

# GO

BRITISH

GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY



Travel

## Why New Orleans needs to be on your vacation list this summer

With a direct flight now available from London to New Orleans, it's time to jet off to the city on the Mississippi River. From the French quarter to the Faubourg Marigny, jazz, art and culture are booming. Start booking your getaway tickets now...

New Orleans is another kind of America. If the United States had been primarily French instead of British, African instead of European, catholic instead of protestant, hedonistic instead of puritanical, it might all have been like this. But it wasn't and it certainly isn't, so the fabled city known as NOLA is unique.

This mesmerising port town at the mouth of the mighty Mississippi has always been a place apart, the sweet spot of the deep south. Its reputation for Mardi Gras and marching bands, jazz and funk, mint juleps and jambalaya have long made it a favourite destination for young Americans seeking home grown exotica, sex and sin. If you want to get wild with the Frat boys drinking bourbon on Bourbon Street, you certainly can. There are strip bars and dance bars aplenty but the contemporary crescent City has a whole host of other, slightly more sophisticated attractions.

Hurricane Katrina changed old New Orleans. Devastation was eventually followed by gentrification and neighbourhoods, which once were no-go zones, are now full of artfully dishevelled coffee shops and cafes run by men with interesting facial hair. Cleaner, safer, hipper, the city has perhaps lost a little of its edge, but it has gained some great restaurants, hotels and galleries. And you can still find that old Louisiana voodoo hanging in the mist, which hovers over the levy at sunrise, or walking along Frenchmen Street with the sound of a lonely trumpet ringing in your ears.

The French quarter is still the epicentre and the swinging soul of the city. Picture book pretty, its' ornate balconies dripping with foliage, its' corners festooned with itinerant musicians. This is actually a largely Spanish colonial architectural gem, an elaborate 18th century wonder, to compete with Havana or Cartagena. Indeed it feels most like a misplaced Latin or Caribbean enclave; historic, atmospheric, simultaneously laid back yet pulsing with potential pleasure.

The best time to see the quarter is in the morning when it is waking up to coffee and beignet (irresistible fried doughnuts dusted with sugar), or late at night when the hubbub has died down and you can loose yourself in its glorious grid. There is too much tourist tat, too many tacky attractions, but there's also great antique shops, splendid hat shops, a few fantastic museums and a slew of marvellous restaurants old and new.

In the quarter you need to try at least one of the timeless staples with their old fashioned fancy French ways. Antoine's is still Le Rois of the lot, Brennan's is best for breakfast and Mr B's bistro feels like an authentic, buzzing Parisian place for lunch. Food in New Orleans is the perfect illustration of the cultural elements which combine here, a delicious gumbo of old world finesse, African spices and Caribbean ingredients. And since Katrina, scores of newcomers have taken those elements and run with them.



R'evolution on Bienville Street, just round the corner from Bourbon, but a million miles from its gaudy neon is the finest dining of the lot. Simultaneously swish and swanky yet funky too, with crab beignet, spicy frogs legs and a wine list to rival the best continental cellar. Compere Lapin over in the hip warehouse district is another impressive newcomer taking just the right liberties with Creole tradition. But you may also want to jump on the St Charles streetcar to eat great Israeli food at Shaya up in the garden district. New Orleans today is embracing multiculturalism.

But the core of the culture here is still music. Jazz is everywhere in New Orleans, but it is also illusive, hard to track down the right stuff. Faubourg Marigny is the district, with it's small jazz museum which houses concerts upstairs, a couple of good record shops and a string of decent clubs on Frenchman. Check out which member of the Marsalis dynasty is playing that night and pay your 30 dollars to really feel the vibe. Back in the quarter you need to go to Preservation Hall, it is touristy and corny and cramped, but half shut your eyes and you're transported back to the very roots of this magnetic music.



The constant barrage of sounds of every kind means the quarter might not be the most relaxing place to stay. Cross Canal into the old Warehouse district, once a near derelict zone of handsome post-industrial buildings and you're in the SoHo of the south. Contemporary art galleries line Julia Street, loft apartments abound, and restaurants and delis compete on every corner.

Hotels too line Tchoupitoulas Street. Old Number 77 is probably the hippest call, all cool exposed brick and dark wood, with a nightclub vibe in the bar of a night. Almost opposite, The Cambria is the new kid in town with a 'baroque and roll' themed interior and yet surprisingly tranquil atmosphere, big bright rooms and good service.

You could easily spend a week in Nola exploring its neighbourhoods and savouring its flavours, maybe take in a Saints game at the Superdome. But a couple of days out of the city, driving deep into the wild bayou or navigating the meandering Mississippi puts it all into context. You can stay on an elegantly restored plantation, The Houmas House, hard by the river about an hour out of the city.

This plantation experience is all southern charm and slightly camp elan, a lovely way to get to know a little about old Louisiana style. But you also have to go to the Whitney Plantation, close by but worlds apart. Here you hear the story of the enslaved African workers who lived and died brutally amid the sugar cane. An eye-opening, heart-breaking couple of hours on the dark side of the deep-south. Yet ultimately it is also uplifting, for the descendants of those slaves contributed so much to the incredible culture of this part of the world and to the shining city which sits where that great river meets the sea.