

Traveling with Jewish Taste® New Orleans: Still “The Big Easy”

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



New Orleans is at the apex of the news for the second time in five years and, again not for happy reasons. But, if you belong to any number of professional or volunteer organizations, you probably will see that many are holding meetings here.

While “The Big Easy” has always been a great tourist draw, much recent interest in heading to the city is to bolster the economy – and the morale – of its residents. Your conference organizers may even hand you a hammer at some point to help in reconstruction efforts.

Television sets today are large enough to give the viewer a wide angle of set designs, but they are not nearly big enough to render a realistic perspective on the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina. Even if you are not scheduled to work on rebuilding, you may want to see

it for yourself.

“Ninth Ward Rebirth Bike Tours” will take you right into the neighborhood and, according to their website, “You’ll meet the people who survived, the people who



A ‘Garden District’ mansion



The ‘princess’ of the 2010 ‘Krewe du Jieux’

could not leave because this unique neighborhood was home. These are the people who are rebuilding their neighborhood, and making it better than it was before, because their love of the ‘Lower Ninth’ won’t allow them not to.”

Jews took part in building the city of New Orleans in the early years. While French colonial law banned Jews from Louisiana before any had even arrived, that decree was rarely, if ever, enforced against the few Jews who did manage to trickle into town in the mid-1700s. The

Spaniards, however, after wresting control in the late eighteenth century, did manage to expel successful Jewish merchants.

Despite these hurdles, the Jewish community developed into a small but important population in New Orleans. Arguably the most famous of the city’s Jews was philanthropist Judah Touro (1775-1854), a wealthy merchant and son of Isaac Touro of Newport fame. The recipients of his largesse included the congregation that became Touro Synagogue and the Touro Infirmary – a major hospital still in operation today.

Among other prominent legacies of early area Jews are Delgado Community College, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and Woldenberg Park.

Jews haven’t encountered too much in the way of anti-Semitism since that time, although they are still excluded from the elite Mardi Gras “krewes” (organized revelers) and other social organizations – despite their leadership in business and community organizations. So, Jews have joined less exclusive krewes, and even established their own, the “Krewe du Jieux.” (I know, Mardi Gras is a Catholic holiday. Go figure.)

The New Orleans Jewish population now counts about 12,000 members who



The Louisiana Superdome

support seven synagogues, two Chabad houses, and one mikveh. The area boasts two JCC campuses that host community events such as an annual “People of the Book” festival and a Jewish film festival. A Jewish day school is housed on the same campus as the New Orleans Jewish Federation and one of the two JCCs.

The highlight for me of any visit to New Orleans is the Garden District. A short ride on one of the iconic streetcars will bring you from noisy and crowded downtown to an oasis of beauty, brimming with homes boasting Southern charm.

I have experienced this pleasure both with and without tour guides, and I would definitely recommend signing on with an organized group. Our leader shepherded us through this beautiful neighborhood and filled us in on all the local history – as well as some juicy gossip. The stately homes and magnificent gardens are a delight for all the senses. Walking languidly through the dense heat and humidity, suffused in the intoxicating perfume of tropical flowers and foliage, I half expected to see Tennessee Williams himself step off “the Desire” streetcar and stroll around the corner with Blanche DuBois on his arm.

And, while burial grounds may not be your cup of tea, the Lafayette Cemetery in the Garden District is a fascinating stop along the way.

Of course, while in New Orleans, you simply must visit the French Quarter and hear some great music. The famous jazz mecca “Preservation Hall” is right there



Philanthropist Judah Touro

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Absolutely Fabulous Sweet Potato Soup

This soup is hearty and delicious, with a nice peppery, Cajun kick. Be prepared to distribute this recipe to your dinner guests; they *will* ask for it!



Ingredients:

4 yams
6 tablespoons butter or substitute
1 tablespoon minced garlic
6 cups vegetable broth
1 large onion, cut into 1-inch pieces
1/2 cabbage, cut into 1-inch pieces
3 peeled parsnips, cut into 1/2 inch pieces
1 10-ounce bag fresh spinach
1 jalapeno pepper, seeds removed and diced (use gloves!)

Seasoning Mix:

2-1/2 teaspoons salt
1-1/2 teaspoons paprika
1 teaspoon dill weed
1 tablespoon chili powder
3/4 teaspoon ground pepper
3/4 teaspoon sage
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon white pepper

Preparation:

- Combine seasoning ingredients in a small bowl.
- Microwave yams for about 12 minutes, or until soft. Slice them open and let cool before scooping out the flesh.
- Place butter in a heavy stock pot over medium-low heat. As soon as butter sizzles, add sweet potatoes, garlic, and 2 tablespoons of the seasoning mix.*
- Cook 8 minutes, stirring frequently. Add 4 cups of the stock and continue to cook, stirring frequently until the mixture thickens, about 6 minutes.
- Add 2 more cups of the stock and continue to cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is thick and bubbling, about 8 minutes.
- Add the onion, cabbage, parsnips, spinach, and jalapeños. Stir and scrape the bottom well, then reduce the heat to low. Cover and simmer, stirring and scraping every few minutes, until the parsnips are soft, about 20 minutes. Add the remaining 1/2 cup of the stock if necessary.
- Remove from heat and serve immediately.

* You can reserve the extra spice mixture for another time.

Serves 8-10

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in the Vieux Carré, New Orleans' oldest neighborhood.

Undamaged by Katrina, 'the Quarter' has its own carnival-like atmosphere every day. Even early in the morning you will see people walking the streets – not sipping coffee, but gulping beer!

But, if you want your morning java, make sure to go to Café du Monde. You can enjoy chicory flavored coffee and fresh beignets while watching the vast array of people going by.

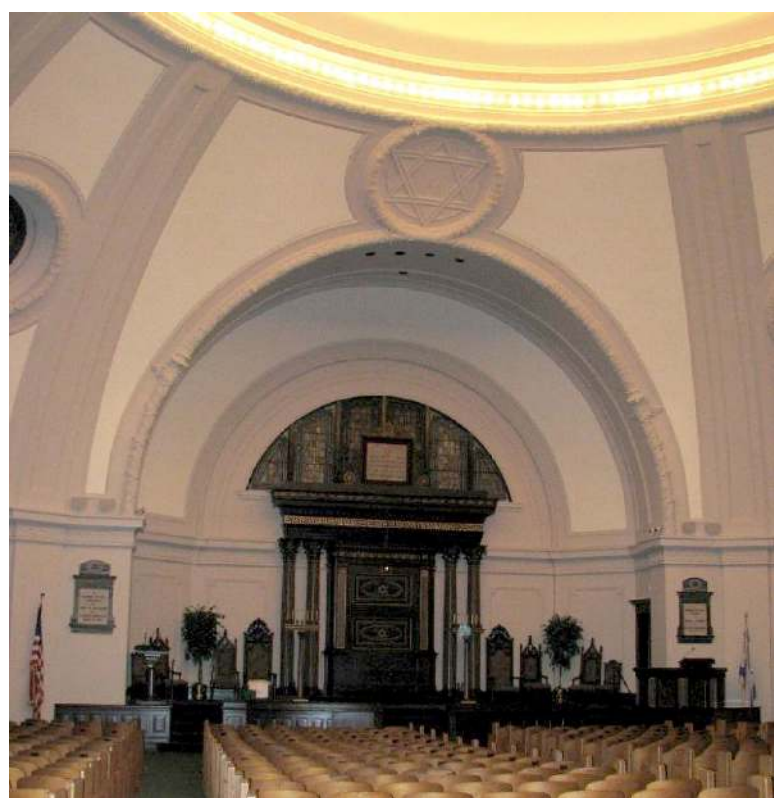
A short walk from the French Quarter is the Louisiana Superdome, home to both the NFL's New Orleans Saints and the



Jazz is the soul of 'Preservation Hall'



'Whisperings of Love' (1889), William Adolphe Bouguereau, at 'The Museum of Art'



Inside Touro Synagogue



Detail of the 'Monument to the Immigrant' in Woldenberg Park

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Tulane University football team. The Superdome is the largest fixed domed structure in the world, its steel frame covering a thirteen-acre expanse under a 273-foot dome. The tour of the facility is amazing.

After all the walking you will be hungry and thirsty. While New Orleans is renowned for its cuisine, it is definitely not the easiest place for the tourist who keeps kosher. Only two kosher restaurants remain since Katrina. Both are located in Metairie, about 20 minutes from the French Quarter.

There you can dine on kosher

versions of local specialties, including jambalaya, etoufee, and gumbo. I found, to my great delight, that asking for a vegetarian dish at the regular restaurants did reap some very delicious dinners.

An important reminder for those planning a visit...bring an umbrella. Rain comes suddenly, heavily, and often.

Carol Goodman Kaufman, an organizational psychologist and writer, is the author of Sins of Omission: The Jewish Community's Reaction to Domestic Violence (Westview Press, 2003). She serves on the National Board

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