

GETAWAYS

Revisiting River Road

These historic plantations are both a snapshot in time and an evolving portrait.

The majesty of the grand plantation mansions along the River Road from New Orleans to Baton Rouge continues to charm visitors from around the world. It may seem to some that the grand houses along the banks of the winding Mississippi River sit quietly in a time warp from another era, when sugarcane ruled the rich land and each plantation operated as a small self-contained village, yet nothing is static in the life of grand mansions. Although your vision may be of stately structures hugging the nearby Mississippi River levee, there are always changes occurring. If you haven't made this winding, history-laden trek for a while, there's much new to discover.

Houmas House

Once the largest plantation in America with 300,000 acres, Houmas House Plantation was purchased and completely restored by Kevin Kelly in 2003. Originally the land of the Houmas Indians, the original house was built in the late 1700s and is still standing behind the mansion. It is now Latil's Landing, an award-winning restaurant. The grand antebellum mansion was built in 1828, and it was called the Sugar Palace at the height of its grandeur.

"We have completed the Tea House on Mount Houmas, a man-made sixteen-foot high hill, that overlooks the Monet-like blue bridge and water garden that pays homage to the famous French artist's garden at Giverny near Paris," Kelly explains. He even added a waterfall that cascades from the top of the new "mountain." "We will soon begin serving High Tea in this whimsical garden folly that is styled with a Japanese flair." Even a large sculptural chandelier has been added in the center of the open-air structure.

Other improvements include a new 38-foot high and 24-foot wide Gothic arch behind the mansion's rear lily pond. It will serve as a wisteria arbor and perhaps a backdrop for photos from the many weddings the plantation grounds host.



Houmas House was built on land originally occupied by the Houmas Indians. New amidst the beautiful surrounding gardens is a Tea House that overlooks a Monet-like blue bridge and water garden."

Bocage

A private residence since 1941, Bocage has just opened to the public. The magnificent mansion is said to be the most original interpretation of American Greek Revival style in the nation. It was built in 1801 and redesigned by James Dakin in 1837. Dakin was the architect of the old Louisiana State Capitol building in Baton Rouge that was built in 1837.

“Bocage has just opened as a bed and breakfast and small event facility, and it will soon be open for tours,” explains Dr. Marion Rundell, the new owner. “It is still in the process of being carefully restored as close to the original as possible, but using today’s technology to ensure longevity. “

Major work was undertaken downstairs to the kitchen, electrical, plumbing and HVAC system. The plaster, crown moldings and medallions have been restored on both floors. Furnishings upstairs approximate the 1850s, while downstairs the furnishings are an eclectic mix of styles, with grand 19th -century Baccarat chandeliers gracing the main parlor upstairs. “Every effort has been made to preserve the elements of Bocage that had not been destroyed in the past as it fell into disrepair,” Dr Rundell said.

St. Joseph

Built on eight -foot high columns to protect it from flooding. St Joseph was built in 1830 by the Scioneaux family. After two other owners, it was purchased by Joseph Waguespack at a post -Civil War sheriff’s sale. It was renovated in 2002 by 201 ancestors of Waguespack, now stockholders in the company, which owns and operates it. Members of the extended family of owners traveled from as far away as California, Illinois and Tennessee to do much of the renovation work and by 2004, St. Joseph was back to take its historical place in history by opening its doors to the public.

“We are constantly working on the grounds and mansion,” explains Joan Boudreaux, general manager and great, great, great granddaughter of Joseph Waguespack. “In the past year we have added twenty crepe myrtles in front of the mansion, following the curve of the original driveway from the road to the house. We have also added large Formosa azaleas in a deep red that duplicate the ones that were part of the original landscaping.”

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