



New Orleans, Louisiana: Enticing and Carefree



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A historic city, unique in the United States for its colonial French and Spanish character, New Orleans has become associated with its annual Mardi Gras festival, jazz music and flavorful Creole cuisine. After being devastated in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina, the city's displaced population is moving back and has embraced the process of rebuilding. But tourists will be glad to know that its most famous sites, including the French Quarter, were spared from destruction and are continuing to entice new visitors.

Then and Now

Founded in 1718 by French colonists, New Orleans transferred to Spanish rule in 1763 and briefly reverted to French control until the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, when it became part of the United States. Because of its history, the city has retained a European and Catholic character that is distinctive among U.S. cities. New Orleans also has more than 35,000 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, more than any other U.S. city.

New Orleans, with its motto of "Laissez les bons temps rouler (Let the good times roll)," is known

as a city for parties and revelries such as Mardi Gras. Celebrated the day before the beginning of the Christian season of Lent, the festival is marked by parades, costumes and colorful beads.

The city's history includes these milestones:

- 1814 — British forces are defeated at New Orleans by American troops led by future President Andrew Jackson in the last battle of the War of 1812.
- 1838 — The first Mardi Gras parade is held.
- 1840s — L'Album Littéraire, Louisiana's first literary

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magazine, is founded by French-speaking African-American poets and writers.

- 1862 — Union forces capture New Orleans from the Confederacy, and the city is spared the destruction suffered by many other cities in the American South.

The People

An estimated 370,000 people live in New Orleans, 60 percent of whom are black, with whites making up the next-largest ethnic group at 30 percent. The first settlers of New Orleans were French, Spanish and African-American, and known as Creoles. The definition of the term broadened to include later waves of immigrants who have left their mark on New Orleans culture, including Irish, Italian, Spanish and Germans.

The Land

New Orleans is a city surrounded by water — the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain, and a multitude of bayous, canals and waterways. It earned its nickname “the Crescent City” because of its growth along a large bend in the Mississippi from the original French settlement and moving out to encompass the once separate town of Carrollton. Much of the city lies below sea level. Near New Orleans is the Causeway. Stretching 24 miles (38.6 kilometers), it is the longest continuous bridge in the world.

The Climate

New Orleans has been called the northernmost Caribbean city, and it can have a humid, semitropical climate, with rain throughout the year. Its average temperature ranges from 51.3 degrees Fahrenheit (10.7 degrees Celsius) in January to 81.9 degrees (27.7 degrees Celsius) in July. As a city near the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, New Orleans offers residents warm and inviting weather year-round.



People on the float threw doubloons and beads to the crowd in a Mardi Gras parade. ©Shutterstock.com

- 1901 — Arguably the most famous jazz performer, Louis Armstrong, is born in New Orleans and develops his talents growing up in poor sections of the city.

- 1929 — The New Orleans sandwich known as a po’boy is created by a local restaurant to provide free food to strikers.

- 1975 — The Superdome, the largest fixed-dome structure in the world, opens in New Orleans.

Jazz, Ghosts, Creole Cooking

New Orleans thrives on its reputation for boisterous night life, swampy Southern charm and spooky intrigue. All have combined to give the city an aura of “elegant decay.”

At the end of the 19th century, jazz music was born in places like the New Orleans red-light district of Storyville, combining elements of ragtime, marching band music and blues, but adding the widespread use of improvisation.

Just like the name given to longtime residents, Creole cuisine is a blend of the city’s various cultures, including African, French,

Irish, Italian, Spanish, German, Caribbean, Native American and Portuguese. Specialties include beignets (also called “French doughnuts”), gumbo, jambalaya rice dishes, étouffée stew, and red beans and rice.

The French Quarter, with its distinctive architecture, hosts Preservation Hall, a celebrated jazz club, popular bars and restaurants on Bourbon Street, and Café du Monde, where New Orleans — style coffee blended with chicory has been served since 1862.

Even before novelist and New Orleans native Anne Rice used the city and its surrounding areas as the setting for gothic tales of vampires and witches, New Orleans had already earned a reputation for being the most haunted city in America, suffering devastating fires in 1788 and 1795 and an 1853 yellow fever epidemic that killed nearly 10,000 of its residents. Voodoo, brought by African slaves, and antique cemeteries with distinct above-ground tombs have added to the city’s macabre allure.