

CAJUN CARNIVAL

There's more to New Orleans
than Mardi Gras. In fact, the city
is like a 24-hour outdoor party.

By GREGORY SHRIVER

SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

If you could pick one United States city to impress a visitor from another country, New Orleans might be the best place to start.

Or the worst.

From its tropical courtyards and flickering gas lamps amid charming 18th-and 19th-century Spanish and French architecture, to its loose liquor laws and history of decadence and crime, New Orleans is likely to leave you with a lasting impression.

Much like New York and Las Vegas, New Orleans seems to never sleep.

This is especially true in the French Quarter, where music spills out of the pubs and clubs all night as barhoppers and curiosity-seekers alike crowd Bourbon Street and other hot spots throughout the city.

If you choose to visit New Orleans, this is a very good time to do so with the weather still warm and airfares low. You may be surprised how far the scope of its offerings extend beyond its well-deserved reputation as a party town.

Tourism is the lifeblood of New Orleans. Yet, because its many points of interest are so naturally incorporated into the fabric of the landscape, and because the natives are likely to treat you with a heavy dose of Southern hospitality, you may feel more like a resident than a tourist.

Indeed, you may never want to leave.

This is a city with many faces, from the plantation homes along the Great River Road to the swampland of the bayous. It has such a distinctly European and Caribbean ambience and feel, you may forget you're in America altogether.

New Orleans has many traditional attractions, and families especially will enjoy visiting the Audubon Zoo, Aquarium of the Americas or Jazzland Amusement Park. Those with the gambling itch may venture into Harrah's

Casino.

This, however, is a city so rich in history and so unusual in its culture, that first-time visitors especially might be better served by focusing on the travel destinations indigenous to the Crescent City.

- Visit the tomb of voodoo queen Marie Laveau at one of the city's famous cemeteries, where flooding dictates that bodies be entombed above the ground.
- Take a boat ride through a Louisiana bayou, where you'll likely come face-to-face with a live alligator and a tour guide who may remind you of Crocodile Dundee.
- Ride on one of the city's streetcars, which extend for miles through many popular spots.
- Experience New Orleans' rich history at the Cabildo museum, where the Louisiana Purchase was signed in 1803. Or see where New Orleans history was actually made by visiting the site of the Battle of New Orleans at Chalmette

National Historical Park.

- Stroll or take a buggy ride through Jackson Square and other areas in the French quarter to watch the vast array of street performers, from statuelike mimes to daredevil acrobats. You can have your fortune told by a tarot card

reader or listen to the numerous sidewalk musicians and would-be musicians playing for tips.

- Take a walking or streetcar tour of the Garden District, with its beautiful mansions and lush foliage. Well-known author Anne Rice, whose books have documented the Garden District, lives here as well.
- Venture into the Musee Conti Wax Museum, featuring Louisiana legends such as Andrew Jackson, Huey Long, Pete Fountain and Louis Armstrong; or the New Orleans historic Voodoo Museum -a tourist trap to be sure but one which will educate you further on the culture.

Some visitors, of course, might prefer just to browse the vast collection of art galleries, antique stores and other shops lining the cozy streets of the French Quarter, which despite its abundance of businesses is largely residential.

Others may come to New Orleans strictly for the night life. Bourbon Street is just one of many choice locations for doing New Orleans after dark, but it is certainly the center of the action.

You won't even have to go in any of the clubs to hear the live music, though the experience is even better if you do. You won't have to go inside for a drink, either, with the prevalence of walk-up bars.

In New Orleans, you can go just about anywhere with liquor in your hand as long as it's in a plastic cup.

Of course, you could just visit New Orleans during Mardi Gras, or during the month-long Carnival leading up to the big day. The traditions of Mardi Gras are much more than the media characterizations, and this is without a doubt

one of the best times to visit. If you can take the crowds.

Next year's Mardi Gras festivities converge with Super Bowl week at the Louisiana Superdome in early February, however, so accommodations could be

difficult to come by within a reasonable distance of the city.

New Orleans beauty: St. Louis Cathedral is the oldest one in the United States. A statue of Andrew Jackson is nearby in Jackson Square. In photo at right are the St. Charles Avenue streetcars.

French Quarter: Balconies with iron railings mark New Orleans' most famous district. Jazz clubs and restaurants draw tourists.

Eating and drinking in New Orleans: It wouldn't be difficult to spend an entire week in New Orleans just eating, drinking and listening to music.

Here are a few places to start:

BEST BREAKFAST

The people's choice for best breakfast place in New Orleans in 2001 according to Citysearch.com, Cafe Du Monde is a must-do.

Conveniently located at 800 Decatur St. in the Jackson Square area of the French Quarter, Cafe Du Monde serves beignets (fried square-cut doughnuts covered in powdered sugar) 24 hours a day. The cafe serves a mean cup of coffee, too. Call (504) 525-4544.

BEST LUNCH

Located in the heart of the action at 900 Bourbon St. in the French Quarter, the cozy Clover Grill diner has the spirit to match.

It claims to have the best burgers in the world, and you might agree. They are cooked under a hubcap, which supposedly holds in the juices.

The menu provides comic relief, as do the energetic waiters. Big windows allow for people-watching on Bourbon Street. Call (504) 598-1010.

BEST DINNER

Commander's Palace, 1403 Washington Ave., is probably the most popular restaurant in New Orleans.

It's also one of the best. The turtle soup au sherry, grilled Gulf fish and bread pudding soufflé are among the specialties.

The waitstaff is attentive. The setting, an 1880s Victorian house in the Garden District, is stunning. Call (504) 899-8221.

BEST NIGHT SPOT

In many ways, New Orleans is one big outdoor party. The establishment that perhaps sums it up best is Pat O'Brien's, 718 St. Peter St. The Hurricane is the signature drink, and the sprawling courtyard area with its centerpiece flaming fountain is where the action is. Call (504) 525-4823.

OTHER TREATS

Visit the tomb of the voodoo queen or enjoy other New Orleans tours and activities.

Interesting variety of tours reveals city's history, culture

Saying that tour companies are abundant in New Orleans is a bit like saying there are a lot of slot machines in Las Vegas.

Whether you are looking for a broad tour of the city, or more specialized ones of the French Quarter, cemeteries, bayou areas, plantations, or the river, there are dozens from which to choose.

Lining up a tour is a good move if you are a first-time visitor, especially if you are really interested in seeing and learning about the city. If you are not a tour person, Frommer's guide to New Orleans provides excellent information for self-guided exploration.

Gray Line conducts tours of all types, with tickets available throughout the city. Some lesser-known companies can be a greater risk, but if you pick the right one they may provide a more colorful, intimate look at New Orleans.

If you decide to take a tour, start by discussing the options with your hotel concierge, who might give you a few dollars off on one with pickup and dropoff where you are staying. Ask whether the tour will be mostly riding or walking.

A few top-notch tours highlighting different aspects of what New Orleans has to offer:

- The Tours at Cypress offers several combination tours, including one of the city and swamps featuring French Quarter architecture and other highlights of New Orleans, a cemetery visit, and a boat ride through an alligator-infested bayou.

A Cajun and seafood buffet is included on this 4 1/2-hour tour departing twice daily from downtown, the French Quarter, the central business district, Garden District and West Bank hotels. Call (800) 633-0503.

- Cap off your day with a Mississippi riverboat cruise aboard the Steamboat Natchez, featuring live Dixieland jazz. Departing from the Jax Brewery in the heart of the French Quarter, both lunch and dinner cruises are available aboard the Natchez, which has a spacious dining area and separate bar, as well as a gift shop and plenty of room on the boat's three levels to relax.

The cruise provides great views of the New Orleans skyline and riverwalk and also covers several miles of the Mississippi waterway away from port. Call (800) 233-BOAT (233-2628).

- The New Orleans Cemetery History Tour provides an informative and entertaining look at the history and architecture of the French Quarter, including some of the most famous buildings in the city.

You'll visit film locations from notable movies such as "Easy Rider," "King Creole," "JFK," "Double Jeopardy" and "Interview with the Vampire."

Other notable stops include one of the schools attended by Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald and St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 -the oldest in New Orleans. Call (504) 524-0708.

- The same group conducting The New Orleans Cemetery History Tour also offers The New Orleans Ghost Tour, providing a glimpse of some of the supernatural elements which are so much a part of New Orleans' culture.

- Also popular with many visitors are the plantation homes along The Great River Road. Tours by Isabelle (504) 391-3544, as well as the aforementioned Gray Lines (800)535-7786 and Tours at Cypress are among the companies covering the plantations.

OTHER THINGS TO DO

Many of the tourist destinations in New Orleans are geared toward those interested in immersing themselves in its history, origin and culture, but there are other more traditional and or family-oriented offerings throughout the city as well. Here are just a few:

National D-Day Museum: This unique shrine, located at 945 Magazine St., was fittingly dedicated on June 6, 2000 (the 56th anniversary of D-Day) by World War II historian and museum founder Stephen E. Ambrose, Steven Spielberg and

Tom Hanks, who collaborated on the film "Saving Private Ryan." It is a rousing collection of personal stories from one of the most complex military operations ever staged. Call (504)-5276012.

Audubon Aquarium of the Americas: The Audubon Aquarium of the Americas and the Entergy IMAX theater, located at the foot of Canal Street in the Riverwalk Marketplace, houses one of the largest and most diverse shark collections in the United States. Other attractions include a white alligator and a Caribbean Reef viewed from an underwater tunnel. Call (800)-774-7394.

Aquarium Zoo: This 58-acre zoo at 6,500 Magazine St. features more than 1,800 different animal species. Most interesting is the Louisiana Swamp

Exhibit, the world's only urban swamp. Mississippi River cruises are available between the Audubon Zoo and Aquarium of the Americas. Better yet,

arrive at the zoo from the aquarium by steamwheeler and leave by streetcar, which can be accessed from the zoo by foot or shuttle bus. Call

(504)-581-4629