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THE BIG EASY IS BACK

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY NEALA SCHWARTZBERG

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New Orleans, post-Katrina, is finding its legs again. Most of the top hotels and restaurants have reopened, business at local shops is picking up again, and the music is back. Walking around **Neala Schwartzberg** finds that the city has not lost its soul.

Jane, our guide for the tour of St. Louis cemetery is emphatic. She wants everyone to spread the word that New Orleans is more than ready for visitors. "Why do people think we're still devastated by the effects of Katrina," she wonders aloud with an edge of frustration.

Kevin Kelly, owner of Houmas House, the lush plantation house and restaurant just outside of the city, sighs with frustration when he recounts people continuing to call him up, almost three years after Katrina, to ask if he's still flooded. "We were never flooded," he says with a shake of his head.

Their reaction is understandable – New Orleans has re-opened and the festivities have recommenced. But there is the lingering notion that the party is still rained out.

Part of the reason is the lopsided coverage in the media. "The national news continues to run archival footage of the city in the immediate aftermath of the flooding," says Mary Beth Romig, Director, Communications & Public Relations for the New Orleans Visitor and Convention Bureau. What they'd really like is for the message to be that New Orleans is "very much open for visitors."

It is certainly true that Katrina devastated New Orleans, and there are parts of the city that are still being rebuilt, but the iconic French Quarter is as lively as ever, the Warehouse district is turning into the hip art and museum district, and Central Business District is open for business.

I recently returned to New Orleans to see if time and weather had changed the city I visited and loved several years ago. I found a city thriving with festivals, street musicians filling the air with their music, artists, galleries, and everyone eager to welcome visitors. How much of the city has returned? Currently, better than 90 percent of French Quarter shops, attractions, hotels, restaurants, clubs and nightspots are recovered and reopened. (Source: May 13th update from Frenchquarter.com)

In fact, at the time of my visit the French Quarter Festival was in full swing. As I strolled through the city I was surrounded with zydeco, R&B, funk, hip-hop, and traditional New Orleans jazz. The stages were set up throughout the French Quarter, and local musicians played free concerts for the crowds, who often broke out into spontaneous dancing. Yet, the next day, the streets were swept clean and the city sparkled in the sunlight.

This was no isolated occurrence. The fact is that New Orleans is now cleaner than it's ever been.

The city has made a commitment to keeping its streets clean. "The SDT Company has the contract for cleaning the city," says Romig. "It's a great company that formed after Katrina and they have men walking through and sweeping the streets all day long. They even have a special machine that washes the street with scented soap."

And tourists are starting to return. The number of visitors to New Orleans increased from 3.7 million in 2006 to 7.1 million in 2007, according to a survey conducted by the University of New Orleans Hospitality Research Center for the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau

This page, clockwise from top right: Eating al fresco in the French Quarter; A bronze of the city's famous musicians; A banner outside the National WWII Museum.



and New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation.

In a way, the aftermath of Katrina has made New Orleans into the Tale of Two Cities. "New Orleans is a city of neighborhoods," explains Romig. The French Quarter, Warehouse District, The Central Business District were mostly spared. "You can land at the airport, take a shuttle into downtown and you'd have to look carefully to see a glimpse of empty, abandoned houses," says Romig. But much of the rest of the city experienced the full fury of Katrina, and the rebuilding of those areas continues.

In the neighbourhoods the tourists visit, life is bustling. The restaurants, hotels, attractions are open. In this city, eating is passion and Cajun and Creole cookin' is king. Seafood abounds and delicious food is a way of life. Stellar Antoine's, and Brennan's are again serving the specialties that made them famous. Visitors can enjoy Antoine's Jazz Brunch, along with its specialty dish Oysters Rockefeller, and Brennan's for breakfast or dinner with a finale of their world-famous Bananas Foster.

Café du Monde is a perennial favourite outdoor eatery. Both for the musicians who sit outside serenading and the cafe's deliciously light powdered-sugar dusted beignets and signature coffee with chicory.

Music feeds the soul in New Orleans. Preservation Hall is jazzed once again. The intimate space and funky atmosphere puts visitors up close to the musicians, whether sitting on the few benches in front, or standing

Clockwise from right: Trendy shops sit amid the historic buildings; Tourists stroll the French Quarter streets; Colourful glassworks; Even the dogs are cool in the city; Bananas Foster.

THE COMEBACK OF THE HOTEL MONTELEONE

Walking down Royal Street, it's hard to miss the regal and resplendent Hotel Monteleone. This landmark hotel, dating back to 1886, owned by four generations of the Monteleone family, catches people's attention with its sparkling facade, decked out doorman, and glittering brass. What casual visitors don't see is the huge heart that lies beyond the graceful exterior.

Their philosophy has always been "Do right by your staff, and they will do right by your guests." And this became clear when Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. "We've always been a safe haven for local residents and staff," says Andrea Thornton, Director of Sales and Marketing. When hurricanes would threaten the city, "people would check in, and party until the storm passed," she explains. Moreover, employees were also invited into hotel with their families and even their pets. "This is the only time pets were ever allowed in the hotel," says Thornton, but "pets are part of the family."

So when Katrina hit, as usual, they had a hotel filled with local residents and staff. But after a few days, the police department needed the fuel the hotel had been using to run the emergency generators and the Monteleone closed. Temporarily.

The hotel itself had just undergone a USD 70 million three-year renovation, and while Katrina damaged the roof, and created water damage from blown out windows, the hotel was largely intact. The message went out. We will reopen. And we will support our staff. "I got a call from the general manager who asked me to contact our staff and tell them that they would be paid – indefinitely," says Thornton with great pride. Any employee who could get back to New Orleans could stay in the hotel until they found housing. "We housed about 150 employees through until January, 2006," says Thornton. The staff were paid salaries, paid hardship money, and housed.

This continuing dedication to their staff has created a loyal and hard-working crew. But the cost of Katrina was also to their heart. "There's been much damage," says Thornton. They have lost homes and all their possessions. But they also carry scars within. "Any time we get close to hurricane season we all get nervous," she explains.

But this is a resilient hotel, and in a resilient city. "We want people to know that we're open for business and we're even more hospitable than ever, because we're much more appreciative of what we do have."





in the back. New Orleans' street musicians are a fixture of the city. From harmonious a cappella to instrumental jazz, these buskers bathe the city in music. If you enjoy their offerings, leave a donation in the hat usually placed nearby.

For a real treat, find zydeco music. With its African-Caribbean roots first and foremost, this is dance music. Few people can hear the strains of the washboards and accordions without getting up and moving. It's not as easy to locate as the traditional jazz, rock or R&B sound, but worth the effort.

Historic Royal Street is still the place for shopping. Galleries featuring New Orleans style art, and French antiques line the narrow road. The Bergan Putman Gallery is a delight for quintessential Big Easy posters. Fisher-Gambino has items for home decor and gorgeous lighting fixtures. Visiting M S Rau Antiques is like going to a museum where the exhibits are available for purchase. The 23,000 square-foot space contains everything from Tiffany glass to antique gambling equipment. And did we mention the historic vampire killing kits? The numerous art galleries carry colourful inexpensive posters to original oil paintings and sculpture. Perfumeries blend their own signature scents. The restaurants and shopping makes Royal Street a full day of strolling and eating.

New Orleans offers every manner and content of tour. Famous for their above-ground cemeteries, these and other city tours help visitors understand the history of this indomitable city.

The Warehouse District, snuggled next to the French Quarter, is a burgeoning neighbourhood whose renaissance predates Katrina. Once filled with 19th century warehouses, today it is home to some of the city's best museums and new residents in its new vertical living towers. Magazine Street has the New Orleans School of Glassworks and Printmaking, with its gallery New Orleans ArtWorks Gallery, filled with gorgeous blown glass art. Have a couple of hours free? They also offer classes.

The district is also home to the country's official World War II museum.

Left: Nobody blows their own trumpet like the people of New Orleans. **Top right:** The historic Houmas House. **Below:** See the glassblowers, buy their art or take a workshop.



HOUMAS HOUSE

Strolling up the walkway to Houmas House feels a bit like stepping out of time. Under the stewardship of owner Kevin Kelly, Houmas House (named after the native American tribe that once roamed the land) has become a refuge, a place to stroll the gardens, sometimes with a cocktail in hand from the Turtle Bar (try the traditional southern favourite – mint julep), watch the swans, admire the gracious touches, take a tour of the mansion completely restored by Kelly as his home.

End the day at Latil's Landing, one of the three restaurants presided over by Chef Jeremy Langlois. It is set amid the 18th century brick home of the Latil family who once owned the plantation.... Today, the original beamed ceilings, wood-burning fireplaces, and original wood floors provide a rich romantic setting. And the menu is truly inspired – bursting with traditional Louisiana ingredients used in new ways and combinations, what Langlois calls "Nouvelle Louisiane" cuisine.

Although it changes with the season, and Langlois inspiration, the menu might include Bisque of Curried Pumpkin, Crawfish, and Corn, Crab and Mango Cake – sauteed and served with chipotle (a smoked Jalapeno pepper) Remoulade Sauce. And you've never had grits until you've tried his bacon-wrapped shrimp atop creamy, cheesy stone-ground grits.

Entrees such as a delectable Lobster and Creole Tomato Risotto featuring a lobster tail stuffed with papaya, fire-roasted shrimp and Louisiana crawfish tails. Or, perhaps the Tenderloin of Beef, a charbroiled fillet drizzled with an oyster mushroom demi-glace, on scalloped Yukon gold potatoes infused with white truffle oil. Voted one of the best new restaurants for 2005 by *Esquire* magazine, the restaurant simply gets better and better.

But wait, dessert hasn't yet been served. The traditional Bananas Foster takes a new turn with homemade vanilla ice cream and pecans atop caramelised bananas, and the Louisiana favourite bread pudding becomes more like a rich cake pudding when Langlois uses date nut bread as the basis.

Houmas House is less than an hour from New Orleans in Darrow, Louisiana.

Houmas House Plantation and Gardens
40136 Highway 942
River Road
Darrow, Louisiana 70725
www.houmashouse.com



Top left: Saint Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square is one of the landmarks of the city. **Top right:** The city's Europe inspired architecture.

BRING A BOOK

John Kennedy Toole: *A Confederacy of Dunces*

The ultimate New Orleans novel, this is a savage satire and cult classic following the protagonist Ignatius J. Reilly in the form of a slothful modern day Don Quixote as he rambles through the French Quarter in search of a job. Published in 1981, it has become central to the cannon of southern fiction. Tragically, the author committed suicide 11 years before it was published, after it was rejected by every publishing house.

Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*

This proto-feminist precursor to American modernism follows Edna Pontellier, wife of a successful New Orleans businessman, as she begins to free herself from the binds of society at the time. An affair leads the protagonist to a dramatic conclusion.

William Burroughs: *Junkie*

Burroughs' first published novel, and his most conventional, is not solely based in New Orleans (episodes of the narrative take place in Kentucky and Mexico City), but it is a fantastically vivid semi-autobiographical account of Burroughs' time with the Louisiana underworld during the early 1950s.

William Faulkner: *Pylon*

Written between *Light in August* and *Absolom Absolom!*, *Pylon* is one of Faulkner's less widely regarded works, unjustifiably so. One of his few novels set outside his regular fictional setting of Yoknapatawpha County, the narrative takes place in New Valois, a fictionalised New Orleans. It follows the lives of a group of barnstormers whose lives are unconventional and whose relationships are unorthodox. The novel was shocker in its day.

Paula Fox: *The God of Nightmares*

An author who has gained little of the repute she deserves, Paula Fox (Courtney Love's grandmother, incidentally) is primarily a writer of children's fiction, though her adult work is frankly superb. *The God of Nightmares*, set shortly before WWII, is narrated by upstate New Yorker Helen Bynum who flees her oppressive mother to search for her mythical Aunt Lulu in New Orleans. Initially charmed by the freedom the city encourages, she soon becomes aware of the racial and sexual constraints of those around her. As conflict looms, New Orleans becomes a metaphor for the false Eden of the period between the world wars. *MG*

The National World War II museum has no shortage of information on military campaigns, but the heart and soul of this expanding institution is the oral histories and anecdotes of the men and women, on both sides of the war – Allies and Axis powers.

As with every successful comeback, New Orleans is attracting new hotels. Harrah's New Orleans Hotel made its official debut in September 2006. This AAA Four Diamond award-winning hotel was the first completely new hotel to open in the city since Hurricane Katrina. The 250-room Hilton New Orleans St. Charles Hotel in the Central Business district opened May of 2007. The Royal Cosmopolitan Hotel, currently under construction, will open on Royal Street, in the French Quarter.

Not only hotels, restaurants as well are springing up. In a city already well-stocked with eateries, visitors now have even more choice. "There are more restaurants open in the metro New Orleans area now than ever before," says Romig, "and we're delighted."

In the Central Business District, one of the hot new spots is Luke serving German and French cuisine in a cozy brasserie atmosphere. And no, you won't find *jagerschnitzel mit spatzlesnitzel* together on your plate with *moules et frites*. Just near each other on this eclectic menu. Harrah's Hotel, already the home of several restaurants, will be welcoming Ruth's Chris steakhouse. The steakhouse's original location in New Orleans flooded during Katrina. It has now relocated to the ground floor of Harrah's. Herbsaint opened shortly after Katrina, and is becoming a new favourite in the Warehouse district.

Not only are there new places, the existing places are spruced up. "Because so many hotels and restaurants had to shut down in the aftermath of Katrina, many had the time to renovate, or the need to renovate," says Romig "so buildings and businesses are much fresher."

Although any time is a good time to visit this eclectic city, New Orleans knows how to party and offers a calendar filled with festivals, often on the theme of music and food. The Satchmo SummerFest runs July 31st through August 3rd. This French Quarter festival honours native son, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong with free musical performances on three stages. Southern Decadence taking place August 28th through September 1st celebrates with parades of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender culture – the more elaborate the costumes the better.

"Some parts of the city will be involved in recovery for years, but the heart and soul of the city and some of the greatest neighbourhoods of the world are alive and well," says Romig. In fact, I'd say they were never better.

As they say in New Orleans – *Laissez le bon temps roulez* – let the good times roll. /