



The Oregonian

THE BIG EASY, MADE EASY

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The Oregonian

Before moving to Portland, I lived in New Orleans for 10 years -- both before and after Hurricane Katrina. Recently, I went back to see what progress had been made.

The recovery is nearly complete in the French Quarter and the visitors' areas, which makes the destruction in the rest of the city even sadder.

But the Big Easy is open -- and hungry -- for visitors; you can even get a table at Emeril's with little problem.

Spring is a great time to visit; it's still temperate, and prices are low in the weeks between Mardi Gras (Feb. 20) and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (April 27-May 6).

But what to do? What's open, and what's improved? Here's the scoop on visiting post-Katrina New Orleans on any budget:

STAY

LUXE: After a yearlong renovation, the posh Ritz-Carlton (504-524-1331, www.ritzcarlton.com/hotels/new_orleans) just reopened; it's all nonsmoking (except the cigar bar) and drop-dead gorgeous. The Windsor Court, (1-888-596-0955, www.windsorcourthotel.com), Louisiana's only AAA Four-Diamond hotel, pampers you with live jazz, daily tea and gracious formality (think the Benson).

NICE: I like Le Richelieu (504-529-2492, www.lerichelieuhotel.com) for its quiet French Quarter location, its pool and its balcony rooms with ceiling fans. Likewise the Provincial (504-581-4995, www.hotelprovincial.com); friends are always charmed by its ultra-Southern courtyard rooms with antiques and tester beds.

BUDGET: Check the travel specials at www.neworleansonline.com. Recent deals included \$57 rooms at the centrally located Royal St. Charles (1-800-268-9749, www.neworleansboutiquehotels.com/royalstcharles) and \$69 rooms at the Andrew Jackson Hotel (1-800-654-0224, www.andrewjacksonhotel.com) -- with free beignets!

EAT

LUXE: Commander's Palace (504-899-8221, www.commanderspalace.com), the city's doyenne of fine cuisine, just reopened after a \$6 million renovation. Amazing seafood, and the best service I've ever experienced. To see New Orleans gentry in their natural habitat (pounding strong drinks and cutting up like crazy), take in the weekly Friday lunch at Galatoire's (504-525-2021, www.galatoires.com). No reservations are taken for the coveted downstairs room, but it's worth the wait; upstairs is Siberia.

NICE: Local foodies are buzzing about several new hot spots: the super-chic 7 on Fulton (504-525-7555, www.7onfulton.com); Couchon (504-588-2123), which serves haute versions of classic Southern cuisine; and chef Todd English's Riche, in Harrah's Hotel (504-533-6000), www.harrahs.com, and click on "New Orleans" which makes French food fresh again.

BUDGET: You can't beat a muffuletta sandwich in the opera-filled courtyard of Napoleon House (504-524-9752, www.napoleonhouse.com) any time of year. And don't be fooled by the tattoos and the pool tables at Coop's Place (504-525-9053, www.coopspplace.net) -- the kitchen turns out seriously good food like swamp-dark sausage gumbo and rabbit jambalaya, and the jukebox is the French Quarter's best.

DRINK

LUXE: "Creative" martinis? Leave 'em in Portland. Go for a Sazerac in the posh 1930s setting where they were invented, the Sazerac Bar in the Fairmont Hotel (504-529-7111, www.fairmontneworleans.com). Or let expert mixologist historian Chris McMillan make you a multi-layered pousse cafe at the Library Bar in the Ritz-Carlton (504-524-1331, www.ritzcarlton.com/hotels/new_orleans).

NICE: Arnaud's French 75 (504-522-8767, www.arnauds.com/bar.html) cigar bar serves grown-up highballs in a Parisian brasserie atmosphere. I'm addicted to the bourbon milk punch at Bourbon House (504-522-0111, www.bourbonhouse.com). Be decadent and have it with a dozen oysters.

BUDGET: That falling-down, Addams Family-style structure on Bourbon Street? It's Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop (504-593-9761), rumored to have been a pirate hangout in its day. At night, it's pitch-black and cheerfully spooky. Down the street is Cafe Lafitte in Exile (504-522-8397, www.lafittes.com) a longtime gay/straight-friendly hangout -- Tennessee Williams was a regular -- with one of the best balconies on Bourbon Street.

LISTEN

LUXE: Trumpeter-crooner Jeremy Davenport (once Harry Connick Jr.'s sideman) holds forth weekends at Melange in the Ritz-Carlton (504-524-1331 www.ritzcarlton.com/hotels/new_orleans). Or go decadent at the brand-new 528 in Harrah's Hotel, 504-533-6000, www.harrah.com -- its bordello theme is perfect for the blues of Marva Wright and the soul of John Boutte.

NICE: Stroll soulful Frenchmen Street (adjacent to the French Quarter). At night, a variety of live music clubs beckon: Snug Harbor for jazz, Ray's Boom-Boom Room for local sounds and the Spotted Cat for everything from acoustic to klezmer.

FUNKY: Strap on bowling or dancing shoes (your pick) and grab a cab to Mid-City Lanes Rock 'n' Bowl (504-482-3133, www.rockandbowl.com), an authentically grungy old bowling alley with great live music, including Cajun, zydeco and blues.

COFFEE

LUXE: A great place for Irish coffee is the kitschy-elegant Carousel Bar in the wedding-cake Hotel Monteleone (1-800-535-9595, www.hotelmonteleone.com); the bar is a real revolving carousel. Hang on tight; these drinks are full-strength. On a hot day, the frozen Irish coffee at Molly's at the Market (504-525-5269, www.mollysatthemarket.net), a neighborhood Irish pub, can't be beat.

NICE: Near the French Market is the charming Cafe EnVie (504-524-3689), a neighborhood meeting spot with Portland-worthy java. Or try one of the native coffeehouse chains: PJ's, CC's or my fave, Rue de la Course.

BUDGET: You still can't beat Cafe du Monde (504-525-4544, www.cafedumonde.com) on the Mississippi River for tasty, muddly cafe au lait and fresh beignets (walk around back to watch the beignets being made). And cheerfully anarchic, eclectic Z'otz (504-861-2224) makes Portland's most outre coffee emporia look like Starbucks: for the ultimate Northwest-meets-South touch, try the vegan pralines (yes, really).

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