

Life after Mardi Gras: Looking Past the Purple, Green and Gold

Written by Alena Hall

March 21, 2012

The sun perches on its afternoon peak, warming the gentle breeze around me to a perfect 73 degrees, as I ride along St. Charles Avenue in a rustic green streetcar. With eyes wide open and mouth agape, I stare at the collection of breathtaking homes that fill the Garden District. Side street after side street, these mansions flaunt their southern affluence through the contrast of authoritative white columns and brightly colored painting schemes. Their perfectly white porches slouch with age as the stained glass windows melt ever so slightly from centuries of sunlight exposure. Victorian style turrets create a row of castle-like towers that any princess would be proud to inhabit. Each easily distinguished by a unique design, these homes create an undeniable sense of community through the lush gardens and playful courtyards that fill the landscape between them.

But today, something is distracting my attention from this beautiful view by the bayou. Something sparkling, dangling from the massive, twisted oak trees that began to blossom just a day earlier. Quickly I recognize these colorful strands dancing in the wind along the streetcar's path: every branch of every oak tree hangs heavily with the additional weight of thousands of Mardi Gras beads. Draped among clusters of Spanish moss, these shiny strands illustrate the undeniable success of the recent party season.

Although festivities ceased more than a week ago, the city remains coated by its traditional purple, green and gold. "Sometimes it takes two weeks or more to get the city back up and running after Mardi Gras," said John Hall, a guide from Southern Style Tours &

Transportation, LLC. The tired look in locals' eyes and the glittering litter strewn across the streets of the French Quarter express a sense of relief that the month-long celebration has finally come to a close. "I'm so glad it's over," said Solomon G., a local cab driver and New Orleans native who insisted that his stories were much more valuable than his last name. "It's too wild for me."

Despite their widespread exhaustion induced by the Mardi Gras holiday, the people of New Orleans refuse to take a day off. Their perpetual vibrancy radiates to the city limits, intoxicating any newcomer with a true appreciation of "N'awlins" history, personality and pride. The spring season specifically comes alive with a renewing energy from the land and a pure sense of joy from the locals. Take a moment now and mentally travel to this lively East Coast city, filled with delectable Creole cuisine, a dynamic cultural history and beautiful views of the bayous surrounding it.

When visiting New Orleans, dining decisions must be given top priority. It is sinful to waste a mealtime on anything other than local creations and specialties. Beginning with breakfast, one morning meal of every visitor's trip should consist of fresh French coffee and beignets from the famous Café du Monde on Decatur Street. Deep fried to perfection and doused with confectioner's sugar, these square doughy delights arrive at the café table in orders of three alongside a steaming cup of café au lait. Get ready to watch the wind blowing through the open café scatter the loose sugar all over your clothes and love every second of it.

Sandwich lovers frequently consider uprooting their lives and becoming New Orleans locals themselves once they experience lunchtime muffulettas and po-boys. Simply put, the muffuletta is an Italian sandwich made for the gods. This massive cold-cut

sandwich stacks Provolone cheese, Genoa salami, Cappelletti ham and fresh olive salad high on an entire loaf of fresh Italian bread—a sandwich so big that only an immortal could finish it in one sitting. Seafood fanatics, on the other hand, flock to Johnny’s Po-Boys on St. Louis Street to experience the best fried shrimp po-boy in the French Quarter. “It’s all about using fresh French bread,” Hall said. “That’s what makes the difference.”

Deciphering dinner menus for the best local dish proves to be quite a challenge. However, an appetizer cup of gumbo easily soothes any concerns of making a poor decision. Each chef in New Orleans creates a unique twist on the classic gumbo recipe, including a combination of fresh seafood, chicken or spicy sausage. No two gumbos are identical, providing the excuse and opportunity to try several renditions throughout the trip. Solomon highly recommends visitors dine at the Gumbo Shop to experience gumbo as the main attraction of the meal rather than as an appetizer.

If jambalaya and crawfish etouffée do not make it to your dinner table during your stay, go ahead and reschedule your flight home for the following morning—you have some unfinished business to tend to. Jambalaya, the characteristic rice dish of New Orleans, includes a combination of chicken, sausage or seafood with a bold Cajun seasoning bound to leave you speechless. And only in New Orleans will you find crawfish etouffée, a savory stew swimming with plump crawfish over a bed of warm white rice.

Only one dessert dish has the power to complete your experience of New Orleans cuisine: bananas foster. A waiter at Brennan’s Restaurant, the home of this 61-year-old creation, combines bananas, butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, dark rum and banana liquor in a tableside flambé performance. The bananas and complementary sauce are then served over a scoop of vanilla ice cream. “We visited Brennan’s for lunch on our last day in the city,

and all we ordered was bananas foster!” said Perri Kylvow, a UNC-Chapel Hill senior and recent visitor of New Orleans. “Best lunch decision I made all week.”

All edibles aside, the French Quarter is home to several noteworthy attractions that cannot be ignored. This original city center and oldest neighborhood in New Orleans is recognized as the most haunted city in the United States. Twilight ghost tours bring all of the city’s creepy history to life, particularly the stories revolving around the LaLaurie House. “I’ve seen energy fields so strong in the second story of the house that it looks like the rooms are on fire,” said Leonard Johnson, a local hypnotist and ghost tour guide. A peek in Marie Leveau’s House of Voodoo following the tour for an eerily accurate palm reading and handmade spiritual charms is bound to leave your skin crawling.

Daybreak sheds a more charming light on French Quarter, filling the streets with a perpetual breeze and the sounds of brass bands around each street corner. With an exception of the bars along Bourbon Street, stereo speakers serve no purpose in the French Quarter; the city’s population is full of talented musicians eager to share their art with all who cross their path. As you enjoy the sounds of street bands, wander through the renowned French Market on Decatur Street, filled with authentic foods and spices, crafts and art grown and created by the locals themselves. Each merchant greets you with a warm smile, ready to strike up a conversation about the origins of their goods and how they connect with the proud culture of New Orleans.

Despite the locals’ genuinely positive outlook on life, strong smiles fade from their faces at the mention of the “K” word. Communities continue to rebuild almost seven years after Hurricane Katrina, the deadliest and most destructive Atlantic hurricane, struck the city. “While 90 to 95 of French Quarter residents have returned to their homes and

businesses, only 60 to 65 percent of the pre-hurricane population has returned to the Ninth Ward, the easternmost section of the city that suffered catastrophic flood damage,” Hall said. Coping with the Katrina aftermath proves to be an arduous process for those who lost homes, friends and loved ones. New Orleans carries on with a proud soul but a scarred heart.

Lastly, don’t hesitate to step outside the metropolitan area, for the true natural beauty of Louisiana lies along the Pearl River in the Honey Island Swamp. Resting approximately one hour outside of the French Quarter, the swamp is home to great blue herons, diamondback water snakes and alligators, to name a few. The purple iris, the state wildflower, grows generously throughout the swamp and Pearl River region as well. “If you look closely, you can see how the iris’ natural petal patterns resemble the fleur de lis, the official symbol of the state,” said Bishop Keller, a Cajun Encounters Swamp Tours guide. If you join a river boat tour, be wary, however, of a banana’s bad mojo. Acknowledging the local fishermen superstition, the guides refuse to let you board their boats with them on your person. From early banana trade tales of capsizing boats to spider infestations that originate in the banana plants, this fruit brings nothing but back luck.

The vibrancy and elegance of New Orleans creates a hybrid travel experience unmatched by any other American city, an experience only understood by those who have adventured to the “Paris of America.” Stepping off the plane on a cool March morning, you will quickly notice the surprising lack of humidity, the subtle scent of salt in the breeze drifting from the brackish waters of the Mississippi River Delta, and the smiling friendly faces of locals eager to share their city with you. Don’t forget a pen—you’ll need to it update your bucket list!