Food:** With a nearly infinite selection of outstanding restaurants and other food sources, meal planning in New Orleans is very serious indeed. There is never time to do it all: a muffuletta from Central Grocery eaten on the banks of the Mississippi;

boiled crawfish or oyster shooting at Acme or Felix's; a po' boy from Gene's; classic Creole at Arnaud's; and amazing, innovative cuisine at Cuvee. Can you eat five meals a day here? We've tried! See chapter 7.

- **Dancing to the ReBirth Brass Band, John Boutte, and/or Kermit Ruffins:** Dancing to three of the best musical acts New Orleans has to offer (a brass band, an astonishing soul crooner, and a jazz musician in the tradition of Louis Armstrong, respectively) is the physical manifestation of the word *fun*—and the truest spirit of New Orleans. See chapter 11.

2 The Best Trip Mementos

The following are just a few suggestions for New Orleans souvenirs beyond the T-shirts and snow globes, and more welcome than a couple of extra pounds around your hips.

- **A Book from Faulkner House, 624 Pirates Alley (© 504/524-2940):** In the appendix we've listed a portion of the many books inspired by this city, and you should consider picking up a couple from this jewel of that vanishing species, the independent bookstore. Tucked into the bottom floor of the house where William Faulkner lived long enough to write two novels (*Mosquitoes* and *Soldiers' Pay*), this charming shop's centerpiece is a table crammed with New Orleans— and Louisiana-related literature, novels, nonfiction, poetry, and art books, with still more on the surrounding shelves (ask the staff to point you in the right direction). Many an author has tried, with varying success, to capture New Orleans on the page, and you may find their efforts will help you get a little fix back home when you begin to know what it means to miss New Orleans. And where better to buy it than at a local

institution with a literary history? See p. 245.

- **A Photo or Art Book from A Gallery for Fine Photography, 241 Chartres St. (© 504/568-1313):** The owner calls his impressive shop “the only museum where you can buy the art.” Always feeling free to spend your money, we do admit we are talking about a bigger investment than a poster. Many famous photographers are represented here, but for our purposes at this moment, you will want to concentrate on the local artists' works such as E. J. Bellocq's famous Storyville photos, or possibly more affordably, atmospheric cemetery images from Sandra Russell Clark, Michael P. Smith's locally beloved moments of New Orleans color and custom (Jazz Fest photos from throughout the festival's 30-year history, jazz funerals, Mardi Gras Indians, and much more), or even photos of the New Orleans World Fair taken by owner Joshua Mann Paillet. If an original is still out of your financial reach, they also carry a range of photo art books. See p. 242.

- **A Southern Scent from Hove**, 824 Royal St. (© 504/525-7827): A perfumery since the 1930s, Hove not only creates their own unique perfumes (like Bayou D'Amor and Creole Days) but also carries some traditional scents. We got hooked on their version of vetivert, which was described by one Virginia-native-turned-Louisiana-resident as “smelling like the South” (Creoles used it to freshen up stuffy closets). Locals also adore the tea olive (made from the indigenous sweet olive). The scents come in perfume drams, as cologne, and some in soaps, while they also sell dried vetivert for your own closet. And they have scents for men, too! See p. 244.
- **A CD from the Louisiana Music Factory**, 210 Decatur St. (© 504/586-1094): A visitor might first think of the sights or tastes of New Orleans as his or her primary sensory experience, but take away the music and you just have another pretty, aging city. Bring some of it home with you, courtesy of an independent store that doesn't just hold the best selection of New Orleans music but embodies its funky spirit. We've listed a number of possibilities in the appendix, and you can always ask the salespeople as well. You could start with one of the international stars (Dr. John, Neville Brothers, Prof. Longhair) or experiment a little (ReBirth Brass Band or New Orleans Klezmer All-Stars), or try a sampler (Rhino Records has several, but we highly recommend the excellent new box set *Doctors, Professors, Kings and Queens: The Big ol' Box of New Orleans* and not just because we wrote some of the liner notes). See p. 252.
- **Mardi Gras Beads:** Here's an interesting phenomenon: You go to New Orleans, especially around Mardi

Gras time, and you get saturated by beads. They are like leaves on the ground—valueless by reason of their ubiquity and seasonal expiration date. But hand a friend at home a few strands, and watch their face light up with pleasure. Even the beads that you know are the cheap, crappy ones will delight, because outside of the parade setting, they are novel. Meanwhile, you may well bring home a couple strands that are kinda cool, ones that have life-size shrimp on them, say, or some that light up.

Don't buy beads (unless it's just a strand or two) in shops around the Quarter, where you can pay 10 times what the beads cost at the source, **Accent Annex**, 1009 McDermott Rd., Metairie (© 888/394-5537 or 504/391-3900). Sadly, they no longer have a Quarter outlet, but the money you'll save on beads will make driving to their store in Metairie worth it, especially if you intend to buy in bulk. The smaller **antiques stores on Esplanade** near Decatur often have bags of used beads, which can produce some curious variations, and in those same shops and the like on **Magazine** you can often find antique Czech glass beads, though even those cost about three times what they did some years ago. Finally, you can go to the headquarters for the **Zulu Krewe**, known for the *coolest* beads of any krewe. You will have to pay a bit more for them, but all the money goes back to the krewe: **Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club**, 732 N. Broad St. (© 504/827-1661).

- **Christmas Tree Ornaments and Other Handicrafts:** The Poor Claire nuns make everything in their little gift shop, from handmade rosaries and ceramic statues (look for the glazed nativity scenes) to, best of all, Sr. Olivia's amazing Christmas tree

ornaments. Various iconic New Orleans landmarks (from the Cabildo to the Cathedral, from a Lucky Dog cart to Mardi Gras floats) are meticulously re-created in architecturally accurate and scaled detail, and then hand-painted on balsa wood. Locals collect them all (there are some standards, but she also introduces new

designs each year). The prices are so low it feels sinful. Buy a lot, to ease your conscience. **Monastery Gift Shop**, 720 Henry Clay Ave. (☎ 504/895-2019). (Go to the sliding window when you enter the building, and ring the bell. The nun on duty that day will open the gift shop for you.)

3 The Best Drinks: Hurricanes Are for Tourists, Sazeracs Are for Natives

New Orleans provides a lot of opportunities to drink, and while there isn't anything wrong with quaffing beer and fruity powdered drinks, some of you may have a more sophisticated palate or wish to acquire one. This is a town that knows its booze, for sure, and it has contributed a few cocktails to the pantheon. You can drink beer anywhere. Why not try a few indigenous cocktails? That said, there's nothing wrong with a Hurricane every now and again, even for natives. (We'd like to thank Chuck Taggart, who regularly reports on New Orleans and other cocktails at www.gumbopages.com, for this list.)

- **Sazerac:** The quintessential New Orleans cocktail, one of the first, and perhaps the greatest ever. The combination of rye whiskey (or cognac), Peychaud's Bitters, a touch of sugar, a hint of Herbsaint anise liqueur, and a breath of lemon oil create a symphony of flavor, and it plays new movements as the drink warms up. We encourage every single tourist to enjoy Sazeracs as often as possible.
- **Ramos Gin Fizz:** There was a time when there were 35 barback boys shaking gin fizzes behind the bar at Henry C. Ramos' Stag Saloon, and Huey P. Long took his favorite bartender from the Roosevelt Hotel to Washington with him so that he would never be deprived of his beloved gin fizz. What's

in it? Gin, egg whites, orange flower water, lemon and lime juice, soda water, and cream. It might be hard to find these days. (The Old Absinthe House still makes it.) Ask for it, and make the local bartenders learn about their own history.

- **Vieux Carré Cocktail:** Unjustly forgotten except for a growing number of cocktailians and the bartenders at the Hotel Monteleone, this wonderful creation was given to us by Walter Bergeron, head bartender at the hotel in the 1930s. He put together rye whiskey, cognac, sweet vermouth, Benedictine D.O.M., and two kinds of bitters, and we thank him.
- **The Brandy Crusta:** Created at Santina's Saloon in New Orleans in the 1880s, this drink was the first to combine a base spirit, liqueur, and citrus juice, plus a dash of bitters. This makes it the father of the Sidecar, the margarita, and all of their descendants in a category of drinks that author and cocktailian Gary Regan calls "New Orleans Sours." It's a beautiful drink, with a beautiful garnish—the rim is frosted with sugar, and a wide piece of lemon peel encircles the mouth of the glass; you sip the drink over the lemon peel.
- **Hurricane:** Okay, okay, so we dissed the Hurricane before, but really, it's a fruity delight, a deviously stealthy

drink (as you can't really taste the alcohol). But Pat O'Brien's is actually a nice, fun bar and worth going to (unless you have to wait in a long line of tourists to get in). What you get these days is a far cry from what Charlie Cantrell first concocted out of rum, passion fruit, and other ingredients back in the 1940s; what we get today is made from a bottled and/or powdered premix. Still, everybody

needs to knock back a Hurricane once in a while. You can purchase bottled or powdered Pat O'Brien's Hurricane Mix at the bar or via mail order; just add rum and ice, and "Have Fun!" A version made with fresh juices can be found at www.gumbo.com/food/beverages/hurricane.html and in Gary Regan's book *The Joy of Mixology*, a variation on the above recipe.

4 The Best Bars Beyond Bourbon

So now that you've read the above, you want to branch out with your drinking environment as well as your choice of drinks. There are many fine bars in this city, but here's a sampling for those looking for something more interesting than the watering holes of the frat variety.

- * **The Library Lounge at the Ritz-Carlton**, At the **Ritz-Carlton**, 921 Canal St. (☎ 504/524-1331): The brain child of local and fourth generation bartender Chris McMillian, this gorgeous, inviting space is the place for serious drinkers, who want to admire a master mixologist at work. Order a Mint Julep from McMillian, and get a history lesson. Or just let him introduce you to a new cocktail and the deep pleasure of good drinking. See p. 276.
- **French 75 Bar at Arnaud's**, 813 Bienville St. (☎ 504/523-5433): Beautiful room, beautiful bar, with enthusiastic, friendly bartenders who now keep a copy of Ted "Dr. Cocktail" Haigh's book *Vintage Spirits and Forgotten Cocktails* behind the bar. (Haigh is the curator of the Museum of the American Cocktail.) It's also a cigar bar, so cigar-haters take heed. See p. 276.
- **Napoleon House**, 500 Chartres St. (☎ 504/524-9752): One of the most civilized drinking spaces in the world. It looks its age (over a century), classical and jazz music play gently, and they serve really good Sazeracs along with their house cocktail (the Pimm's Cup, garnished with a cucumber spear), plus warm muffulettas to boot. See p. 277.
- **Carousel Bar at the Monteleone Hotel**, 214 Royal St. (☎ 504/523-3341): No, you're not drunk (well, maybe you are, but that's beside the point). The bar is actually spinning; the stools rotate around the central hub of the Carousel Bar, although not as fast as what generations of New Orleanian kids call "da flyin' horses." Ask for the Vieux Carré Cocktail, their signature drink for nearly 75 years. It's a little pricey here, so beware. See p. 274.
- **Columns Hotel**, 3811 St. Charles Ave. (☎ 504/899-9308): The interior substituted for the brothel in the movie *Pretty Baby*, which is reason enough to come here, but truly, it's the wide, deep veranda that will inspire your Southern, warm summer night, mint-julep-sipping fantasies. See p. 115.
- **Ralph's on the Park**, 900 City Park Ave. (☎ 504/488-1000): The newest venue on our list, once the site of a tavern frequented by the ladies of Storyville, though in being spiffed up

it's lost that particular ooh-la-la flavor. Still, who cares? Look how gorgeous that bar is! A grown-up but not stuffy place to drink, with a gorgeous view of the oak trees at City Park, plus real Sazerac rye to make their Sazeracs! See p. 150.

- **Swizzle Stick Bar at Café Adelaide**, 300 Poydras St., in the Loews Hotel (☎ 504/595-3305): Classy and sassy, with its own self-named signature cocktail. Get the cocktail sampler (also known as the shot tree), which comes with shots of the Swizzle (made with New Orleans silver rum, lime juice, bitters, a splash of club soda, and a secret ingredient), or

sometimes additionally Sidecars and Sazeracs. Bartender manager Lu, reason enough to come here, also makes a mean Corpse Reviver #2. Aren't you intrigued? See p. 280.

- **Orleans Grapevine Wine Bar & Bistro**, 720 Orleans Ave. (☎ 504/523-1930): A wonderfully intimate venue, dark and cool, and surprisingly quiet so close to the bustle of Bourbon Street. The cocktails are still a bit iffy, but the staggeringly extensive wine list and the small but delightful seasonal dining menu (including some exceptional gumbo) make up for it. See p. 277.