



# New Orleans:

READY WHEN YOU ARE

BY VERA MARIE BADERTSCHER

Memories of New Orleans come wrapped in heat, color, and music. The hues of tropical fruits cover walls in shades of mango, persimmon, lemon, and lime. Humidity peels the paint, creating abstract art along the sidewalk.

Photo courtesy of Mr. B's Bistro

Photo courtesy of the New Orleans CVB

Opposite: Wrought iron balconies are an iconic detail of the architecture found in New Orleans. Above: Mr. B's Bistro, one of New Orleans' finest restaurants, serves up regional Cajun and creole delights, such as crayfish. Right: The time-honored Krewe of Zulu parades first on Mardi Gras day.

In the evening when the soggy heat relents, visitors stroll down narrow streets as they sip from tall plastic cups of beer or margaritas and seek out the best jazz in the world. The wail of saxophone and thrum of guitar spill onto the street from alleys and small clubs, setting shoulders swinging and feet sliding into cozy bars. Everything except the music moves in slow motion in summer in New Orleans.

In September 2005, our mental slideshow of the unique cityscape of New Orleans changed overnight from brilliant colors and architecture exuding sensuous charm to a black and white nightmare. Struggles to survive replaced exuberant celebration of life. A complicated city became more complex.

Three years later, the recovery remains far from complete, but tourists, some taking working vacations to help rebuild houses, schools, and hospitals, once more flow through the Louis Armstrong Airport. With flight schedules almost back to normal and 32,000 hotel rooms available in more than 200 hotels, New Orleans welcomes visitors. Some claim there is no such thing as a bad meal in New Orleans, and more than 900 restaurants, many brand-new, are dishing up Cajun and creole treats, seafood, whiskey bread pudding, and more.

Museums are open and the famous and convenient St. Charles trolley once more rolls through the Garden District. The flooding that followed Katrina barely touched the French Quarter, tourist central. Unless you are a regular visitor, you probably will not notice the changes in Mardi Gras.

One of the earliest settlements in the United States, the French Quarter displays marks of French and Spanish habitation. Plain walls abut sidewalks, hiding lush courtyards behind rustic wooden gates. Bougainvillea rains fuchsia blossoms from wrought iron balconies. Best explored on foot, the short blocks of the Quarter stretch along a bend in the Mississippi River that gives the city one of its many nicknames – the Crescent



Photo courtesy of Brennan's Restaurant

Photo by Terry Thibeau

Photo courtesy of Waldhorn & Adler Antiques



Top left: The flower-draped Court of the Two Sisters is an excellent choice for brunch. Top right: There's no better place than Brennan's to taste Bananas Foster – the restaurant invented the scrumptious dessert! Above: Waldhorn & Adler Antiques showcases stunning furniture, jewelry, and other antiques.

City. Although streets run north/south and east/west in the adjacent business district, the diagonals of the old section almost guarantee you will get disoriented. That is good. Explore. Eat. Drink. Shop. Enjoy *le bon temps*.

### ROYAL SHOPPING

Whether people fly into New Orleans for a sporting event at the Super Dome, a convention like the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club Meet in June 2009, or just to explore, they enjoy shopping at one-of-a-kind stores. In neighboring shops, people stroll among paintings of "Blue Dogs," diamond brooches from bygone eras, and voodoo dolls.

Sophisticated, refined Rue Royal (Royal Street), the place for art and antiques, parallels the boisterous Bourbon Street.

As you leave the business district along Canal Street, the 122-year-old Hotel Monteleone on Royal welcomes you. It stands taller than any other building in the French Quarter, but its graceful façade lets you know you have entered a special place.

Across the street, Mr. B's Bistro provides an introduction to traditional creole cuisine. Creole food, by the way, represents the original fusion cooking, mixing Spanish, French, Caribbean, and African with locally grown products.

As you continue along Royal, keep a tight grip on your credit cards, lest they get too frisky when faced with serious temptations. Many stores here have been family-owned for three or four generations. Founders chose the convenient location just blocks from where ships unloaded fine furniture and other goods from Europe. In eight short blocks,



Top: Mardi Gras crowds of the young and the young-at-heart join in the fun to catch a prize. Above: The historic and boisterous Bourbon Street runs the length of New Orleans' French Quarter.

you can browse through nearly 40 fine stores, if your feet don't give up first.

Laura Borchert, co-chair with her husband of next year's Rolls-Royce meet, says that she and her friends like to have brunch in the flower-draped courtyard of The Court of the Two Sisters in the 600 block of Royal, and then stroll down Royal to see what tempts them. "Everybody has different tastes," she says, but she is drawn into shops by "special little antiques and oddities that you can see as you are walking by."

Resident Belinda Lazaro says, "Valobra on Royal is wonderful, with fine jewelry and estate pieces. Every time my best friend and I had lunch in the French Quarter, we would make a point to window-shop and daydream about the lovely sparkles in the windows of 333 Royal Street." In the same block, Lazaro yearned for some of the estate jewelry on display at Jack Sutton Antiques (315 Royal).

New Orleans expert Kenneth Holditch mentions Waldhorn & Adler Antiques, the oldest continually operated store in town. Since 1881, the enormous store, at the corner of Royal and Conti, has offered antiques from around the world from gigantic English carved wardrobes to delicate French estate diamond jewelry. Insider tip: Check the limited hours. They are not open every day.

Just as the eyes and feet need a rest from the antique and art gawking in the 300 block, Café Beignet (334 Royal) comes to the rescue. Beignets are those sugary, light-as-air pastries that go with the chicory coffee served in New Orleans.

A popular place for brunch graces 417 Royal, a historic home for Brennan's, a destination restaurant since 1956. The luscious egg dishes may bring people to "Brennan's for Breakfast," but the restaurant also earns our gratitude for inventing Bananas Foster.

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Photo courtesy of the New Orleans CVB

Photo by Carl Purcell courtesy of the New Orleans CVB



Below: The popular Galatoire promises traditional cuisine and an exquisite dining experience. Right: Café du Monde, the "Original French Market Coffee Stand," serves coffee and beignets 24 hours a day.

Photo by Louis Sahuc

R. Nowitz photo courtesy of the New Orleans CVB

## info RESTAURANTS

Resisting the temptation to list ALL the good restaurants, the writer offers a list of favorites from her visits and recommendations of natives.

### THE TRADITIONALS

#### Antoine's

713 St. Louis St.

(504) 581-4422

www.antoines.com

Started in 1840, it's the oldest eatery in New Orleans. For a town with an anything-goes reputation, New Orleans clings savagely to its traditions, like Antoine's.

#### Arnaud

813 Bienville St.

www.arnauds.com

Started in 1910. A favorite of Tennessee Williams, and Tom Wolfe said he had his best meal there.

#### Galatoire

209 Bourbon St.

(504) 525-2021

www.galatoires.com

Ken Holditch likes to sit at Tennessee Williams' favorite table near the window and one of his favorite dishes is stuffed eggplant. Insiders ask for their favorite waiter by name.

#### Café du Monde

800 Decatur St.

(504) 525-4555

www.cafedumonde.com

In operation since the 1880s, this café helps visitors survive a day of shopping at the French Market.

### THE STUNNING NEWCOMERS\*

(\*In New Orleans, anything less than antique is new.)

#### Stella!

Scott Boswell, chef/owner

1032 Chartres St.

(504) 587-0091

www.restaurantstella.com

Fine dining in a charming house.

#### August (a John Besh restaurant)

301 Tchopitoulas St.

(504) 299-9777

www.restaurantaugust.com

Bill Borchert may be prejudiced when he recommends this and other Besh restaurants, like Lüke, because he grew up with the multi-award-winning John Besh.

#### Café Adelaide and the Swizzle Stick Bar

300 Poydras St.

(504) 595-3305

www.cafeadelaide.com

In the Loews New Orleans Hotel. Named for Adelaide Brennan, this establishment is part of the Commander's Palace Family of Restaurants.

### MISCELLANEOUS FAVORITES

#### Napoleon House Bar and Café

500 Chartres St.

www.napoleonhouse.com

Typical New Orleans worn-wood bar area and palm-filled courtyard, with a surprising background of classical music.

#### Muriel's

801 Chartres St. (on Jackson Square)

(504) 568-1885

www.muriels.com

After a good meal in the palatial dining room, ask for a tour where the ghosts play.



Tales of the Cocktail, an annual culinary and cocktail festival, mixes up some of the drinks for which New Orleans is best known, such as the Sazerac. Cheers!

Not that you should skip any of the glam, glitter, and history displayed along the next two blocks, but Lazaro points out, "M.S. Rau Antiques [at 630] is the spot NOT to miss. Specializing in uber-chic antiques and collectibles, they happen to have a \$9 million Van Gogh in the store."

The last couple of blocks cover the quieter end of the quarter and art galleries reign in the 700 block, with the well-known "Blue Dog" holding court at 721 at the gallery of George Rodrigue. Borrowing from a Cajun legend about a ghost wolf, *loup garou*, Rodrigue paints a large cartoon-like blue dog in various settings suggestive of the Cajun world.

Having worked your way to the end of the Quarter, cross over to Chartres Street (pronounced "Charters") for trendy clothing or retro rags, or circle back by taking Decatur Street along the river to the upscale shopping at Canal Place. Some suggest the sprint down Royal as a warm-up for marathon shopping along 6 miles of stores (yes, 6 miles) along Magazine Street, outside the French Quarter.

### LAISSEZ LE BON TEMPS ROULEZ

No other city in the United States is so inextricably linked to one annual event as New Orleans is to the Mardi Gras festival. The roots of Fat Tuesday extend back to pagan springtime rituals co-opted and tamed by the Catholic church. The French who settled New Orleans brought their traditional pre-Lenten carnival to the New World. Partygoers say a raucous goodbye to meat, *carne vale*, from the Twelfth Night (12 days after Christmas) until the beginning of the fasting of Lent (40 days before Easter).

Although the whole event takes the name of Mardi Gras, the final day of carnival, that day is only the culmination of weeks of celebration. More than 50 spectacular parades entertain the crowds. The larger, complex floats of today do not fit in the narrow

streets of the Quarter, however you may watch walking groups, small parades of two or three blocks in length. And watching the people who are watching the parades provides endless entertainment in the French Quarter. For the major parades, head over to Canal or St. Charles streets.

Insider tip from Bill and Laura Borchert: If you want to avoid the worst masses of people, attend the parades a week before the final weekend. Residents of the Garden District provide the best view of the parades from their front porches. However, if you do not have time to make a new best friend before the next Mardi Gras, stake out a place along the sidewalk of St. Charles Avenue.

New Orleans natives stress that you can choose the type of Mardi Gras experience you want. In the X-rated version, show up in an outrageous costume, drink yourself into an alcoholic stupor, and make obscene gestures from your French Quarter hotel balcony. Wake up too hungover to attend Ash Wednesday Mass at the Cathedral on Jackson Square. Note: Unless you are riding on a float, the law permits people on the streets to wear disguises only on Mardi Gras (Tuesday), and then, only from dawn to dusk.

However the G-rated (well, okay, sometimes leaning toward "R") family fun is taking place in other parts of town on days leading up to the bawdy finale. Grab a copy of *Arthur Hardy's Mardi Gras Guide*, or check his Web site for advance information. Decide which parades you simply must see.

Each parade consists of many elaborate floats plus marching bands and walking groups. Each is privately financed by a krewe, an organization that works all year to produce a ball or an extravaganza as well as a parade. Mardi Gras does not collect corporate or government money. Besides partying, krewes contribute heavily to local charities. The Borcherts rode on the Orpheus float this year. Bill calls the festival, "the greatest street party in the world." Although there is no admission charge for the spectators, members of the krewes invest heavily, he says. They pay to ride, pay to give and attend parties, and buy thousands of dollars worth of those gold and green and purple beads that rain down on spectators.

Native Jo Ann Bird, who works at a French Quarter hotel, says one of her favorites, Babylon, which rolls the Thursday before Mardi Gras, has about 20 floats. She also likes the sheer size of Endymion, a male-only Krewe composed of about 2,000 members. Endymion features a celebrity each year. In 2008, Kevin Costner and his guitar headlined the parade. Bird chooses Rex, which leads the parades on Mardi Gras morning with approximately 27 floats, as the prettiest and few would disagree. Each year some new technology is added, from mechanized movement to fiber-optic displays.

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Photo courtesy of Hotel Montealeone

Photo by Kerri McCaffrey

Jeri Hines Photography

### info HOTELS

Here are some favorite unique French Quarter hotels. Expect to pay higher prices during all festivals, particularly Mardi Gras, and rock-bottom prices in sultry summer.

#### Lafitte Guest House

1003 Bourbon St.  
(504) 581 2678  
www.lafitteguesthouse.com

Fireplaces, four-poster beds, and unique décor in each room. This classic French Quarter building started as a private home in 1849. Owners have a culinary school in a Tuscan villa and are introducing culinary weekends here. Only 14 spacious rooms and suites, so book early.

#### Maison de Ville Hotel and Cottages (pictured bottom left)

727 Toulouse St.  
(504) 561-5858  
www.hotelmaisondeville.com

Cozy hotel in a quiet area of the French Quarter with individual Audubon cottages nearby. Tennessee Williams always stayed in room No. 9 facing the courtyard. Other celebrity guests range from John James Audubon to Elizabeth Taylor.

#### Hotel Montealeone (pictured top left)

214 Royal St.  
(800) 535-9595

Family-owned since 1866, the Montealeone provides superb service and location, the Aria Day Spa, and Carousel Lounge. One of five Literary Landmark Hotels in the United States.

#### The Ritz-Carlton New Orleans

921 Canal St.  
(504) 524-1331  
www.ritzcarlton.com

You get a three-fer at the Ritz-Carlton with two other choices within the same building.

For its Club Level customers, the Ritz-Carlton incorporates the Maison Orleans in the same building as the main hotel. Wine and a buffet of snacks handy at all times, two-person tubs, and 75 rooms with 24-hour butler service. Enter at 904 Iberville.

The Ritz also manages the Iberville Suites, with an entrance at 910 Iberville, on the French Quarter side of the building. The rooms are not as lush, but guests have access to the Ritz gym and spa. (866) 229-4351 (www.ibervillesuites.com)

#### Soniat House

1133 Chartres St.  
(800) 544 8808 or (504) 522 0570  
www.soniathouse.com

Soniat is an historic property with 24 rooms, nine suites (no two alike), loaded with antiques. Three town houses and their courtyards made this hotel. You can breakfast in a lush courtyard with fountains and dappled shade of olive, magnolia, and guava trees.

Book the suite – why settle for just good when you can have decadent?



Above left: Jazz and Heritage Festival. Above right: During the New Orleans Wine & Food Experience, sip and stroll down Royal Street.

Be sure not to miss the great fun of Lundi Gras (Monday) festivities on the river bank as Zulu, reigning monarch of the African-American Zulu Krewe and Rex, King of Carnival, arrive by boat at 5:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. respectively. Music, food, and fireworks make Monday an all-day party.

Then on Mardi Gras itself, stake out your place on St. Charles Avenue, get food from barbecue vendors, and catch those beads and other trinkets that are thrown from the floats. And no, you do not have to disrobe to get the people on the float to throw a treat your way. Just yell, "Throw me something, mister!"

Arthur Hardy says that Mardi Gras bounced back a mere five months after Hurricane Katrina because it belongs to the natives of New Orleans. "People said, 'I couldn't save my house, but I could save Mardi Gras,'" says Hardy.

He emphasizes that the city does not do Mardi Gras for the tourists. It is a celebration for New Orleans, by New Orleans. Nevertheless, the city welcomes the million-plus visitors that show up as they greatly boost the city's economy. And what is a parade without sidewalk spectators?

### WE HAVE FESTIVALS

While it may seem overwhelming to choose among so many delights during Mardi Gras, festivals crowd the calendar year-round. So whether you want to experience food, music, or literary works, pick a festival to suit.

As Kenneth Holditch says, "In New Orleans, we do not have conferences. We have festivals." Holditch was talking about a

scholarly gathering livened with banquets, performances, and workshops for writers. The retired professor, who has written several books about Tennessee Williams, was one of the founders of the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival, which takes place in late March ([www.tennesseewilliams.net](http://www.tennesseewilliams.net)). Insider tip: Enhance your experience with a walking tour of Tennessee Williams' New Orleans through Heritage Tours. The tour is offered on the festival Web site or call Holditch at 504-949-9805.

Bill and Laura Borchert try to take their family to the Jazz and Heritage Festival ([www.nojazzfest.com](http://www.nojazzfest.com)) held at the Fairgrounds racetrack in late April and early May. A 38-year history, 12 stages, and a list of headliners that includes every important musician in the country mark this event. Food (of course!), crafts, and a Louisiana Folk Village keep you busy in between musician's sets. Insider tip: Take the Gray Line® bus from the waterfront instead of struggling with limited parking.

In May, the New Orleans Wine & Food Experience ([www.nowfe.com](http://www.nowfe.com)) delves into the culinary delights of New Orleans. Meet 75 chefs and 1,000 varieties of wine at the Super Dome, or attend lectures on wine and stroll down Royal Street with stops and sips at shops.

Wine may be essential with good food, but New Orleans is better known for mixed drinks like the Sazerac and the Hurricane. In July, Hotel Monteleone hosts Tales of the Cocktail ([www.talesofthecocktail.com](http://www.talesofthecocktail.com)), with events throughout the French Quarter.

With so much to see and do, the choices are highly personal. For more options, consult [www.neworleansonline.com](http://www.neworleansonline.com) or [www.neworleanscvb.com](http://www.neworleanscvb.com).