

The Herb Traveler

'New Orleans, City with Soul'

by Norma P. Weinberg (aka herbsdottir@comcast.net)

Few travel experiences touch the heart, soul and tummy as the southern U.S. city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Sitting on a crescent of the Mississippi River no more than 15 feet above sea level, this unique place tugs at a visitor's senses. Spring is a delicious time to visit as the temperature is moderate, spirits are high, and perfumed rose bushes and lush magnolias are in full bloom.

It was only to be a weekend sojourn on our way from Boston to Austin, but happy moments were nonstop. We stayed in a small, venerable hotel, Le Richelieu, in the French Quarter (luckily the 'Quarter' was untouched by the fury of Hurricane Katrina 8/29/05). One could not walk down any street without folks saying, 'Mornin', or, 'Thanks for coming to our city!' The Vieux Carre is the City's cultural hub and oldest neighborhood. Architecture is a mix of Spanish, Creole, American and French, redolent with lacy, cast iron balconies and walled courtyards.

Culinary 'must haves' include: French Market coffee with chicory, beignets (the State doughnut of Louisiana!), muffellata sandwiches (Central Grocery's flat bread stuffed with cold cuts and cheese and topped with fresh olive spread), one is enough for two; po'boy sandwiches, hollowed out French bread stuffed with roast beef, and dressed the way you like it. Then, there is the spicy, gumbo stew and amazing fried green tomatoes, and for a belt-loosening finale-- coconut-raisin bread pudding with praline sauce. 'Oh-my.'

For live music and other entertainment in the Quarter, Frenchman Street offers Blues, Jazz, Country, and anything else you might want including a 'Hookah' Cafe replete with sweet mango, pineapple or papaya tobacco! Bourbon Street houses the historic Old Absinthe House built in 1807 by Jean Lafitte and once home to history's most notorious drink. The 'green fairy' or 'absinthe' is associated with artists as Van Gogh, Toulouse Lautrec and writers as Joyce and Hemingway. This was a strong herbal liquor (60% alcohol) distilled with anise, licorice, hyssop, veronica, fennel, melissa /lemon balm, angelica and wormwood (*Artemisia absinthum*).

Drinking a wormwood infusion was considered addictive and possibly harmful due to the chemical thujone and its psychoactive effects. Absinthe was banned in the U.S. in 1912. Today, there are flavored liquors that mimic the absinthe liquor without the wormwood. Herbsaint, first produced in New Orleans, was marketed as "having all the virtues of absinthe but none of its sins." (For more info on absinthe, its production and ritual, check out the 'virtual absinthe museum' online.)

There is much to do outside the French quarter. It is worthy to tour the Ninth Ward for a look at the aftermath of Katrina and the painfully slow, re-building progress. We savored an electric trolley ride down Carrollton Street to New Orleans City Park. More than 150 years old and one of the ten largest urban parks in the heart of a U.S. city, the Park is home to the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Botanical Garden and Conservatory, with a display of more than 2000 varieties of plants and herbs, the only one in the State of Louisiana, the wonderful Besthoff Sculpture Garden, New Orleans Historic Train Garden, Storyland, a children's amusement park, and the nation's largest stand of mature live oaks. Some of these trees are over 600 years old. Surrounded by 11 miles of lagoons, lakes and bayous, City Park was widely damaged by the Category 3+ Hurricane and only re-opened in March 2006. Ninety percent of the Park had been under one to eight feet of water. Saltwater killed all of the grass. One thousand trees were toppled. Every piece of maintenance equipment was destroyed. Where there were once 240 employees, there are now only 23 workers! It is estimated that it will cost \$43 million dollars to entirely rebuild this great park. One can liken the damage to New York City losing its Central Park! New Orleans is a city on the rebound and there is so much to derive pleasure from and celebrate. JetBlue will soon be offering direct flights from Boston to New Orleans. Highly recommended!

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New Orleans City Park

1 Palm Drive

New Orleans, LA 70124

Tel: 504-905-1056 or Email: _amarks@nocp.org