

New Orleans

by Nancy Fowler, Willamette International Travel

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We stayed at the Renaissance Pere Marquette Hotel, 817 Common St. It is a block off Canal, non-Quarter side. I really enjoyed the hotel. It is in an old building, and lobby is on the second floor. The rooms had been recently renovated, and were lovely. Very, very clean, with their new branded beds. Bathroom was huge, all tiled. We had a corner room, #220. One window faced the river, with the Harrah's Casino building in our view. Other window faced an office building, though I never saw anyone in the offices, even on the Monday.

We'd walk the block to Canal, and if we stayed straight, we were on Bourbon Street. It was even nastier than I remember; this is not a street you walk with kids. It would be jumping by 11am and seemingly go all night. We quickly learned to walk down Canal a block or so, then cut in to the Quarter on Royal or Chartres, which are as refined as Bourbon is raw.

The Central Business District and the Quarter had more wind damage, than flood damage. In the CBD, a fair number of small businesses have not re-opened. The quarter is back, however. Most of the restaurants had help wanted signs posted with several positions needed. Stores remain open, but the owner is now behind the counter; either due to lack of people to employ, or can't afford to pay staff due to the losses since Katrina. One grumpy owner in a gift store said he used to take a vacation every other month, and now he works 16 hour days in his stores.

Food highlights in the Quarter, since New Orleans is all about food!

Note: you really need reservations for Brennan's, Court of Two Sisters, and Red Fish Grill.

Brennan's restaurant for breakfast. One of my favorite places in the Quarter. www.brennansneworleans.com

Court of Two Sisters for dinner. Like Brennan's, this is an old traditional restaurant, popular with locals. Dinner? www.courtoftwosisters.com

Attiki for lunch. This is a wonderful Mediterranean style place, and I highly recommend it. Very casual and comfortable. Had hookahs, with many different flavors to smoke (not that we tried it). The 2 brothers that own it were very nice. It was a great respite from the Quarter's noise. It is at 230 Decatur Street. www.attikibarandgrill.com

A fantastic bookstore next door is a nice bonus. It had new and used, as well as collectible books, and a wonderful selection of books on New Orleans and the area (as well as fiction by local writers).

Red Fish Grill for dinner, at 115 Bourbon St. We had walked by this restaurant several times during our stay and decided to eat there for our last night. It is owned Ralph Brennan, of the Brennan family, and is very contemporary. Excellent food (I swear there is no bad food in New Orleans). www.redfishgrill.com

Café d'Monde for beignets and coffee

Entertainment and sightseeing:

We asked the hotel staff for their recommendations of a good place to go for music that didn't involve tourists doing karaoke. They suggested The Bombay Club, 830 Conti Street. It was great. www.thebombayclub.com
The staff are eccentric, the entertainers are local and excellent. The setting is dark, jungle prints, some booths with curtains, all cushy and relaxing. It is part of the Prince Conti hotel, which looks nice from the lobby.

Grayline New Orleans' Hurricane Katrina tour. www.graylineneworleans.com

The day we went, there were 4 buses for the tour, it is so popular. You do need advance reservations. Many tourists were walking up to the office, thinking they would get on without reservations, and were told that all was sold out, as well as for the next 2 days...

I highly recommend this tour. It is handled sensitively, if clients are concerned about exploiting the situation. The owner of Grayline NO lost his house in Katrina. He heard an interview with senators who had just toured the area, and noticed the passion they had after visiting; wasn't there before. So he put a tour together. \$3 of each ticket is donated to a non-profit organization that was directly affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The passengers get to choose from 5 different organizations; on our bus, most selected Habitat for Humanity.

The tour begins with a drive-by of the Superdome and a recap of Katrina's time line. It continues to the causeway and levee that breached, and along Lake Ponchartrain. Originally, tour buses were not allowed in the 9th Ward or New Orleans East, but they can now enter. The devastation is incredible and the lack of support from America is deplorable. It is grassroot associations, churches, community centers, that are offering real, daily support with food kitchens, clothes, assistance with insurance companies and government departments. Bernard Parish, where most of the blue collar service staff lived, is entirely gone. We are talking many square miles of neighborhoods, strip malls, movie theatres, etc. Try to imagine all the structures in Tigard, Beaverton, Lake Oswego, Hillsboro and Forest Grove flattened.

Music-focused walking tour of the Quarter: www.tourneworleans.com/jazz.html

They offer a weekend Jazz Walk at 230pm on Sat. and Sun. You meet at the Bourbon Café Beignet, 311 Bourbon St. No reservations required. Tour lasts approx. 2 hours, maybe longer if there is a jazz funeral and second line within walking distance. It leaves rain or shine. We were going to do it, but ran out of time. This same company does the Cemetery Voodoo Tour, FYI.

We took the free ferry across the river to Algiers. Not worth getting off, and don't do this after dark. Looking back at New Orleans, you realize just how far below sea level they are. Tall buildings look really small behind the levee.

There are many layers to the problems involved in re-building, and it will be interesting to see how they are addressed. Harry Connick, Jr., and Branford Marsalis have created a housing project, New Orleans Habitat Musicians' Village. They hope to provide 250 to 300 homes for displaced musicians. It consists of five city blocks in the 9th Ward, and we drove by it on our tour. The homes are all shot gun style homes on stilts, and painted in Caribbean colors. After being in the "dead" neighborhoods for the past 45 min., they appeared like a rainbow to us. There were kids playing, people sitting on their porches; a very vibrant community. The Village will also be the home to the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music.

In the meantime, the average tourist will have a great time in New Orleans, especially with the experience of this tour. Tourism is so critical to New Orleans' comeback, and is one of the best ways to show support. We were welcomed everywhere. People were quite willing to answer questions about their personal situation and their community. There is great support for their mayor. Everyone has a very positive attitude.