

New Orleans, City Tour 2007



Nancy and I couldn't resist the chance to spend the weekend in New Orleans this mid-October. Especially we wanted to see how the city had changed since Katrina. Saturday was a bright sunny day – a perfect day for a stroll along the river and around the French Quarter. The city didn't disappoint – around almost every street corner was another jazz band. Here is a tuba player strolling down the street. He like most was playing Dixieland jazz.

The group performing in front of the mural played Cajun jazz, which is not a real genre but just Cajun music sounding jazzy. They were playing in the “New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park,” which is a museum of sorts adjacent to Jackson Park.

We ended the afternoon at Lafayette Park where the annual Crescent City Blues Festival was going on.

One of the nicknames for New Orleans is Crescent City. It came by this name before the town was a city. The Mississippi River makes a huge bend in the shape of a crescent moon along the downtown, which is how the nickname came about. The city has another name, the Big Easy, which came about because it is easy to get a long of things like beads there.



Cemeteries

New Orleans is also called the City of the Dead, as if it didn't have enough names already. This nickname comes from its history of cemeteries and problems with the dead. In the early days when they buried people, the coffins filled with water, which is not surprising because much of the city is 10 to 20 feet below sea level. Sometimes after a storm, empty coffins floated out of the ground. So they started burying people in tombs above ground. When space became a premium in early New Orleans, they built wall vault and large tombs where many coffins could be placed in the same structure.



In the first cemetery photo you are looking down a lane of St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, just a few blocks from the French Quarter. The tombs are quite large and elaborate,

indicating ownership by a wealthy part of the community. The second photo shows wall vaults that are quite dilapidated, which are typical of the poor sector.

Because the heat and humidity quickly decomposes bodies in that region, especially when only a small amount of embalming fluid is injected into the bodies, they discovered that they could replace coffins as often as once a year, making even better use of the scarce city land. So now the practice at the end of a body's year-long rest in a coffin is to scrape the bones into a hole in the floor of the tomb. This makes room for another fresh coffin. This not only saves space, but it becomes possible to bury many, many generations of a huge family all inside a tomb the size of a typical bathroom.

Riverboat



That evening we indulged in a riverboat dinner cruise on the Mississippi. Two boats offer such cruises, departing from the river front near the French Quarter. We took the Naches, notorious for being one of the few paddle-wheel driven boats remaining on the Mississippi. The boat, which accommodates several hundred people, is a replica of the old steam boats that went up and down the River, but this one burns natural gas rather than wood in the boilers. The photo shows the Naches headed toward the Mississippi River Bridge (Interstate 10). (This was the bridge of the infamous Katrina "bridge incident" where suburban Gretna police blocked entry to fleeing downtown refugees.) The riverboat cruise was a bit cool to be outside but it was a fun 2 hours.

The New Orleans Zoo

To our surprise the New Orleans Audubon Zoo qualifies as one of the best zoos in the country. The settings are very native and most of the animals do not have to be caged due to the terrain. The highlight for most visitors is the pair of white tigers. These Bengal tigers were not only lively but cuddly as well. Here is a picture of what appears to us as affection. We don't have cats or dogs, but we'd think twice about a baby white tiger.



The zoo had some other elegant cats as well. Below are a lion and a cheetah, both from Asia.



Summary

From this little story it should be obvious that New Orleans is still a fun city to visit. It is less obvious that it is a fun city to live in. Two years have elapsed since the Katrina disaster, and still as many as 40% of the people have not returned. I am saving the remaining details of the post-Katrina for a separate story.

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