

AOL Sun Escapes



AOL's Guide to Top 10 Winter Destinations for Canadians

Eating Your Way Through The Big Easy

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Parmjit Parmar

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By Parmjit Parmar
 Special to AOL Travel

New Orleans was voted number 1 in a list of American cities with the strangest people by [Travel and Leisure](#) magazine. With its crazy bars, music culture, historic cemeteries, and vampire and voodoo legacies, I have to agree. When I received the call from my young American nephews to join them for a five-day sojourn to this vibrant city, how could I say no? After years of reading novels and seeing movies set in the Big Easy, and the devastating fiasco of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has always been on the top of my travel list. Apparently I'm not alone in this desire as it's ranked as one of America's top cities to visit by many travel surveys. Upon arrival we checked into the wonderful Renaissance Marriott Arts Hotel in the [Warehouse Arts District](#) of NOLA, three quarters of a mile from the French Quarter. Our street, Tchoupitoulas (I still can't pronounce it), runs west of [Canal Street](#) – the dividing line of the city – through many neighbourhoods. Lucky for us we were situated in the heart of the art district and near some of the best restaurants and art galleries. I'm sure the socialites salivate every time they walk into art galleries or past candle-lit wine bars. Emeril's, one of the first restaurants to be located in the district is packed seven nights a week. One thing you immediately realize about this city is that you're in for a sensory explosion. Locals know how to take pleasure in all things food, wine and music.

Venturing out on the first night, we walked over to have dinner at [Cochon](#), Chef David Link's ode to earthy, spicy Cajun cuisine. We ordered a whole collection of small plates – fried alligator with chili garlic aioli, an oyster & meat pie, grilled shrimp with chow chow, smoked pork ribs with watermelon pickle, fried boudin with pickled peppers, and rabbit & dumplings - to share along with a cornucopia of cocktails.

Just Wander and Wander

The next day I was ready to experience more of the fabric that makes up this amazing city. So off we went to the French Quarter, to start the day off right with chicory coffee and sugar-coated beignets at [Café du Monde](#). The establishment opened in 1867 at its current location on Decatur Street. Locals and tourists alike frequent the café 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And the best part of travelling in November is that during the weekdays you're not overwhelmed by two many tourists; tables are easier to come by at restaurants.



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Wandering the French quarter we came across some very interesting friendly people, including street musicians all over the place. One Jazz player shouted at a passersby in Jackson Square, "you're not gonna holla by giving up a dolla!"

Okay, so I have bit of an obsession with Marie Laveau the voodoo queen. After all, she features in the folklore of New Orleans, not to mention many vampire novels. With this in mind I dragged my companions over to St Louis Cemetery #2, on our way up Canal Street to visit [Willa Mae's Scotch House](#) to sample some of the best fried chicken in the States. Both Anthony Bourdain and the Food Network along with James Beard gave it top honours. This was going to be our second lunch since we had already stuffed ourselves with [Napolean House's](#) muffaletta sandwiches. (I only ordered a quarter sandwich to go with my Pimm's Cup cocktail, and I still felt full.) Napolean House suspends you in time, with its 200 year old history and décor of quietly decaying elegance, while Willie Mae's shows you a different side of the city, a side slower to recover from Katrina. You can still see houses slowly getting rebuilt. Needless to say we never found Marie Laveau's cemetery, but we did see above-ground sun-bleached tombs. There is a sense of decay and mystery in this cemetery, with some tombs lined with candles. The dead are definitely shown respect by their living relatives here.

Musical Adventures

Music aficionados from the around the world descend on New Orleans to enjoy the music scene. Best of all is that no matter where you go you will hear music, be it on the street in the French Quarter, late night Jazz bars or the ever popular New Orleans hip hop "bounce" music playing in dance bars like Mimi's in Faubourg-Marigny. The older generations of restaurants run by the Brennan family feature Sunday brunch jazz at their two traditional restaurants Commander's Palace (Garden District) and Mr B's (French Quarter). Waiters dress in crisp black uniforms and white aprons, and the service is impeccable at both locations. Commander's during the week serves 25-cent martinis and draws quite a crowd of both locals and tourists. The martinis are a perfect accompaniment to whatever you order, just take it easy as there's definitely no skimping on alcohol content.

Our musical adventures took us out to Frenchmen Street in the Faubourg-Marigny. All bundled up on a cool night at the foot of the strip, we scanned the bars and ended up at [The Three Muses](#), a retro-style bar with great small plates for noshing. Live music drives this establishment, which is always packed with a diverse crowd enjoying drinks and waiting for the live band to come on. As we checked out the crowd and ordered *moules frites* along with the "The Muse" cocktail – cucumbers and strawberries with St. Germain and Plymouth Gin – the band came on. The [Luke Winslow King](#) trio played a number of sets of 1920s and '30s depression-era music. The trio is immensely talented and had just returned from a cross-country tour.



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After The Three Muses we headed over to [The Spotted Cat](#), where Miss Sophie Lee – who I found out later, is one of the owners of The Three Muses – sang beautifully to some old-time jazz. There swing dancers on the small crowded fall enjoying her tunes. We also met up with [Barbara Herman](#), a local gal we met during the day at [Avery Fine Perfumery](#), working at this fine European perfumery, back in the Warehouse Arts District. She came to New Orleans from San Francisco to write a book on vintage perfume – working title: *Scent and Subversion: A Century of Provocative Perfume* – which will hopefully come out next fall. Barbara was happy and enthusiastic to tell us all about the bohemian and neighborly, cozy and comforting Marigny district, home to Frenchman Street and its great music scene. "I made more friends in a month here than I did 15 years in San Francisco," she told me. She chose the Faubourg-Marigny as her area of residence since it is close to the French Quarter, to art galleries, restaurants and cool bars/music venues in the fast growing Bywater district. [Click here for Barbara's personal list of must-do's when visiting New Orleans.](#)

There is just so much to do and see and eat in New Orleans, not to mention the very interesting people. We spent five days in the Big Easy and were only able to touch the surface of this vibrant city. Our next visit will definitely take in all that we missed.

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