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Planning Your Trip to New Orleans

This chapter will give you the information to make informed plans about your New Orleans trip and help point you toward some additional resources.

1 Visitor Information

New Orleans is a city in flux and is likely to remain that way for a long time. In theory, everything will only get better as time passes, but in reality, all manner of things can change, especially if the economy does not improve. Accordingly, for the most recent information, be it restaurant status, museum operating hours, new and accurate phone numbers, and pretty much just about anything you can think of, it's worth making phone calls or sending e-mails asking relevant questions in advance of your trip.

Even a seasoned traveler should consider writing or calling ahead to the **New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 2020 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ **800/672-6124** or 504/566-5011; **www.neworleanscvb.com**). The staff is extremely friendly and helpful, and you should be able to get any information you can't find in this book from them. Their site offers an "Open for Business" link that lists many local businesses, including hotels, restaurants, attractions, and more, and gives a post-storm status for each. For each establishment, click on "More Information" and then "Rebuilding Status" to learn about the damage (or lack thereof) and what, if anything, remains to be done and when the business in question will reopen, if it has not already.

For further information, **www.nola.com**, a terrific resource linked to the online edition of the *Times-Picayune* (which operates it, though it is more than just the newspaper), includes restaurant listings, entertainment guides, much Katrina dialogue, the 24-hour Bourbocam (trained on the action of New Orleans's most active street), and more. Also, local food writer Tom Fitzmorris is keeping

an exhaustive list of reopened restaurants at www.nomenu.com/RestaurantsOpen.html.

Another source of information is the **New Orleans Multicultural Tourism Network**, 2020 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 800/725-5652 or 504/523-5652; www.soulofneworleans.com); you may be particularly interested in their self-directed tours of African-American landmarks.

2 Money

Not surprisingly, prices are flopping every which way these days as local businesses try to get themselves righted again. Even once things stabilize, expect prices for accommodations to skyrocket during major events and festivals (see “Planning a Visit for Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest,” later in this chapter). New Orleans generally is quite popular in the fall during what was the convention season, as it ideally will become again. The heat and humidity of the summer months (July–Aug) keep tourism in the city to its yearly low, so if the weather doesn’t bother you, you can find some incredible hotel bargains, though even at other times these days, if a hotel is feeling a paucity of tourists, you can get some good deals.

ATMs Almost all New Orleans ATMs are linked to a national network that most likely includes your bank at home. **Cirrus** (☎ 800/424-7787; www.mastercard.com) and **PLUS** (☎ 800/843-7587; www.visa.com) are the two most popular networks.

Some centrally located ATMs in New Orleans are at the **First National Bank of Commerce**, 240 Royal St.; **Hibernia National Bank**, 701 Poydras St.; and **Whitney National Bank**, 228 St. Charles Ave. There are now ATMs all over the French Quarter, a big change from some years ago when there was just one.

Expect to pay a \$3 or more service charge each time you withdraw money from an ATM in addition to what your home bank charges.

3 When to Go

This used to be a pretty easy answer to give; we’d say, with the possible exception of July and August (unless you happen to thrive on heat and humidity), just about any time is the right time to go to New Orleans. Now? We still say that—if we haven’t made it clear by now, the city needs you, so go, already—though we add a whole lot of qualifiers having to do with ongoing problems regarding basic

infrastructure issues, many of which should be resolved by the time you read this.

But let's pretend the main problems are behind the city, even if years of reconstruction are ahead of it, and the old guidelines are back in place. Mardi Gras is, of course, the time of year when it's hardest to get a hotel room, but it can also be difficult during the various music festivals throughout the year, especially during Jazz Fest (see "Planning a Visit for Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest," later in this chapter). It's important to know what's going on when; the city's landscape can change dramatically depending on what festival or convention is happening, and prices can also reflect that. The best time of year, in our opinion, is December, before and during Christmas. The town is gussied up with decorations, there are all kinds of seasonal special events, the weather is nice—but for some reason, tourists become scarce. Hotels, eager to lure any business, lower their rates dramatically, and most restaurants are so empty that you can walk in just about anywhere without a reservation. Take advantage of it.

THE WEATHER

The average mean temperature in New Orleans is an inviting 70°F (21°C), but it can drop or rise considerably in a single day. (We've experienced 40°F/4°C and rain one day, 80°F/27°C and humidity the next.) Conditions depend primarily on two things: whether it rains and whether there is direct sunlight or cloud cover. Rain can provide slight and temporary relief on a hot day; for the most part, it hits in sudden (and sometimes dramatically heavy) showers, which disappear as quickly as they arrived. Anytime the sun shines unimpeded, it gets much warmer. The region's high humidity can make even mild warms and colds feel intense. Still, the city's semi-tropical climate is part of its appeal—a slight bit of moistness makes the air come sensually alive.

It will be pleasant at almost any time of year except July and August, which can be exceptionally hot and muggy (though not necessarily; you might well have perfectly lovely, balmy weather). If you do come during those months, you'll quickly learn to follow the natives' example, staying out of the noonday sun and ducking from one air-conditioned building to another. Winter is very mild by American standards but is punctuated by an occasional cold snap, when the mercury can drop below the freezing point.

In the dead of summer, T-shirts and shorts are absolutely acceptable everywhere except the finest restaurants. In the spring and fall,

something a little warmer is in order; in the winter, you should plan to carry a lightweight coat or jacket. Umbrellas and cheap rain jackets are available everywhere for those tourists who inevitably get caught in a sudden, unexpected downpour.

And in case you were wondering, hurricane season is from June 1 to November 1.

New Orleans Average Temperatures & Rainfall

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
High (°F)	61	64	71	78	84	89	90	90	87	80	71	64
High (°C)	16	18	22	26	29	32	32	32	31	27	22	18
Low (°F)	44	47	54	60	67	73	74	74	71	61	54	47
Low (°C)	7	8	12	16	19	23	23	23	22	16	12	8
Days of Rainfall	10	9	9	7	8	10	15	13	10	5	7	10

NEW ORLEANS CALENDAR OF EVENTS

For more information on **Mardi Gras**, **Jazz Fest**, and other major area events, see below. For general information, contact the **New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 2020 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 800/672-6124 or 504/566-5011; www.neworleanscvb.com).

January

Nokia Sugar Bowl Classic. First held in 1934, this is New Orleans's oldest yearly sporting occasion, and it will return to the city in 2007, after a massive renovation of the Superdome. The football game is the main event, but there are also tennis, swimming, basketball, sailing, running, and flag-football competitions. Fans tend to be really loud, really boisterous, and everywhere during the festivities. For information, contact Nokia Sugar Bowl, 1500 Sugar Bowl Dr., New Orleans, LA 70112 (☎ 404/221-2445; www.nokiasugarbowl.com). January 2.

February

Lundi Gras. An old tradition that has been revived in the last decade or so. Celebrations take place at Spanish Plaza. It's free, it's outdoors, and it features music (including a jazz competition) and the arrival of Rex at 6pm, marking the beginning of Mardi Gras. For more information, contact New Orleans Riverwalk Marketplace, 1 Poydras St., New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 504/522-1555). Monday before Mardi Gras (Feb 19, 2007).

Mardi Gras. The culmination of the 2-month-long carnival season, Mardi Gras is the big annual blowout, a citywide party that takes place on Fat Tuesday (the last day before Lent in the Christian calendar). The entire city stops working (sometimes days in advance!) and starts partying in the early morning, and the streets

are taken over by some overwhelming parades—which, these days, go through the Central Business District (CBD) instead of the French Quarter. Day before Ash Wednesday (in 2007, it'll be Feb 20). See later in this chapter for more details.

March

St. Patrick's Day Parades. There are two: One takes place in the French Quarter beginning at Molly's at the Market (1107 Decatur St.), and the other goes through the Irish Channel neighborhood following a route that begins at Jackson Avenue and Magazine Street, goes over to St. Charles Avenue, turns uptown to Louisiana Avenue, and returns to Jackson Avenue. The parades have the flavor of Mardi Gras, but instead of beads, watchers are pelted with cabbages, carrots, and other veggies. For information on the French Quarter parade, call **Molly's at the Market** (☎ 504/525-5169). The Irish Channel parade takes place in early March.

Black Heritage Festival. Honors the various African-American cultural contributions to New Orleans. Write or call the Black Heritage Foundation, 4535 S. Prieur St., New Orleans, LA 70125 (☎ 504/827-0112) for more info. March 15 to March 16.

St. Joseph's Day Parade. In addition to the parade, which takes place March 19, you may want to visit the altar devoted to St. Joseph at the American Italian Museum and Library, 537 S. Peters St. For more information, call ☎ 504/522-7294. March 17 to March 19.

Super Sunday. This is the annual Mardi Gras Indians showdown, which takes place on the Sunday following St. Joseph's Day.

Tennessee Williams New Orleans Literary Festival. A 5-day series celebrating New Orleans's rich literary heritage, it includes theatrical performances, readings, discussion panels, master classes, musical events, and literary walking tours dedicated to the playwright. By the way, the focus is not confined to Tennessee Williams. Events take place at venues throughout the city. For info, call ☎ 504/581-1144 or go to www.tennesseewilliams.net. Late March.

Spring Fiesta. The fiesta, which begins with the crowning of the Spring Fiesta queen, is more than half a century old and takes place throughout the city—from the Garden District to the French Quarter to Uptown and beyond. Historical and architectural tours of many of the city's private homes, courtyards, and plantation homes are offered in conjunction with the 5-day

event. For the schedule, call the Spring Fiesta Association (☎ 504/581-1367) or go to www.springfiesta.com. Last two weekends in March or early April.

April

The French Quarter Festival. For hard-core jazz fans, this is rapidly becoming an alternative to Jazz Fest, where actual jazz is becoming less and less prominent. It kicks off with a parade down Bourbon Street. Among other things, you can join people dancing in the streets, learn the history of jazz, visit historic homes, and take a ride on a riverboat. Many local restaurants set up booths in Jackson Square, so the eating is exceptionally good. Events are held all over the French Quarter. Call or write French Quarter Festivals, 400 N. Peters St., Suite 205, New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 504/522-5730; www.frenchquarterfestivals.org). Second to last weekend in April.

The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (Jazz Fest). A 10-day event that draws musicians, music fans, cooks, and craftspeople to celebrate music and life, Jazz Fest rivals Mardi Gras in popularity. Lodgings in the city tend to sell out up to a year ahead, so book early. Events take place at the Fair Grounds Race Course and various venues throughout the city. For information, call or write the **New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival**, 1205 N. Rampart St., New Orleans, LA 70116 (☎ 504/522-4786; www.nojazzfest.com). Usually held the last weekend in April and first weekend in May. Look for more information below.

The Crescent City Classic. This 10km (6-mile) road race, from Jackson Square to Audubon Park, brings an international field of top runners to the city. For more info, call or write the Classic, P.O. Box 13587, New Orleans, LA 70185 (☎ 504/861-8686; www.ccc10k.com). Saturday before Easter.

May

Greek Festival. Three days of Greek folk dancing, specialty foods, crafts, and music at the Holy Trinity Cathedral's Hellenic Cultural Center. For more information, call or write Holy Trinity Cathedral, 1200 Robert E. Lee Blvd., New Orleans, LA 70122 (☎ 504/282-0259; www.greekfestnola.com). Last weekend of May.

June

International Arts Festival. This 3-day gathering of calypso, reggae, and soca (a blend of soul and calypso) musicians is held in City Park and includes a heady helping of ethnic foods and arts and crafts. For more information, call or write Ernest Kelly,

P.O. Box 6156, New Orleans, LA 70174 (☎ 888/767-1317 or 504/367-1313). Second week of June.

July

Go Fourth on the River. The annual Fourth of July celebration begins in the morning at the riverfront and continues into the night, culminating into a spectacular fireworks display. For more information, go to www.go4thontheriver.com. July 4th.

September

Southern Decadence. All over the French Quarter, thousands of folks—drag queens, mostly—follow a secret parade route, making sure to stop into many bars along the way. People travel from far and wide to be a part of the festivities. There is only an informal organization associated with the festival, and it's hard to get anyone on the phone. For information, try the website www.southerndecadence.com or contact *Ambush* magazine (☎ 800/876-1484 or 504/522-8047). Labor Day weekend.

Festivals Acadiens. This is a series of happenings that celebrate Cajun music, food, crafts, and culture in and near Lafayette, Louisiana. (Most of the events are in Lafayette.) For more information, contact the **Lafayette Convention & Visitors Commission**, P.O. Box 52066, Lafayette, LA 70505 (☎ 800/346-1958 in the U.S., 800/543-5340 in Canada, or 337/232-3737; www.lafayettetravel.com). Third week of September.

Swamp Festival. Sponsored by the Audubon Institute, the Swamp Festival features long days of live swamp music performances (lots of good zydeco here) as well as hands-on contact with Louisiana swamp animals. Admission to the festival is free with zoo admission. For information, call or write the Audubon Institute, 6500 Magazine St., New Orleans, LA 70118 (☎ 504/861-2537; www.auduboninstitute.org). Last weekend in September and first weekend in October.

October

Art for Arts' Sake. The arts season begins with gallery openings throughout the city. Julia, Magazine, and Royal streets are where the action is. For more information, contact the Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 504/528-3800; www.cacno.org). Throughout the month.

Louisiana Jazz Awareness Month. The Louisiana Jazz Federation sponsors nightly concerts (some of which are free), television and radio specials, and lectures. For more information and a schedule, contact the Louisiana Music Commission (☎ 504/736-8605; www.louisianamusic.org). All month.

Gumbo Festival. This festival showcases one of the region's signature dishes and celebrates Cajun culture to boot. It's 3 days of gumbo-related events (including the presentation of the royal court of King and Miss Creole Gumbo) plus many hours of Cajun music. The festival is held in Bridge City, on the outskirts of New Orleans. For more information, contact the Gumbo Festival, P.O. Box 9069, Bridge City, LA 70096 (☎ 504/436-4712). October 9 to October 11.

New Orleans Film Festival. Canal Place Cinemas and other theaters throughout the city screen award-winning local and international films and host writers, actors, and directors over the course of a week. Admission prices range from \$6.25 to \$7.25. For dates, contact the New Orleans Film and Video Society, 843 Carondelet, New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 504/523-3818; www.neworleansfilmfest.com). Mid-month.

Halloween. Rivaling Mardi Gras in terms of costumes, Halloween is certainly celebrated more grandly here than in any other American city. After all, New Orleans has a way with ghosts. Past events have included Boo-at-the-Zoo (Oct 30 and 31) for children, costume parties (including a Monster Bash at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center), haunted houses (one of the best is run by the sheriff's department in City Park), the Anne Rice Vampire Lestat Extravaganza, and the Moonlight Witches Run. You can catch the ghoulish action all over the city—many museums get in on the fun with specially designed tours—but the French Quarter, as always, is the center of the Halloween-night universe. October 31.

November

Words & Music: A Literary Feast in New Orleans. A highly ambitious literary and music conference (originated in large part by the folks behind Faulkner House Books) offering 5 days worth of roundtable discussions with eminent authors (with varying connections to the city), original drama, poetry readings, master classes, plus great music and food. For authors seeking guidance and inspiration and for book lovers in general, call ☎ 504/586-1609 or visit their website at www.wordsandmusic.org for exact dates. November 2 to November 6, 2006.

December

Christmas New Orleans Style. New Orleans loves to celebrate, so it should be no surprise that it does Christmas really well. The town is decorated to a fare-thee-well, there is an evening of candlelight caroling in Jackson Square, bonfires line the levees along River Road on Christmas Eve (to guide Papa Noel, his sled drawn

by alligators, on his gift-delivering way), restaurants offer specially created multicourse Réveillon dinners, and hotels throughout the city offer “Papa Noel” rates. Why? Because despite all the fun and the generally nice (read: not hot and humid) weather, tourism goes *waaay* down at this time of year, and hotels are eager to lure you all in with cheaper rates. For information, contact French Quarter Festivals, 400 N. Peters St., Suite 205, New Orleans, LA 70130 (☎ 504/522-5730; www.frenchquarterfestivals.org). All month.

Celebration in the Oaks. Lights and lighted figures, designed to illustrate holiday themes, bedeck sections of City Park. The return of this annual display of winter wonderment, open for driving and walking tours, was a sign of post-Katrina recovery much welcomed by weary residents in need of some holiday cheer in 2005. Driving tours are \$12 per family car or van, and walking tours are \$5 per person. For information, contact New Orleans City Park, 1 Palm Dr., New Orleans, LA 70124 (☎ 504/483-9415; www.neworleanscitypark.com). Late November to early January.

New Year’s Eve. The countdown takes place in Jackson Square and is one of the country’s biggest and most reliable street parties. In the Southern equivalent of New York’s Times Square, revelers watch a lighted ball drop from the top of Jackson Brewery. December 31.

4 Planning a Visit for Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest

MARDI GRAS

There was a great deal of speculation about whether New Orleans should cancel Mardi Gras in 2006, whether it was appropriate to hold the traditional massive celebration at such a somber time. The opposition failed to take into account several things; since it is a holiday separate from any observation of it, one can no more “cancel” Mardi Gras than one can cancel Christmas. Secondly, Mardi Gras celebrations—that is, parades and parties—are all privately funded and operated, so it’s not really a city decision. And finally, for a town that tends to throw a party just because it’s a day with a “Y” in it, the response to any suggestions that official celebrations should be postponed for a year was “Fine. Then we will load up little red wagons with a bunch of beads, and walk down the streets and do it ourselves.”

It didn’t come to that after all. Six months to the virtual day after Katrina, Zulu and Rex paraded as usual, along with the other krewes

who march earlier. Some parades were a little shorter, but the beads and other throws were even more plentiful. The crowds may not have been as thick as usual (though conversely, Sunday night may have set a record for attendance) but that wasn't unexpected. More to the point, the spirit was immeasurably high, as New Orleanians and lovers of same alike turned out in their most glittery or satirical costumes, screaming for beads, engaging in their traditions, and generally exalting in a moment that not that long before seemed like it would never come again. They had survived, and they were filled with hope that their city would, too.

Forget sensational media reports that tend to focus on the salacious action. There is a lot more to Carnival than that, and it remains one of the most exciting times to visit. You can spend several days admiring and reveling in the traditions and never even venture into the frat-party atmosphere of Bourbon Street.

THE SEASON The date of Fat Tuesday is different each year, but Carnival season always starts on **Twelfth Night**, January 6, as much as 2 months before Mardi Gras. On that night, the Phunny Phorty Phellows kick off the season with a streetcar ride from Carrollton Avenue to Canal Street and back.

Two or three weeks before Mardi Gras, parades begin chugging through the streets with increasing frequency. There are plenty of parodies, such as the parade of the **Mystick Krewe of Barkus**. Barkus is, as you might guess, a krewe for pets that parades through the Quarter (some of the dogs get quite gussied up) and is a total hoot.

If you want to experience Mardi Gras but don't want to face the full force of craziness, consider coming for the weekend 10 days before Fat Tuesday (the season officially begins the Fri of this weekend). You can count on 10 to 15 parades during the weekend by lesser-known krewes such as Cleopatra, Pontchartrain, Sparta, and Camelot. The crowds are more manageable during this time.

The following weekend there are another 15 parades—the biggies. Everything's bigger: The parades are bigger; the crowds are bigger; the city has succumbed to Carnival fever. After a day of screaming for beads, you'll probably find yourself heading somewhere to get a drink or three. The French Quarter will be the center of late-night revelry; all of the larger bars will be packed. The last parade each day (on both weekends) usually ends around 9:30pm or later.

LUNDI GRAS In the 19th century, Rex's **King of Carnival** arrived downtown from the Mississippi River on this night, the Monday before Fat Tuesday. Over the years, the day gradually lost

its special significance, becoming just another day of parades. In the 1980s, however, Rex revived Lundi Gras, the old tradition of arriving on the Mississippi.

These days, festivities at the riverfront begin in the afternoon with lots of drink and live music leading up to the king's arrival at around 6pm. Down the levee a few hundred feet, at Wolfenberg Park, Zulu has its own Lundi Gras celebration with the king arriving at around 5pm. In 1999, for the first time, King Zulu met up with Rex in an impressive ceremony. That night, the **Krewe of Orpheus** holds their parade. It's one of the biggest and most popular parades, thanks to the generosity of the krewe's throws. It holds fast to old Mardi Gras traditions, including floats designed by master float creator Henri Schindler. For Mardi Gras 2000, venerable Proteus returned to parading, right before Orpheus.

Because Lent begins the following night at midnight, Monday is the final dusk-to-dawn night of Mardi Gras. A good portion of the city forgoes sleep so as not to waste the occasion—which only adds to the craziness.

MARDI GRAS The day begins early, starting with the two biggest parades, **Zulu** and **Rex**, which run back to back. Zulu starts near the Central Business District (CBD) at 8:30am; Rex starts Uptown at 10am. Generally, the best place to watch parades on St. Charles Avenue is between Napoleon and Jackson avenues, where the crowds are somewhat smaller and consist mostly of local families and college students.

It will be early afternoon when Rex spills into the CBD. Nearby at about this time, you can find some of the most elusive New Orleans figures, the **Mardi Gras Indians**. The “tribes” of New Orleans are small communities of African Americans and black Creoles (some of whom have Native American ancestors), mostly from the inner city. Their elaborate (and that's an understatement) beaded and feathered costumes, rivaling Bob Mackie Vegas head-dresses in outrageousness and size, are entirely made by hand.

After the parades, the action picks up in the Quarter. En route, you'll see that Mardi Gras is still very much a family tradition, with whole families dressing up in similar costumes. Marvel at how an entire city has shut down so that every citizen can join in the celebrations. Some people don't bother hitting the streets; instead, they hang out on their balconies watching the action below or have barbecues in their courtyards. If you are lucky and seem like the right sort, you might well get invited in.

In the Quarter, the frat-party action is largely confined to Bourbon Street. The more interesting activity is in the lower Quarter and the Frenchmen section of the Faubourg Marigny (just east of the Quarter), where the artists and gay community really know how to celebrate. The costumes are elaborate works of art. Although the people may be (okay, probably *will* be) drunk, they are boisterous and enthusiastic, not (for the most part) obnoxious.

PLANNING A VISIT DURING MARDI GRAS

LODGING You can't just drop in on Mardi Gras. If you do, you may find yourself sleeping in Jackson Square or on a sidewalk somewhere. Accommodations in the city and the nearby suburbs are booked solid, *so make your plans well ahead and book a room as early as possible*. Many people plan a year or more in advance. Prices are usually much higher during Mardi Gras, and most hotels and guesthouses impose minimum-stay requirements.

CLOTHING As with anything in New Orleans, you must join in if you want to have the best time. Simply being a spectator is not enough. And that means a **costume** and **mask**. Once you are masked and dressed up, you are automatically part of it all. (Tellingly, the Bourbon St. participants usually do not wear costumes.) As far as costumes go, you need not do anything fancy. If you've come unprepared, several shops in town specialize in Mardi Gras costumes and masks. Or just don an old suit and a cheap Halloween mask.

DINING If you want to eat at a restaurant during Mardi Gras, make reservations as early as possible. And pay very close attention to **parade routes**, because if there is one between you and your restaurant, you may not be able to cross the street, and you can kiss your dinner goodbye. This might work to your advantage; often restaurants have a high no-show rate during Mardi Gras for this reason, and so a well-timed drop-in may work.

PARKING Even though the huge crowds everywhere add to the general merriment, they also grind traffic to a halt all over town. So our admonition against renting a car is even stronger during Mardi Gras. *Don't drive*. Instead, relax and take a cab or walk. Remember, the fun is everywhere, so you don't really have to go anywhere. Parking along any parade route is not allowed 2 hours before and 2 hours after the parade. In addition, although you'll see people leaving their cars on the "neutral ground" (the median strip), it's illegal to park there, and chances are good that you'll be towed. Traffic in New Orleans is never worse than *in the hour after a parade*.

Tips For More Information . . .

You'll enjoy Mardi Gras more if you've done a little homework before your trip. You'll want to get your hands on the latest edition of *Arthur Hardy's Mardi Gras Guide*. Your best bet is to contact the magazine directly ((☎ 504/838-6111; www.mardigrasneworleans.com/arthur). This invaluable guide is sold all over town and is full of history, tips, and maps of the parade routes.

Also contact the **New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 2020 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70130 ((☎ 800/672-6124 or 504/566-5011), and ask for current Mardi Gras information.

SAFETY Many, many cops are out, making the walk from uptown to downtown safer than at other times of year, but, not surprisingly, the streets of New Orleans are a haven for pickpockets during Mardi Gras. Take precautions.

CAJUN MARDI GRAS

Mardi Gras in New Orleans sounds like too much for you, no matter how low-key you keep it? Consider driving out to Cajun country, where Mardi Gras traditions are just as strong but considerably more, errr, wholesome. **Lafayette**, the capital of French Acadiana, celebrates Carnival in a different manner, one that reflects the Cajun heritage and spirit. Three full days of activities lead up to Cajun Mardi Gras, making it second in size only to New Orleans's celebration. There's one *big* difference, though: The Cajuns open their final pageant and ball to the general public. Don your formal wear and join right in!

MASKED MEN AND A BIG GUMBO In the Cajun countryside that surrounds Lafayette, there's yet another form of Mardi Gras celebration, one tied to the rural lifestyle. Cajuns firmly believe in sharing, so you're welcome to come along. The celebration goes like this: Bands of masked men dressed in raggedy patchwork costumes (unlike the New Orleans costumes, which are heavy on glitter and shine) and peaked hats known as *capichons* set off on Mardi Gras morning on horseback, led by their *capitaine*. They ride from farm to farm, asking at each, "*Voulez-vous recevoir le Mardi Gras?*" ("Will you receive the Mardi Gras?") and dismounting as the invariable "*Oui*" comes in reply. Each farmyard then becomes a miniature

festival as the revelers *faire le macaque* (“make monkeyshines”) with song and dance, much drinking of beer, and other antics loosely labeled “entertainment.” As payment for their show, they demand, and get, “a fat little chicken to make a big gumbo” (or sometimes a bag of rice or other ingredients).

When each band has visited its allotted farmyards, they all head back to town where there is dancing in the streets, rowdy card games, storytelling, and the like until the wee hours, and you can be sure that all those fat little chickens go into the “*gumbo gros*” pot to make a very big gumbo indeed.

You can write or call ahead for particulars on both the urban and rural Mardi Gras celebrations. For the latter, the towns of **Eunice** and **Mamou** stage some of the most enjoyable celebrations. Contact the **Lafayette Convention & Visitors Commission**, P.O. Box 52066, Lafayette, LA 70505 (☎ **800/346-1958** in the U.S., 800/543-5340 in Canada, or 337/232-3737; www.lafayettettravel.com), for more information.

THE NEW ORLEANS JAZZ & HERITAGE FESTIVAL

People call it “Jazz Fest,” but the full name is the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, and the heritage is about as broad as it can get. Stand in the right place and, depending on which way the wind’s blowing, you can catch as many as 10 musical styles from several continents, smell the tantalizing aromas of different food offerings, and meet a United Nations–like spectrum of fellow fest goers all at once.

In the days immediately following Katrina, one of the things lovers of the city wondered about was the fate of Fest. It seems like a trivial thing to focus on, but it wasn’t. The music festival is one of the city’s two largest tourist draws (Mardi Gras being the other), and much of the local economy (particularly hotels and restaurants) relies on it. But it goes deeper than that; over more than 35 years, Jazz Fest has come to encompass everything the city has to offer, in terms of music, food, and culture. That, and it’s a hell of a party. When its return was announced (thanks in part to Shell Oil, the festival’s first corporate underwriters, a necessary step under the circumstances), it was seen as a sign that the city really would survive, after all.

While such headliners as Sting, Van Morrison, Dave Matthews, and Bob Dylan have drawn record crowds in recent years, serious Jazz Fest aficionados savor the lesser-known acts. They range from Mardi Gras Indians to old-time bluesmen who have never played

outside the Delta, from Dixieland to African artists making rare U.S. appearances to the top names in Cajun, zydeco, and, of course, jazz. The 2006 Fest had more big names—Matthews and Dylan were back, Bruce Springsteen appeared for the first time, as well as Paul Simon, Elvis Costello, and Keith Urban, among others. But the biggest worry was that local acts, the backbone of the festival and its *raison d'être*, would be in short supply. Many local musicians, from Fats Domino on down, lost their homes, and far too many remain exiled from their city. Their return was essential for this to be the homecoming the city deserved. To attendees' relief, the organizers pulled together a local lineup that looked very much like those of the past.

While attendance at the 2006 festival was down from previous years (though those headliners were there to ensure just the opposite), nonetheless, gone are the days when only a few hundred people came to celebrate. Now filling the infield of the Fair Grounds horse-racing track up near City Park (where the grandstand sustained considerable hurricane damage, limiting its Fest use), the festival covers the last weekend in April and the first in May. It's set up about as well as such an event can be. When the crowds get big, though—the second Saturday traditionally is the busiest—it can be tough to move around, especially if the grounds are muddy from rain. However, the crowds are remarkably well-behaved—to make a sweeping generalization, these are not the same types who come for Mardi Gras.

EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY Hotel and restaurant reservations, not to mention choice plane flights, fill up months (if not a year) in advance, but the schedule is not announced until a couple of months before the event. That may mean scheduling your visit around your own availability, not an appearance by a particular band. Just about every day at Jazz Fest is a good day, however, so this is not a hardship—at least, until you learn about an extraordinary group that is playing on a day you won't be in town. Or you could do like we do: Go for the whole 11 days so you won't miss a thing.

The second Saturday does attract some of the top acts, and each year it sets a record for single-day attendance. But we feel the fun tends to diminish with that many people. Still, the tickets are cheap enough (provided you buy them in advance; prices at the gate have become rather costly) that going early in the day and leaving before the crowds get too big is a viable option. The Thursday before the second weekend (which was dropped for 2006, because of post-Katrina scheduling and other problems) is traditionally targeted to

locals, with more local bands and generally smaller crowds because fewer tourists are around than on the weekends. It's a great time to hit the best food booths and to check out the shopping in the crafts areas.

Contact the **New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival**, 1205 N. Rampart St., New Orleans, LA 70116 (☎ 504/522-4786; www.nojazzfest.com), to get the schedule for each weekend and information about other Jazz Fest–related shows around town.

JAZZ FEST POINTERS

A typical Jazz Fest day has you arriving sometime after the gates open at 11am and staying until you are pooped or until they close at around 7pm (incredibly the whole thing runs as efficiently as a Swiss train). After you leave the Fair Grounds for the day, get some dinner and then hit the clubs. Every club in the city has Jazz Fest–related bookings (of special note is the **Ponderosa Stomp**, a 3-day event featuring “unsung heroes” of the blues, rockabilly, Swamp Pop, and New Orleans R&B that ideally, after a temporary move to Memphis, will return to New Orleans in 2007). Bouncing from one club to another can keep you out until dawn. Then you get up and start all over again. This is part of the reason we think Jazz Fest is so fun.

There are also many nonmusical aspects of Jazz Fest to distract you, particularly the crafts. Local craftspeople and imported artisans fill a sizable section of the Fair Grounds with demonstrations and displays of their products during the festival. You might get to see Louisiana Native American basket making; Cajun accordion, fiddle, and triangle making; decoy carving; boat building; and Mardi Gras Indian beading and costume making.

And then there's the food. The heck with the music—when we dream of Jazz Fest, we are often thinking more about those 50-plus food booths filled with some of the best goodies we've ever tasted. The food ranges from local standbys—red beans and rice, jambalaya, étouffée, and gumbo—to more interesting choices such as oyster sacks, the hugely popular sausage bread, *cochon de lait* (a mouthwatering roast pig sandwich), alligator sausage po' boys, and quail and pheasant gumbo. There's plenty of cold beer, too, although you'll probably have to wait in some mighty long lines to get to it.

Try to purchase tickets as early as February if possible. They're available by mail through **Ticketmaster** (☎ 800/488-5252 or 504/522-5555; www.ticketmaster.com). To order tickets, get information about transportation shuttles to and from the Fair Grounds, or to

find out what you are allowed to bring in to Jazz Fest, contact **New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival** (☎ 504/522-4786; www.nojazzfest.com). Admission for adults is \$30 in advance (depending on when you buy the tickets) and \$40 at the gate; \$5 for children. Evening events and concerts (order tickets in advance for these events as well) may be attended at an additional cost—usually between \$20 and \$30, depending on the concert.

JAZZ FEST PARKING & TRANSPORTATION Parking at the Fair Grounds is next to impossible. The few available spaces cost \$35 a day, but it's rare to get a space there. We strongly recommend that you take public transportation or one of the available shuttles.

The **Regional Transit Authority (RTA)** operates bus routes from various pickup points to the Fair Grounds. For schedules contact ☎ 504/248-3900; (www.norta.com). Taxis, though probably scarce, will also take you to the Fair Grounds at a special event rate of \$3 per person (or the meter reading if it's higher). We recommend **United Cabs** (☎ 504/524-9606).

PACKAGE DEALS If you want to go to Jazz Fest but would rather have someone else do all the planning, consider contacting **Festival Tours International**, 15237 Sunset Blvd., Suite 17, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272 (☎ 310/454-4080; www.gumbopages.com/festivaltours), which caters to music lovers who don't wish to wear name tags or do other hokey tour activities. Packages include accommodations, tickets, and also a visit to Cajun country for unique personal encounters with some of the finest local musicians.

If you're flying to New Orleans specifically for the festival, visit www.nojazzfest.com to get a Jazz Fest promotional code from a list of airlines that offer special fares during the event.

5 Tips for Travelers with Special Needs

FOR TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Be aware that while New Orleans facilities are mostly accessible (especially in the Quarter) with proprietors being most accommodating (opening narrow doors wider to fit wheelchairs and such), you are still dealing with older structures created before thoughts of ease for those with disabilities. Before you book a hotel, **ask questions** based on your needs. If you have mobility issues, you'll probably do best to stay in one of the city's newer hotels, which tend to be more spacious and accommodating. Sidewalks are often bumpy and uneven, and getting on the St. Charles streetcar might be too great a challenge.

For information about specialized transportation systems, call **LIFT** (☎ 504/827-7433).

You can join **SATH** (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality) (☎ 212/447-7284; www.sath.org), which offers a wealth of travel resources for all types of disabilities and informed recommendations on destinations, access guides, travel agents, tour operators, vehicle rentals, and companion services.

FOR GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

This is a very gay-friendly town with a high-profile homosexual population that contributes much to the color and flavor of the city. You'll find an abundance of establishments serving gay and lesbian interests, from bars to restaurants to community services.

If you need help finding your way, you can stop by or call the **Gay and Lesbian Community Center**, 2114 Decatur St. (☎ 504/945-1103; www.lgccno.org); hours vary, so call before stopping in.

Ambush, 828-A Bourbon St., New Orleans, LA 70116 (☎ 504/522-8047; www.ambushmag.com), is a weekly entertainment and news publication for the Gulf South's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. **The Whiz** is another popular area publication found in many gay establishments (www.whizmag.com).

Grace Fellowship, 3151 Dauphine St. (☎ 504/944-9836), and the **Vieux Carré Metropolitan Community Church**, 1128 St. Roch Ave. (☎ 504/945-5390), are religious organizations that serve primarily gay congregations. Both invite visitors to attend services.

One useful website is **www.gayneworleans.com**, which provides information on lodging, dining, arts, and nightlife as well as links to other information on New Orleans gay life.

FOR SENIORS

Don't be shy about asking for discounts, but always carry some kind of identification, such as a driver's license, that shows your date of birth, especially if you've kept your youthful glow.

Also mention the fact that you're a senior when you first make your travel reservations. Many hotels offer discounts, and seniors who show their Medicare card can ride New Orleans streetcars and buses for 40¢.

Members of **AARP**, 601 E. St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (☎ 888/687-2277 or 225/381-2940; www.aarp.org), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over 50 can join.

6 Getting There

BY PLANE

Flights have been somewhat limited since Katrina, though more are being added as time passes and demand increases again. Still, you may have to have a more flexible schedule for visiting than you might like. Among the airlines serving the city's **Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport** are **America West** (☎ 800/235-9292; www.americawest.com), **American** (☎ 800/433-7300; www.aa.com), **Continental** (☎ 800/525-0280 or 504/581-2965; www.continental.com), **Delta** (☎ 800/221-1212; www.delta.com), **JetBlue** (☎ 800/538-2583; www.jetblue.com), **Northwest** (☎ 800/225-2525; www.nwa.com), **Southwest** (☎ 800/435-9792; www.southwest.com), **US Airways** (☎ 800/428-4322; www.usairways.com), and **United** (☎ 800/241-6522; www.ual.com).

The airport is 15 miles west of the city, in Kenner. You'll find information booths scattered around the airport and in the baggage claim area.

BY CAR

You can drive to New Orleans via **I-10**, **I-55**, **U.S. 90**, **U.S. 61**, or across the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway on **La. 25**. From any direction, you'll see the city's distinctive and swampy outlying regions; if you can, try to drive in while you can enjoy the scenery in daylight. For the best roadside views, take U.S. 61 or La. 25, but only if you have time to spare. The larger roads are considerably faster.

It's a good idea to call before you leave home to ask directions to your hotel. Most hotels have parking facilities (for a fee); if they don't they'll give you the names and addresses of nearby parking lots.

Driving in New Orleans can be a hassle, and parking is a nightmare. Cabs are plentiful and not too pricey, so you really don't need a car in New Orleans unless you're planning several day trips.

Nevertheless, most major car-rental companies are at the airport including **Alamo** (☎ 800/327-9633; www.alamo.com), **Avis** (☎ 800/331-1212; www.avis.com), **Budget Rent A Car** (☎ 800/527-0700; www.budget.com), **Dollar Rent A Car** (☎ 800/800-4000; www.dollar.com), **Hertz** (☎ 800/654-3131; www.hertz.com), and **National** (☎ 800/227-7368; www.nationalcar.com).

BY TRAIN

The passenger rail lines cut through some beautiful scenery. **Amtrak** (☎ **800/USA-RAIL** or 504/528-1612; www.amtrak.com) trains serve the city's **Union Passenger Terminal**, 1001 Loyola Ave. The New Orleans train station is in the Central Business District. Taxis wait outside the main entrance to the passenger terminal. Hotels in the French Quarter and the CBD are a short ride away.