

DISCOVER FRENCH-SPEAKING LOUISIANA: A BRIEF GUIDE TO CREATING AN "ACADIANA ADVENTURE TOUR"

November 4-10, 1999 is the week of *La Fête de la Francophonie*, a national initiative sponsored by the AATF to increase the visibility and understanding of the Francophone world. The *Fête* Committee, chaired by Dr. Margot Steinhart and Dr. Jacki Thomas, is preparing a comprehensive dossier of materials that can be used in classes to celebrate *la Fête*.

Despite the fact that *la Francophonie* has received increased attention in French language textbooks, many students are not quite sure of the scope *l'espace francophone* entails. Some are even unaware of the pockets of French culture and language present in the United States.

For many French language educators, the prospect of taking students to a Francophone country in Africa or Asia is rather remote. France and Quebec have long been the foreign study and travel destinations of choice. However, it is possible to immerse one's students in *la Francophonie* without leaving the United States. It is as close as Louisiana, home to the rich culture of the Acadians or "Cajuns."

I have taken three groups of Mountain View Community College faculty, staff, and students on five-day excursions into the heart of Louisiana's Cajun country. These trips have been a popular offering at my campus, due in part to the \$300 price tag. My students are fascinated by the history of the French-speaking Cajuns. They are also charmed by the hospitality and friendly nature of the people they meet. Students do have a chance to speak French during their five days, especially in the Lafayette area, although they often have difficulty understanding the distinctive Cajun accent. I offer this trip at our campus because it is short, fairly easy to organize, affordable for even budget-conscious students, and genuinely enjoyable!

I normally conduct these trips in May at the end of the spring semester. It is possible to visit Louisiana during spring or Christmas break. However, be advised that May is usually a drier month which makes travel more enjoyable. I do not recommend visiting the area with students during Mardi Gras for obvious reasons.

Because Louisiana is a neighbor of Texas, bus transportation is the most logical mode of travel for my groups. Teachers living more than eight to twelve hours away might consider flying into New Orleans, hiring a passenger bus for land travel, and reversing the tour order.

Natchitoches is the first venue of the tour as it is a natural stopping point between

Dallas and Lafayette, Louisiana, the heart of Cajun Country. Teachers coming from the north or west into Louisiana will want to include Natchitoches on their itineraries for its history, cuisine, and considerable charm.

Day One

Natchitoches, a delightful little town nestled on the tranquil Cane River in Eastern Louisiana, has bragging rights to quite a few things considering its size. Located in the heart of the Natchitoches Parish, Natchitoches (pronounced NACK-uh-tush) is Louisiana's oldest town. Not only that, it has the additional distinction of being the oldest permanent European settlement in the entire Louisiana Purchase Territory (Martin 1990).

Natchitoches has long been known for its meat pies. It gained national attention a few years ago as the location for the movie *Steel Magnolias*. It is also the setting for the popular "Christmas Festival of Lights" which is shown in the film.

Meat pies were popular in this region of Louisiana long before the Civil War. Street vendors selling "hotta meat pies!" were a common scene on city streets for years. Although the vendors are now a memory of the past, meat pies are still a staple of the locals' diet. One of Natchitoches' most popular purveyors of meat pies, James Laysonne, has been cranking out his delicious creations for more than 25 years in his restaurant of the same name, Laysonne's Meat Pie Kitchen.

Mr. Laysonne is a colorful character. He will be happy to come to your table at the end of your meal and tell you about his love of cooking. Legend has it he sleeps on a cot in his kitchen, although when we were once lucky enough to be invited into the kitchen for a quick personal tour, the famous cot was nowhere in sight.

Students will be reluctant to leave the charm and quiet of Natchitoches, but there is much more to be discovered nearby. Namely, the Melrose Plantation, home of one truly remarkable Marie-Thérèse Coincoin.

Marie-Thérèse was a slave (born 1742) whose beauty caught the attention of a Frenchman named Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer. The two lived together for 25 years and had no fewer than 10 children. Metoyer gave Marie-Thérèse her freedom and a large amount of property (30,000 acres, which was recorded in the name of her son). She went on to become the matriarch of her family and founder of a large colony of people whose descendants still live along the Cane River today. Marie-Thérèse

started Melrose Plantation with the help of her sons, growing indigo and tobacco (Martin 1990).

At the turn of the 20th century, Melrose became a retreat for artists and writers, including Lyle Saxon, Caroline Dorman, and François Mignon. Their cook, Clementine Hunter, discovered her considerable talents as a primitive painter and became Melrose's most famous artist. Some of her best works are on display at Melrose's "Africa House" today.

Days Two and Three

The second and third days of this tour are spent in the area of Lafayette and St. Martinville, the heart and soul of Cajun country. Lafayette was originally named Vermillionville and later renamed in honor of the French General Lafayette. Lafayette and its environs were settled by French Acadians fleeing New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in 1755.

The day begins with a visit to the Lafayette museum. It was the home of Alexandre Mouton, Louisiana's first Democratic governor. This wonderful old house is filled with antiques, Civil War relics, and richly brocaded Mardi Gras costumes. Don't miss the tour.

After visiting the museum, go to the St. John's Cathedral at 914 St. John Street. St. John's dates from the late 19th century. It features Dutch Romanesque architecture. The cemetery, with its above-ground burial vaults, is worth a visit as well. The famed 500-year-old live oak tree near the Cathedral spreads its leafy foliage over what seems to be an entire city block. This tree is truly a wonder of nature in its grandeur. It makes a perfect photo stop.

The afternoon is divided between a visit to the Acadiana Village and a swamp tour at McGee's Landing. The Acadiana Village is a re-creation of Acadian life of the 19th century. This is also a "must see" while in Lafayette.

No visit to southern Louisiana would be complete without an excursion into the wilds of the Atchafalaya River Basin. McGee's Landing offers a two-hour "swamp tour" of the watery domain of alligators, nutria, minks, opossums, otters, and muskrats. Moss-covered oak trees create an eerie setting for a Stephen King novel, while an amazing variety of plants, such as lotus pads and wild hibiscus, cover large areas of surface water. Homegrown tour guides keep visitors laughing throughout the tour with thickly accented "Boudreau and Thibodeau" jokes.

The evening is reserved for dinner and dancing at Randol's Cajun Restaurant and

Dance Hall. The menu, complete with offerings of crawfish and dirty rice, is just above average. The lively chank-a-chank music is the reason to search out Randol's. As soon as the band strikes up, entire families get out on the dance floor—babies in mothers' arms, grandparents with grandchildren. They dance waltzes and a fast Cajun two-step that makes one nearly dizzy just to watch. My students love Randol's. They are always disappointed when closing time comes.

St. Martinville is a delightful, lazy little town steeped in Acadian history. It was once known as "*Le Petit Paris*" because it served as a refuge for French aristocrats fleeing the Revolution's Reign of Terror. It eventually became a cultural haven and still maintains a distinctive charm.

Day three of our tour starts in St. Martinville, with a *beignet* and *café au lait* breakfast at La Place d'Evangeline. La Place, also known as the Old Castillo House, is a restored bed and breakfast inn dating from the 1790's. The *café au lait* here is thick and sweet. And the *beignets* are unlike those found at the Café du monde in New Orleans. These mouth-watering creations are oblong and are eaten like pancakes, drowned in cane syrup.

After breakfast, tour the "mother church of the Acadians," St. Martin de Tours. The original church also dates from the late 1700's. Just outside the church is a statue of Evangeline, the heroine of Longfellow's immortal poem of two lovers (Emmeline Labiche and Louis Arceneaux), separated during their cruel exile from Nova Scotia.

Walk just a few steps to the Bayou Teche (pronounced TESHE) and the famed Evangeline Oak. According to legend, Emmeline's boat docked just under the large oak, marking the end of her long journey from Nova Scotia and the even longer search for her lost lover.

If you are lucky, you might see the Romero brothers at this spot. The septuagenarian pair spends many a morning singing old Cajun ballads to passersby. They have been featured in many French magazines and are much loved by the local population.

Also make sure to include the Petit Paris Museum located next to St. Martin's Church. It houses Mardi Gras costumes and an unusual display of vestments depicting a famous local 1870 wedding.

After lunch, New Iberia is the next destination of the day's calendar. Shadows-on-the-Teche is the 1834 plantation home of the David Weeks family. Every detail of the original floor plan and original furnishings has been painstakingly restored. It is now a museum managed by the National Trust. Tours are given daily.

After Shadows, we proceed to Avery Island, the home of the world-famous McIlhenny Tabasco Sauce. First, tour the Tabasco factory. While tourists can't get too close to the factory floor (one is obliged to walk along an elevated, glassed-in area above the production floor), there is a well-stocked gift shop sporting a wide array of Tabasco products.

Next, visit the extensive jungle Gardens which comprise 250 acres of beautiful sculpted gardens, exotic trees, and ponds. It is also the home of "Bird City," a large egret rookery providing shelter to as many as 20,000 white egrets and other migratory water birds.

After soaking up the beauty of Avery Island, head northeast 140 miles to New Orleans, where you spend the next two nights.

Day Four

New Orleans has long been appreciated for jazz, cuisine, architecture, and its boisterous Mardi Gras festivals. It is a wonderful city to be discovered at any time of the year.

Of course, it is possible to spend several full days of sight-seeing in New Orleans. Fodor's New Orleans Guide offers hundreds of possibilities. However, to contain tour costs, I choose to spend only one full day and two evenings in the city. In addition, for security reasons (mainly in not making it too convenient for students to linger in the French Quarter until early morning hours), I choose a hotel located in the suburbs, rather than in the city center. I have found the Holiday Inn of Metairie to be a convenient choice for lodging. This hotel offers regular shuttle service to the Jax Brewery until midnight.

I give students a free afternoon in New Orleans after a morning historical tour of the French Quarter. This free tour is provided by the National Park Service (Jean LaFitte National Park) and led by park rangers.

Students report that in addition to Preservation Hall, Le Café du monde and the Garden District cemeteries, one of their favorite sites in New Orleans is across the Mississippi River at Algiers Point. Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World is the home of the major builder-designer of New Orleans Mardi Gras floats. Tours must be booked in advance, and they are well worth it. Explore the warehouses of finished and under construction floats and try on elaborate costume headpieces for fun. There is also a large gift shop with souvenirs.

Our day in New Orleans is capped with a Mississippi River dinner cruise on the Steamboat Natchez. The Natchez is an authentic sternwheeler steamboat. Dinner is served buffet style. The Dukes of Dixieland

Jazz Band entertain guests the duration of the two-hour tour. After dinner, spend the remainder of the evening on the outdoor decks taking in the great views of the river and New Orleans skyline or watching the riverboat's huge paddle-wheel beat up froth. This outing is the most expensive of the five-day tour and runs approximately \$42.50 per person, but group rates are available, and it is worth every penny.

Day Five

This is our last tour day. Due to the eight-hour drive from New Orleans to Dallas, the day begins with a 6:30 a.m. hotel departure. Our route is northwest along the old River Road, toward Baton Rouge, to the famed Oak Alley Plantation.

Oak Alley is a grand antebellum home built in 1839. Home tours are conducted for a modest fee. However, the real stars of Oak Alley are the 28 enormous, gnarled oak trees leading from the house to the banks of the Mississippi. These 300-year-old giants are breathtaking in their ensemble.

Next, follow the River Road north for lunch and a tour of Nottaway Plantation (approximately one hour and fifteen minutes). The Nottaway, also known as White Castle, is one of the largest plantation homes west of the Mississippi. It boasts 64 rooms and 53,000 total square feet.

Nottaway has been lovingly restored to its original grandeur. Guests may spend the night, have lunch in the highly rated dining hall on the grounds, or simply take a home tour. If possible, stay for lunch. The food is excellent. Service and presentation are equally elegant. There is also a lovely gift shop where you can purchase the book *The White Castle of Louisiana*, written by one of the Randolph daughters.

If time allows, plan to visit the Destrehan Plantation and the "steamboat gothic" San Francisco House. They are additional architectural jewels sprinkled along the Old River Road.

There is really no more perfect time to start planning a tour of French-speaking Louisiana. An added bonus for French teachers is *la Francofête 1999*, a yearlong celebration marking 300 years of French culture in Louisiana. *La Francofête* is a huge tourism initiative coordinating a network of 400 festivals and special events. To obtain a list of *Francofête* activities, call 1 (800) 870-4959 or (318) 262-1642.

Laissez rouler les bons temps en découvrant les bijoux de la belle Louisiane!

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Sources

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WWW resources

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