

TWO TONES

Words STEVE MADGWICK & MEGAN ARKINSTALL

There's two sides to every story, right? Two IT staffers share their tales of a few days spent in the cultural melting pot that is The Big Easy.

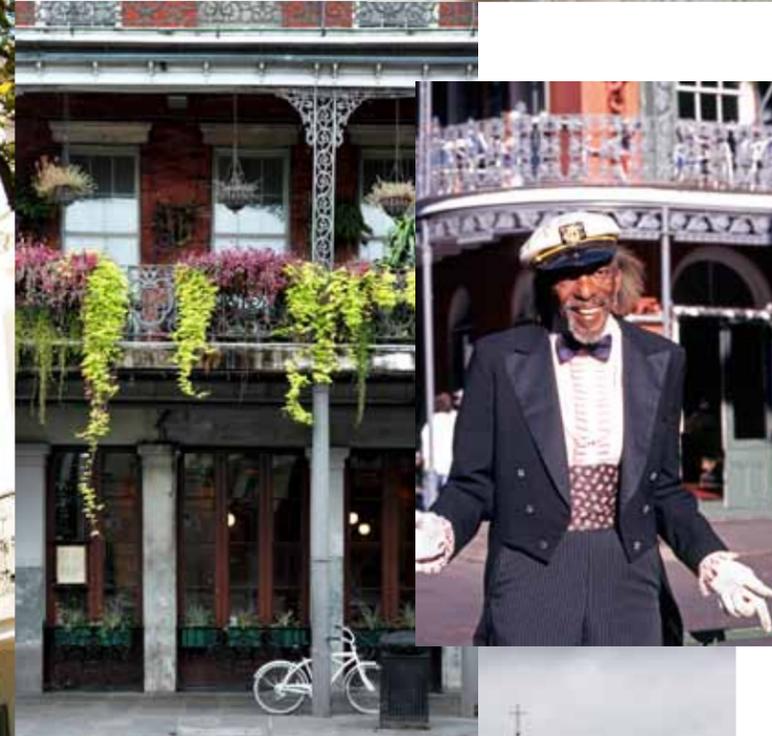


PHOTOGRAPHY CEDRIC ANGELES

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Preservation Hall's soulful big band, and its age-worn chairs and walls.



OPPOSITE: *The leafy Garden District. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A sweet, sugary beignet is a local delicacy; The streets are filled with colourful characters; A horse and buggy waits out the front of Jackson Square; Creole townhouses line the historic French Quarter.*



HE SAID... *By Steve Madgwick*

SATURDAY

10:35AM – *A novel idea?*

Am I the biggest dork in The Big Easy right now? Of all the salaciousness on tap here, I choose to wander through the French Quarter's crannies on, get this, a personal literary walking tour.

Turns out that ghosts of the 20th century's most enlightened writers, the likes of Capote and Faulkner, are 100 per cent cooler (and actually played harder) than the gaggles of bar-hopping college kids I wade through. Every bar and hotel here from last century and beyond claims a link to one or more of these tantalisingly dangerous minds, who fled conservative Middle America to the refuge of Dixieland's bohemia. Including, of course, Mr I've-Been-Everywhere-Man Hemingway.

"Tennessee Williams lived right here while penning *A Streetcar Named Desire*," says my bookish guide. "And he drank over there. And probably over there and there too."

12:30PM – *Fine dining Creole-style*

Sounds like fists are about to fly inside the kitchen. Then, baritone laughter: it's just Antoine's Restaurant's chef and my white-jacketed, bow-tie-adorned waiter trash-talking.

Straight-faced, Sterling takes my order, just like he has for Katherine Hepburn, Brad and Angelina, multiple presidents, and a pope before me, in his 43 years at New Orleans' oldest restaurant (circa 1840). Antoine's capacious Alsatian-styled annex room wears a mosaic of Louisiana Old Money nostalgia on its walls. Lit by muted chandelier light, it radiates a stately home ambience.

The saucy specialty, Oysters Rockefeller (so named because it is as rich as the Rockefellers), forces me to unleash my belt a notch. The signature Baked Alaska, the size of an infant seal, notches up another notch. Antoine's butter-worshipping Creole fare is more compatible with a Lyonnais winter's evening than this Mississippi-side swelter.

3:45PM – *Spiritual encounters*

Tough choice: blessed chicken feet, a Guatemalan worry doll or an eclipse ritual bath kit? A wall full of evil-eye trinkets has me under its spell, but I leave Marie Laveau's House Of Voodoo empty-handed, in search of another spiritual experience that New Orleans embraces.

I sit in Old Absinthe Bar on seats that (the bar claims) have been warmed by Wilde, Twain, Roosevelt, Sinatra and Minelli. I choose to believe; as Nobel Prize laureate William Faulkner once said, "in New Orleans, imagination takes precedence over fact."

The gypsy-blooded, pirate-costumed barmaid preps the evil green liquor for me. The first evaporates. I accidentally order a second.

8PM – *Jazz's Bethlehem*

Preservation Hall resembles a dilapidated haunted house at a long abandoned amusement park: exposed beams (and wires), rough bench seats, and so stuffy that a fan on full blast only just stops me fainting.

A few African-American gentlemen stroll onto the stage, the way only gentlemen do. The brass section smokes; the saxes duel. The saints have never marched in like they march in tonight; I shake the hands of these master musicians on my way out of jazz's Bethlehem. >>



9:35PM – Frighteningly fast food

The line doglegs around the block, three wide. “Waitress available sometimes” teases a scarlet-red neon sign. Everyone shouts to be heard; one of Acme Oyster House’s waitresses shouts specials at me.

Almost too quickly a New Orleans Medley and (fried) Oysters Remoulade frisbees onto the checkerboard tablecloth. The intensity of the jambalaya makes my blush blush, while the red beans and rice transcend their beige moniker; I love the poppy texture.

I try the voluptuous seafood gumbo, but it’s too late to appreciate its subtleties – a Cajun inferno rages on my palette. Fittingly, the “coldest beer in the world” is on hand.

SUNDAY

9:35AM – Breakfast battles lost

Mother’s serves “food to make you wheeze with pleasure,” says a friend, and the quintessential television ode to gluttony, Man v. Food, concurs.

I’ve dreamt of a Po’ Boy at this place for weeks, but like-minded, early-rising sheeple sabotage me: the block-long queue is cemented to the spot (and I don’t have a couple of hours to spare). I scowl away.

Plan B? A sugar-logged beignet (deep-fried choux pastry) at another institution, Cafe Du Monde. But the line here dwarves the one at Mother’s, so I settle for nearby non-institution (and line-free) Famous Beignets & Coffee. The naughty pastry, which The Heart Foundation would deem the Antichrist, gets my tick of approval.

11:45AM – Meanwhile, in the swamp

Mental note: study the Swamp Tour brochure more closely next time. My fellow Cajun Encounters passengers in the oversized tinny introduce themselves by their city, state and age. They talk about the Honey Island Swamp Monster (and, no, that’s not an alligator).

On the city’s outskirts, Honey Island Swamp is alive: moss-clothed cyprus trees, absorbed egrets, unbelievably electric-blue dragonflies. The humidity is Mekong Delta-esque.

The outboard’s hum acts as mechanical Pavlovian dinner bell for eight-foot Carlos. Is it OK to feed a wild alligator hotdogs and marshmallows every day? No one on board seems to have an issue with it – and neither does Carlos... Deep sigh.

4:30PM – In her shadow

On the way back to town, I gape at still abandoned houses and ghostly car dealerships within splashing distance of a massive levy. We drive over a short, but tall bridge; the flood peaked 16-foot above it, says the driver. Katrina hasn’t entirely left the building yet, even a decade on.

8:45PM – It had to happen

I plunge into the torrent of Bourbon Street’s humanity: bead-draped pilgrims flood the street’s 13 blocks of strip clubs and bars with Mardi Gras intensity (even though it’s just another night here). Many are armed with fluoro-green hand grenades (frozen cocktails, that is).

The strip’s elegant late-Spanish architecture feels like an innocent bystander to all this, while the homeless and plastic surgeons party side by side in its shadows. Music belts out from speakeasies and street swing bands combine to continue the ceaseless cacophony.

Bourbon Street is no longer the place for jazz bars (Frenchman Street is). It’s a requiem for revelry; like New Year’s Eve the day before the apocalypse. But I’ll do another lap, just to make sure. >>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
By day Bourbon Street’s stunning architecture takes centre stage; Breakfast at Brennan’s is a local tradition; Bourbon Street buzzes with revellers at night; Crawfish Boil, a local delicacy. OPPOSITE: Performers keep the streets of New Orleans alive.



PHOTOGRAPHY CEDRIC ANGELES

SHE SAID... By Megan Arkinstall

SUNDAY

10AM – Local flair

From the window of our car, I spot a portly man strutting down the street in a pink wig, black vest, leotard, fishnet stockings, platform boots, and heart-shaped sunglasses.

“Welcome to N’Awlins!” our driver says in a slow Southern drawl.

10:30AM – Breakfast of legends

“Is that who I think it is!?” I ask, discreetly (read: embarrassingly) glancing my eyes to the left to see if the pink-haired figure in oversized sunglasses is the one and only Cyndi Lauper.

We’re having breakfast at Brennan’s – a New Orleans institution since 1946 – among friends... and celebs, as it turns out. It’s Sunday and the place is packed with diners. More than a meal, this local tradition sees friends spending hours over breakfast and a few bottles of wine. We choose a Bloody Mary instead.

A waiter wheels a trolley to our table for the finale: the restaurant’s most famous dish, Bananas Foster. Created in the 1950s, the devilishly sweet dessert made of bananas, sugar, cinnamon, banana liqueur and aged rum is flambéed at our table; flames seemingly lick the ornamental ceiling. We’re told the restaurant sets alight more than 15,000 kilograms of bananas each year. That is, literally, bananas, I muse.

12:10PM – I’ll have one to go

“Why should conviviality be confined to a bar?” our tour guide Elizabeth Pearce asks, waving a cocktail in the air. We all say cheers to that with a St Charles Hotel Punch.

We’re on a Drink & Learn walking tour: a crash course on the city’s history with the help of some stiff drinks that complement the stories we are told. Elizabeth is an expert on the topic, given her rather unique credentials: cocktail historian.

A few cocktails and centuries later, our final drink begins with the shortage of whiskey during WWII. In order to be able to purchase just one case of this liquid gold, local bar owners were forced to also purchase 50 cases of rum. And so, with a surplus of rum, local publican Pat O’Brien created the Hurricane. Some cheaper versions “taste like chemicals and disappointment,” Elizabeth warns. This one does not, so I pour the rest in a to-go cup for the road. This is the Big Easy y’all: every hour is happy hour.

Before we part ways, Elizabeth hands me a copy of her book *The French Quarter Drinking Companion* in which she’s written: “To Megan, on your trip to New Orleans, a city you can’t forget, full of nights you may not remember.” I consider reforming.

6PM – The secret garden

We’re in the well-heeled Garden District at another cornerstone restaurant, Commander’s Palace, which has been serving haute Creole cuisine since 1893. This palatial blue and white Victorian mansion was formerly only patronised by distinguished local families. Though we’re not local, nor (dare I say it) distinguished, our dolled-up party is escorted through a labyrinth of rooms to a table by a large window overlooking a whimsical oak tree-filled courtyard.

The jackets-preferred dress code may rub some casual Joes up the wrong way, but the waistcoated, bow-tied staff who don’t miss a beat and serve our artfully prepared meals in synchrony more than justify it.

When I ask for directions to the (very lovely) bathroom, I am escorted arm-in-arm by my waiter as though we’re headed to a ball. I thank him, hoping he doesn’t wait to escort me back, but he politely bids me adieu.

9PM – A taste of debauchery

Post-dinner, we slingshot ourselves far from the leafy streets of the Garden District to the seedy surrounds of Bourbon Street: where good-time gals and guys stagger from bar to bar with to-go cups full of Sazerac and whatever else they can get their hands on.

One local described Bourbon Street to me as “beautifully vulgar”. To me, it’s Cavill Avenue circa 2002. But I give in, because it would be blasphemous not to, and perch myself on a chair at the merry-go-round Carousel Bar and order a Vieux Carré. Or two. I stop myself at that, not wanting Elizabeth’s parting words to ring true.

MONDAY

9AM – Do-not miss this

When in New Orleans, do as the every-man-and-his-dog do; we are told Cafe du Monde is the place to do it. Established in 1862 in New Orleans French Market, this cafe has perfected the melt-in-your-mouth recipe of beignets.

We arrive to find a line-up as long as the Mississippi and a cafe bursting with people with powdered sugar on their lips. We don’t give up easily and eventually squeeze in among the sweet-toothed crowd. After my first bite, I am hooked. Worth the wait? *Oui*.

10AM – Lessons from Big Kev

More food!? I don’t think I can do it. But Kevin Bolton has other ideas. “They call it fat in Louisiana, but this is credibility,” he says. “We’ll eat anything that walks, crawls, swims or flies. A gator might come out fighting but then it says, oh back up, back up, they’re gonna eat us!”

At six-foot-nine and almost 200 kilograms, his credibility is off the Richter. We’re at the New Orleans School of Cooking, and Big Kev is showing us how to make some of the city’s most famous dishes. I’m not sure how much I’m learning, but I belly-laugh my way through it and leave with a belly full of flavour-bursting jambalaya.

3:30PM – The party business

Mardi Gras is a serious business here. Locals and visitors alike spend weeks, nay months, poring over costume ideas and planning celebrations for the 12-day festival in which there are more than 60 parades through the city. We’re not here for the actual event, (I can only imagine how crazy that time would be) so we head to Mardi Gras World, to see the big and brash floats and glitzy costumes from years past and to watch artisans work on floats for next year.

10PM – Facing the music

I’m sitting cross-legged on the floor in Preservation Hall. The building (circa 1750) with its discoloured façade, crumbling plaster and creaky floorboards transports me to yesteryear when jazz reigned supreme.

I’m so close to the band that I have to jolt my head back a few times to avoid clashing with the trombone. The soulful player’s eyes are closed; he’s moving absorbedly to the syncopated rhythms, and probably can’t even see me sitting inches from a brassy blow.

Before the final song, the main vocalist cries out to the crowd: “Have you been to church lately?” A few hesitant murmurs ensue. “Well y’all going tonight!” he cries. Amen! *IT*

NEW ORLEANS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sazerac, a specialty; Throwing beads from balconies is a Mardi Gras tradition; The city has the world’s oldest continuously operating streetcar; French Quarter pavements; A Spanish moss tree.



ILLUSTRATION CLARE OWEN (MAP)

DETAILS

GETTING THERE

He flew Air New Zealand which has daily flights via Houston (airnewzealand.co.nz). She flew Qantas which has daily flights via Dallas (qantas.com.au).

STAYING THERE

He stayed at The Roosevelt New Orleans, an historic 1893 hotel just a short walk from the French Quarter, with a fabulous rooftop bar and pool. From \$268 a night; therooseveltneworleans.com

She stayed at the modern, recently renovated Le Meridien New Orleans, a short walk from the Mississippi River and town. From \$224 a night; lemeridienneworleanshotel.com

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