

The Big Easy beckons

Revitalized New Orleans boasts terrific surprises for new, frequent visitors



Some of New Orleans' historic hotels are right on top of the French Quarter action.



Photos by Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers' Group

Many French Quarter buildings feature ornate ironwork.

By KAREN CATCHPOLE
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NEW ORLEANS — What other city has a coin laundry in a building that used to house the recording studio where Fats Domino, Little Richard, Ray Charles and Dr. John recorded seminal tracks? Where else will your favorite local bartender hand you a to-go cup so you can take your favorite adult beverage with you? When was the last time there was real, live dancing in the streets where you live?

These are just a few of the things that keep me coming back to New Orleans, also known as the Crescent City or the Big Easy. New York may be so nice they named it twice, but they named New Orleans three times.

I'm not the only one who loves New Orleans.

In 2010, the city hosted 8.3 million visitors who generated \$5.3 billion, the highest tourism revenue in the city's history. All over town, hotels, bars and restaurants are opening and icons are being spruced up to get a piece of the action.

During a recent trip to New Orleans, I branched out beyond my tried-and-true favorites and explored fresh finds. Add them to your list of New Orleans musts to be sure you're experiencing the best of the latest developments.

Breakfast near bed

My top breakfast spot has always been Camellia Grill, which is located in a building that looks like a miniature Southern plantation house. The perpetually smiling waiters all seem to have worked here their whole lives, serving diner favorites to early risers and all-nighters. This Garden District classic requires a journey from the French Quarter all the way up St. Charles Avenue. Now Camellia Grill has opened a more convenient French Quarter location (540 Chartres St., 504-522-1800, camelliagrill.net). It replicates the elegantly S-shaped marble countertop and the Southern diner menu of the uptown original, including creamy freezes, but without the commute.

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You don't have to go far to find music in New Orleans.



Take your adult beverage along with you as you stroll around New Orleans and see the sights.



French Quarter architecture such as this, the Olivier House Hotel, was inspired by the French, who settled New Orleans, and the Spanish who rebuilt after devastating fires razed the city.

Tintin turns up throughout Brussels

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next to me. Brussels, of course, is known for its food: waffles, chocolate, mussels and frites. It's also famous for its beer. I quickly learned that even

quaffing beer in this city could result in a connection with the ubiquitous Tintin. After I spent one day wandering around and through the fairy tale-like Grand Place, I ended up at the unassuming storefront of Le Fleur en Papier

Doré. Somewhat off the beaten tourist track, this funky, historic place was once a favorite haunt of Hergé's. (It was also popular with Magritte and the surrealists.) The walls of the cozy rooms are covered with old photos, verses, framed letters and more. Even better, they made their own chocolates! (Who knew beer paired so well with chocolate?)

Later, on my way back to my hotel, I strolled through the ornate and fashionable Galleries St.-Hubert. With its 19th-century domed glass roof, St.-Hubert is known for being the first shopping arcade in Europe, and it remains one of the most elegant. Champagne shops and chocolate stores abound within, including the Neuhaus Chocolatier, with a window display entirely devoted to Tintin. Prints from Hergé's books were backgrounds to Tintin-decorated tins spilling out chocolates, each wrapped in a miniature frame from a Tintin cartoon strip. "Blistering barnacles," as Hergé's character Captain Haddock might say; they seemed like the perfect souvenir.

Serious Tintin admirers could no doubt recite all of Captain Haddock's alliterated curses from Hergé's 23 completed Tintin books. Such admirers will definitely want to visit the Musée Hergé, located about 30 minutes out of the city in Louvain-la-Neuve.

Even fair-weather fans will find the short journey worthwhile. The magnificent contemporary building is built to evoke the feeling of a ship, relating to Tintin's travels to exotic lands. The museum is more for grown-ups; it offers a

fascinating study of the artist Hergé and a vast collection of the artist's personal photographs, sketches, documents and original drawings.

Back in Brussels, I couldn't leave for the United States without a visit to the popular Place du Sablon. In the Upper Town of Brussels, it's home to many respected chocolate shops: Pierre Marcolini, Leonidas and Godiva. I was on my way to the famous chocolatier Wittamer when I discovered that the life-size statue of Tintin in front of the Comic Strip Café was almost right next door. I would have stopped and had my photo taken with the city's favorite character, but I didn't have much time, and there was a line. As much as I now consider myself a fan of Tintin, I still know I'm more a fan of chocolate.

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Donna Tabbert Long/
Special Contributor

La Boutique Tintin near Brussels Grand Place sells all things related to Tintin.



Tourism Flanders

Tintin and his sidekick Snowy, appearing high atop the offices of Le Lombard, are a Brussels landmark.

When you go

- Hotel Amigo:** Rue de l'Amigo 1-3; roccofortehotels.com
The Comics Café — Brasserie, Bookstore, Gallery: Place du Grand Sablon, 8; open every day noon to midnight; comicscafe.be
Belgian Comic Strip Center: Rue des Sables, 20; open Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; comicscenter.net
Le Fleur en Papier Doré: Rue des Alexiens, 55; open Tuesday to Saturday 11 a.m. to midnight and 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday; fleurenpapierdore.be
Neuhaus Chocolatier: Galerie de la Reine, 25-27; open Monday to Saturday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday and holidays 10 a.m.-7 p.m.; neuhaus.be
Hergé Museum (Musée Hergé): Rue du Labrador, 26 B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve; open Tuesday to Friday, 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; museeherge.com; tintin.com
Pierre Marcolini: Rue des Minimes, 1; marcolini.be
Godiva: Place du Grand Sablon, 47/Grote Zaval 47; godiva.be
Leonidas: Place du Grand Sablon, 41; leonidas.com
Wittamer: Place du Grand Sablon, 6, 12, 13; wittamer.com
For more information on visiting Brussels, go to: visitflanders.us; visitbrussels.be; American Airlines offers several flights to Brussels daily from Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

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Happiest happy hour

An army of restoration workers and a \$170 million budget — the largest single investment in post-Katrina revitalization in downtown New Orleans — have brought the Roosevelt Hotel (123 Barone St., 504-648-1200, the rooseveltneworleans.com) painstakingly back to life. One team of workers spent more than a year refurbishing the crystal chandeliers in this 504-room hotel, which was built in 1893.

Don't miss the antique French clock in the lobby. This masterpiece from the late 1800s was purchased by Nicolas Cage from a local antiques dealer, but the actor was ultimately persuaded to sell it to the hotel.

Just off the hotel's historic lobby lies the thoroughly modern Domenica (504-648-6020, domenicarestaurant.com). Overseen by celebrity chef John Besh, Domenica quietly offers one of the best daily happy hours in town, which is saying something in New Orleans. From 3 to 6 p.m., the gourmet pizza menu featuring pork sausage with scallions and oven-dried tomatoes, or clams, chilies and garlic, is half price. That's just \$6.50 for a 10-inch pie. Beer, wine by the glass, and cocktails are also half price.

Lazy lunching

The whole idea of ladies who lunch might not have started in New Orleans, but it's been perfected at the city's *grande dame* Creole restaurants.

During Friday lunch at 106-year-old Galatoire's (209 Bourbon St., 504-525-2021, galatoires.com), conservatively dressed members of society (of

both genders) enjoy traditional dishes such as oysters Rockefeller along with a perpetually full cocktail glass served at their tables, which, it is assumed, they will not vacate until dinner time.

"Welcome in!" is the greeting you get when you enter the assertively blue Commander's Palace (1403 Washington Ave., 504-899-8221, commanderspalace.com) in the Garden District. Where Galatoire's feels like a private club in which visitors are tolerated, Commander's, which was started in 1880, feels like a private club whose members relish the chance to playfully show off to strangers.

Creative takes on Creole classics come at surprisingly reasonable prices. "Angry Oysters" fried on a bed of roasted corn, the pork-cheek confit and the grilled Pacific sardines were all deliciously done, not to mention the 25-cent martinis. Sensibly, they're limited to three per person " 'cause that's enough." Ask for the Garden Room to enjoy the ample sunlight and the leopard-print carpet.

Opened in 2003, Ralph's on the Park (900 City Park Ave., 504-488-1000, ralphsonthepark.com) is the least traditional of this lunch trio; it serves "contemporary Creole" dishes such as their Rouxben sandwich, Louisiana seafood crepes and corn-fried oyster remoulade salad as well as classics such as fried chicken and cheeseburgers. All orders come with views of the moss-draped oaks in City Park across the street, which is also a good spot for walking it off.

French Quarter quarters

Despite spending dozens of nights in New Orleans, I'd never stayed in a classic French Quarter historic hotel until I



Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers' Group

Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop Bar dates to 1732 and is said to be the oldest building used as a bar in the U.S.

checked into Soniat House (1133 Chartres St., 504-522-057, soniathouse.com). Here, 30 antiques-filled rooms and suites in two facing buildings instantly take you back to a more genteel time with some of the most elaborate ironwork in the Quarter and original architectural details throughout.

An expansive street-side porch is the perfect place to watch New Orleans stroll by. Baked-to-order biscuits in the morning don't hurt either.

I'd also never stayed close to raucous Bourbon Street and wasn't entirely sure I wanted to. Then I discovered Hotel Le Marais (717 Conti St., 504-525-2300, hotellemarais.com). Completely renovated and reopened in January, the starkly chic hotel makes liberal use of purple, one of the three colors of Mardi Gras, and artsy black-and-white photos of the city and the state. More impressively, the hotel manages to create a serene environment just steps from Bourbon Street with quiet rooms, friendly staff and a welcoming bar that opens onto a stone courtyard with a small pool. There's even a well-stocked business center and an efficient gym.

Div(in)e bar

The International House Hotel (221 Camp St., 504-553-9550, ihhotel.com) is a celebrity haunt, now even more so

with the April unveiling of their new Apple Suites kitted out with a wall-mounted LCD screen connected to an Apple TV, which wirelessly talks to all your other Apple products. The real draw, though, is Allen Walter; just don't call him a mixologist. Walter prefers spirits handler, which is appropriate since he has recently taken over the hotel's bar, called Loa, a voodoo term for benevolent ghosts. Here, surrounded by bordello chic, Walter brews his own bitters, makes his own sodas and concocts seasonal cocktails that he calls potatoes. It's seriously delicious stuff.

Do some good

New Orleans tourism might be booming, but the wounds inflicted by Hurricane Katrina are still far from healed. To help the city rebuild and to learn more about local restaurants, check out *The Man Who Ate New Orleans* (tmwanola.sitebrew.net). Produced by filmmaker Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*), this documentary chronicles Presbyterian minister Ray Cannata's quest to eat at every restaurant in New Orleans, or at least the 742 that fit his definition. Cannata wrapped up his epic feat on Oct. 21 at a meal dubbed the Last Supper.

The reverend, a New Jersey transplant, believes food is at the heart of his adopted city

When you go

Goop.com — run by actress Gwyneth Paltrow, a New Orleans booster whose brother and father both went to Tulane University — offers city tips and publishes guest posts from her fabulous friends. Recently, singer Michael Stipe offered his best-of list (goop.com/newsletter/96).

Hotel openings to watch:

- The Hyatt Hotel in New Orleans had been closed since Hurricane Katrina damaged it in 2005. It re-opened on Oct. 19 after a \$275 million renovation that upgraded the 32-story hotel to a Hyatt Regency (601 Loyola Ave., 504-561-1234, neworleans.hyatt.com) complete with a John Besh restaurant.
- In the spring of 2012, the W French Quarter (316 Chartres St., 504-581-1200, starwoodhotels.com) will unveil a \$10 million renovation, including new guest rooms designed with tarot card and jazz themes, and a Cajun tapas bar.
- The landmark Audubon Building, which stood vacant for a decade, is returning as The Saint Hotel (931 Canal St., 504-522-5400, the saint hotel neworleans.com). The beaux-arts building, completed in 1909, will feature opening rates of \$149 and a rooftop bar.

Access

Getting around: Cabs come when they're called in New Orleans. The most reliable cab company I've used is United Cabs (unitedcabs.com). Put their dispatch number (504-522-9771) in your cellphone so it's handy when you need it.

Unsung festivals: Mardi Gras (mardigrasneworleans.com) and the Jazz & Heritage Festival (nojazzfest.com) are both world-famous for a reason. However, New Orleans is full of less well-known excuses to party.

■ Held on the Wednesday between the two Jazz & Heritage Festival weekends, Chaz Fest (May 2, \$30, chazfestival.com) is a backyard throwdown meant to give local bands who didn't make the official Jazz Fest roster a chance to perform.

■ The second annual Street Fare Derby (August, \$10 advance, \$15 day of, \$40 VIP with prices subject to change, streetfarederby.com) will be held at the Fair Grounds Race Course featuring more than 25 of the city's best food trucks as well as quarter-horse racing.

Free food, fun and ferries:

- Enjoy free oysters and live music every Friday at uptown music club and bar Le Bon Temps Roulé (4801 Magazine St., 504-897-3448).
- Some Friday night shows are free during the summer at legendary music venue Tipitina's (501 Napoleon Ave., 504-895-8477, tipitinas.com).
- The YLC Concerts at the Square series in Lafayette Square puts on free outdoor concerts every Wednesday starting at 7 p.m. throughout the spring and summer (wednesdayatthesquare.com). Proceeds from food and drink sales support the Youth Leadership Council.
- A free Canal Street Ferry ride across the Mississippi River from the French Quarter to the town of Algiers and back offers the best views of the New Orleans waterfront and skyline (friendsoftheferry.org).

and one of its most powerful saving graces. Proceeds from the documentary, which will be shown in theaters in the fall before going to DVD in the winter, help pay for ongoing rebuilding efforts in New Orleans through Make It Right (makeitrightnola.org), Second

Harvest (no-hunger.org), and Musicians Village (nolamusiciansvillage.org). Visit the newly transformed New Orleans soon. The city's boom shows no sign of slowing; who knows what this unstoppable city will have to offer next.