

Low lights of Louisiana

Baton Rouge, the capital of the state of Louisiana, presents a medley of experiences for visitors, both in the city itself and as a jumping off point for the state's many natural attractions, including swamps, alligators, fine historical houses, and special French flavour not found elsewhere.

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Louisiana with its special French heritage is different from the rest of the South. Baton Rouge gets its name from two French explorers who found a red stick in the ground marking the boundary between the hunting grounds of local Indian tribes back in the 18th century.

Louisiana was an organised French colonial settlement from about 1720. Decent farming folk were induced to move there from France.

Their descendants are the Creoles. The French population was later boosted by the forcible deportation of prisoners, prostitutes and others from French cities.

Later the Cajuns arrived - French settlers from Canada who fled after the British takeover after 1745. The first crop was indigo used to dye clothes, then sugar (but not cotton as the soil is unsuitable). The area remained French in orientation, culture and religion even after Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States in 1805. British influence is minimal because this area was never part of the British colonies in America.

Baton Rouge is about an hour north of New Orleans and among the many pluses are the food, the music, the wildlife and the culture. The food is different and special. This is the land of crawfish, a very small crustacean - lobster shaped

but shrimp sized. It's farmed and eaten by the bucket full in etouffee, gumbo and other fish-stew type dishes served with or on rice. Desserts like banana sauteed in butter with lots of liquor are typically sugar laden. Much food is fried, even peanuts still in their shells, and alcohol is freely consumed, even with breakfast. The craft beer scene is active and oysters are plentiful, as is pork, chicken and beef.

I enjoyed oysters at Indigo Pearl, freshly shucked, a dozen for US\$14. And for BBQ the locals pointed me to TJ's Ribs - a legendary place. I chow down on pork and beef ribs, chicken, brisket, sausage and chips with rice and beans and coleslaw as sides.

City Pork an innovative restaurant focusing on local produce is also excellent, Flemings, a sophisticated steak house and Stroubes where I enjoyed crab beignets.

At Poor Boy Lloyds the traditional Po'Boy sandwich is a sizeable soft bread roll (like a bap) filled with whatever you want. The vibe is casual - square tables with plastic tablecloths, gingham curtains, waitresses who call out your order. In Baton Rouge people stop for lunch and eat substantially. It's a very social thing.

Almost every type of music can be found here. At the very good museum in Baton Rouge I listen to jazz, blues, swamp pop, rockabilly, zydeco (a local mixture of blues, R&B and indigenous sounds) on headphones from a large selection of recordings tracing the evolution of music in the state. The Roux Bar and the Blues Room have some impressive local bands with hot sounds.

All the madness that is Louisiana comes together in Mardi Gras. The exact origins are disputed, but the name means Fat Tuesday and it is always held the day before Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, so it was a big celebratory blow-out before a period of self denial. Now it's a major tourist event and not just in New Orleans.

A short distance out of town is the vast swamp area. At 220kms long and 37kms wide, it's the largest natural swamp in the United States. The area is alternatively flat open water and close tree-lined streams with overhanging branches, thick brush, murky water filled with debris. Ghostly white Spanish moss hangs off the trees like gossamer.

Dave the tour guide slaps the water with a paddle and the alligators swim slowly to the side of the boat. They are rewarded three or four times a day with marshmallows, chicken necks and gizzards, sometimes dropped straight into their mouths.

Baby alligators about a year old scurry about under their Momma's watchful eye. We travel in airboats, shallow-draught flat bottomed boats with fans driven by powerful V8 engines making the vessels skim on top of the water.

Downtown Baton Rouge is dominated by the memorial to the state's favourite son, Huey Long, a manipulative populist who stood up for ordinary folks against

big business, particularly the oil industry, and built a huge personal following across the state. The many projects he initiated, were almost all paid for on borrowed money.

State Governor and then Senator, Long was becoming a rival to President Roosevelt, advocating an ambitious programme of redistribution in the Depression era called Share Our Wealth, which was more far-reaching than anything in FDR's New Deal.

The State Capitol Building, a 27-storey art deco building housing the two chambers of the state legislature and the Governor's office, is Huey Long's building. He championed its construction during the Depression and as Governor borrowed money to make it happen.

On the night of 10 September 1935 when Senator Long stepped into the corridor from the Governor's office where he was met by a doctor called Carl Weiss who pulled a pistol and shot Long in the stomach. Long's bodyguards cut Weiss down in a hail of bullets. No motive has ever been established for the doctor's actions, but a bullet hole can still be seen and felt in a marble pillar where the shootout took place.

The bullet hole and site of the killing are the most popular attractions in the building, which offers an extensive view of the city and countryside. By state law no building can be built taller than the State Capitol, and in the gardens where he is buried, Huey Long's statue is the only one on display. Louisiana also has a darker side, as one of the slave states, and one notorious for their ill treatment.

Baton Rouge is a handy base for exploring Plantation Country, with dozens of historical houses dating from the 1730s onwards. Many fine stories are told about the houses and the families who lived there one such is the story of Laura Locoul Gore, a French Catholic Creole woman who inherited Houmas House and the estate when her husband died. It's now a major tourism award winner.

She lived to 102, and left behind a set of stories about her life on the plantation written when she was a young woman. The manuscripts were only rediscovered after her death.

Only one plantation is dedicated to telling the slaves' story. Thanks to a remarkable project commissioned in the Depression, teams of historians, writers and archivists located hundreds of former slaves and captured their stories. Whitney Plantation now has the names of about a hundred thousand slaves who lived in Louisiana, recorded on marble walls with extracts from their stories.

One tells of a pregnant woman who had been caught stealing. The plantation owner had a shallow pit the shape of her pregnant belly dug to protect the baby while she was tied down and flogged. Whitney is a moving experience. Entrance tickets each have a picture of a slave with a name and identifying information. I had Catherine Cornelius, "Ah was a slave born an raised on de Smithfield Plantation ... Ah worked in de field cutting cane."

Like most of the slave South, Louisiana is in denial about its past. Slavery is not much discussed; it's airbrushed from the record. At all the other plantations the focus is on the white folks in the big house. At Whitney it's about the slaves which makes its preservation an important contribution to the historical record. ■