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New Orleans is a small city but is full of history and mystery



New Orleans is putting its Katrina tragedy behind it, with a host of attractions

By REBECCA WICKS

It got to the point where my friend and I would debate over stepping into a shop, for fear we'd never make it out within the hour. With so much to see in the Big Easy over a short span of three days, getting stuck in conversation with another chatty local wasn't on the agenda. But there's something special about the residents of New Orleans. They're warm and cordial — and everyone has a story to tell.

Under a spell

Between the Voodoo Museum and a shop named Voodoo Authentica, we lost several hours to the tales of Mimi and High Priest of the weird kind, John T. Martin. Rivals in their circle of this ancient religious practice, we learned of magical spells, vengeance-seeking dogs and pickled cow's tongues.

Although the effects of Katrina might not be so evident in the city centre, the devastation is clear as day in its resident's eyes. "A lot of people moved away. They lost everything. But I stayed on. I've never lived anywhere else and I probably never will," Mimi says.

This is a relatively small town. Everyone knows someone who was affected, lost their home, their job or a family member. But there's a resounding strength and hope that rings out. Beautiful old world, imbued with infinite new promise.

Haunted homes

On our Haunted History tours of the French Quarter and the Garden District, we took in some of the most stunning houses.

Giant mansions and climbing townhouses in all the colours of the rainbow, balconies decorated with beads, detailed shutters and defensive wrought-iron fences. We even saw the house Brad Pitt and An-

gelina Jolie lived in for the filming of *Benjamin Button*. Sandra Bullock and Nicolas Cage are residents, too. Although I dare you to ask Cage why he won't let his family sleep in his fabulous French Quarter kingdom.

Chilling tale

Apparently, it's haunted by the evil spirit of a murderous 18th-century lady and her victims. So says our Ghost Tour guide one night, as we listen in wide-eyed wonder. The house looks unquestionably evil, under the street lamps, in a cobblestone alleyway off Jackson Square.

Thankfully, we were staying in the gorgeous W New Orleans hotel, just a short walk from anything remotely scary on Poydras Street and straddling the Mississippi River. My suite

came comfortingly ghost-free, with two giant plasma screens and the fluffiest pillows; much needed at the end of a hard night on Bourbon Street. This is the street that comes alive when the lights go down — the sight of Mardi Gras every March. Live jazz attacks your eardrums from every doorway.

Amazing acoustics

One night, we caught a performance at Preservation Hall. It's a show by live musicians in a tiny venue, maybe only 50 seats, with amazing acoustics. We also got the chance to check out Frenchmen Street — refreshingly neon-free and filled with cool late-night eateries. Slightly off the

tourist trail, this low-lit strip is a musical haven that regularly features some of the best live jazz bands in the city. All just a short walk away from the bustling French Quarter.

A jazz brunch

Tourism is on the rise in New Orleans. About 441,000 people flocked in for the 20th annual French Quarter Festival in April — the largest free festival in the south. We caught a jazz brunch at The Court of Two Sisters on Royal Street and sampled a variety of Creole and Cajun dishes, which included an incredible crawfish Louise, as we dined to the sounds of the saxophone.

What's crawfish Louise? Well, imagine the creamiest, fishiest mashed potato, mixed with cheese and grilled for a crispy topping — and you're probably only halfway there on the scale of yumminess.

While we're on the subject of food, an authentic alligator sausage and seafood gumbo at Bourbon Street's Redfish Grill was chock-full of meaty deliciousness. If you visit New Orleans, make sure you are hungry and forget about the diet. Louisianans eat. And they're not ashamed.

On a gator cruise

If you would rather see your alligators swimming than simmering in a large bowl of gumbo, the Swamp and Bayou Tour leaves the Steamboat Natchez Dock most days at 12.30pm and takes you to the murky green lair of a thousand scaly creatures, all of which swim up in hunger as you cruise past on a boat.

Our guide has been luring them in for photo opportunities for years, using marshmallows. And now they come to expect it. At one point, he rubs a giant gator's belly while leaning

over the edge — don't try this at home. The best part was when he fished a live American alligator out of a cupboard, placed an elastic band around its jaws and passed it around our tour group like a newborn. It felt like one, too. Soft, smooth and silky. Wouldn't have wanted the band to snap, though. I'm not so sure its teeth would have felt the same.

Although uprooted trees line the banks of the Bayou and the stories of the locals ensure the effects of Katrina

will never be forgotten, this is a city oozing history, mystery and unquestionable charm. It shines through the bad times and paves the way for a million more good ones.

A stroll hand in hand along its twisty streets, the perfect, bad-for-you dinner and a slow dance to the sound of a solo saxophone all make some of the happiest memories you'll get to make on a holiday.

— Rebecca Wicks is a Dubai-based freelance writer?

Bourbon Street comes alive with the sight of Mardi Gras every March



The city is full of cool late-night eateries



A house in the French Quarter

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