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BIG FUN IN THE BIG EASY

I landed at Louis Armstrong International Airport intentionally hungry, thirsty and ready to rumble in America's oldest bohemia, New Orleans French Quarter. Also known as "Vieux Carre" (or "old square" in French) it is a living museum of classic, subversive Southern charm, gothic decadence, a slight whiff of scandal, a sense of small town intimacy, and a herculean ability to celebrate life 24-7. Within these parameters is more sheer pleasure per square foot than any place on earth.

By: Carolyn Gerin

domestic DESTINATIONS

New Orleans

Photography by: Susan Stripling Photography
www.susanstripling.com





*"being on a diet in New Orleans
is like trying to breathe
underwater; quite impossible."*



An aficionado of the road less travelled, I wasn't sure if the Quarter would be a sea of team-shirt-clad-revelers with Hurricanes in go cups, or a little something more sublime? I planned on making no plans: to carouse through the Quarter and see what would be revealed. I was happy to find it restored, with shops and restaurants thriving. In five short days, I cracked the code to what makes New Orleans tick: they love to live, and live to love (food, spirits, friendship, parties, a bawdy joke, a well told tale, a flirtatious glance, a great band). This bon vivant philosophy of living in the present (because as it was explained to me: *anything* can happen, so you need to enjoy your life *now*) is key to the soul of "The Big Easy."

Our Creole Cab driver ("from the Swamps," he states) in a lyrical patois, gives us a short list of some of his favorite dives to get gumbo and etoufee, **Mother's** being his favorite. We head into the Quarter as the sun slants low in the sky over black iron-trellised porches spilling over with begonias. The streets are lined with wedding cake inspired French Colonial buildings in pale pastels, and everyone is in a gregarious mood.

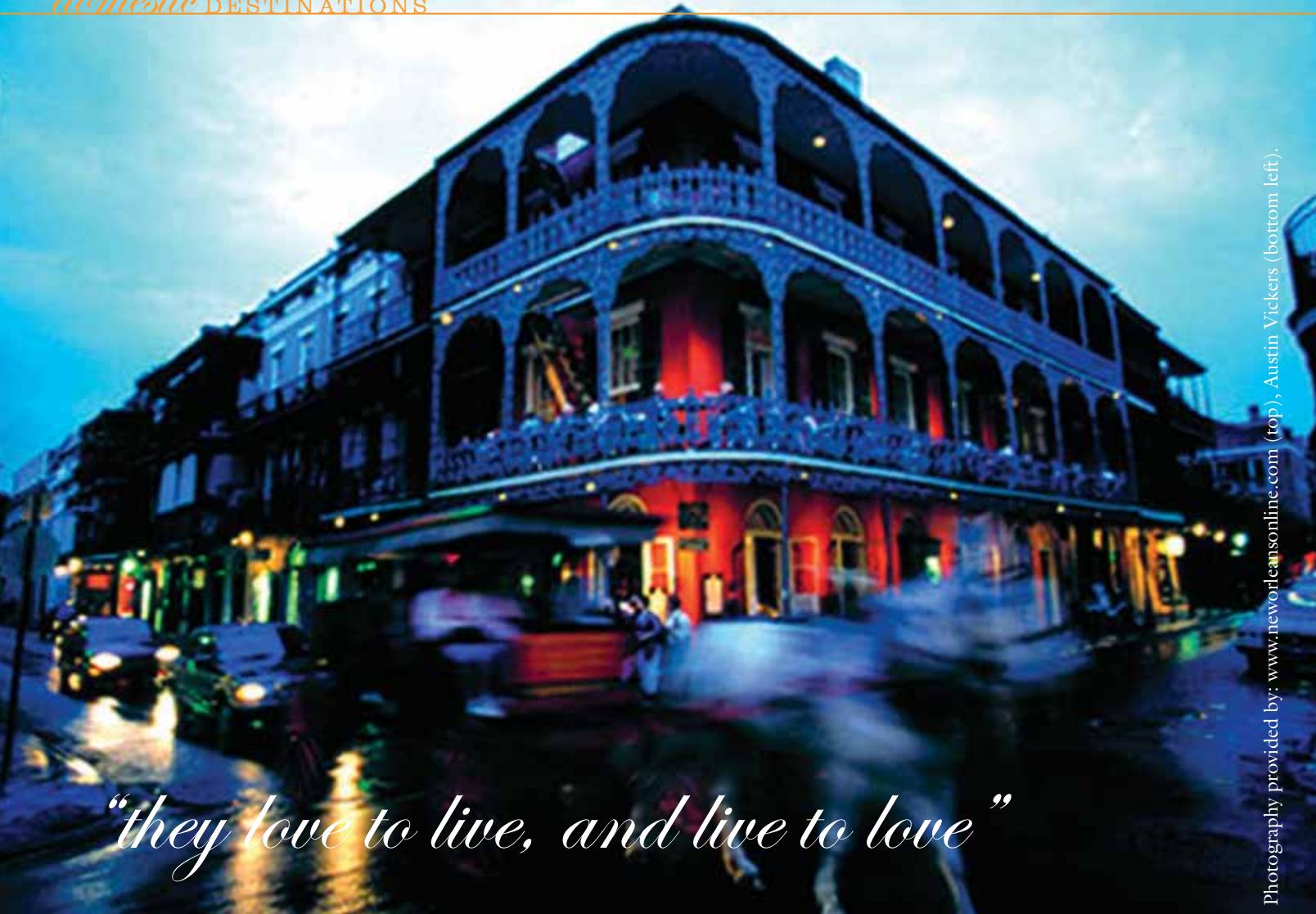
Our first stop is the **W French Quarter**, an oasis of hip on Chartres Street. A favorite of rock stars and celebs, this 98 room nouveau-retro hotel clusters around a lushly landscaped courtyard with clusters of cabanas, pool, and a dramatic fire fountain.

Sipping a complimentary champagne and fabulous people watching is de rigueur. The décor is bordello retro-mod, (think Louis XVI meets Courreges): Red velvet walls, sparkling chandeliers, oversized Victorian mirrors, striped wallpaper, and hot pink coverlets. Our room is spectacular: a private balcony overlooking the cobble-stoned street and facing an ancient pink and green shuttered building. The staff feels like family: they are so attentive and delightful; you could eat them with a spoon.

www.whotels.com.

Dinner at **Bacco's** is extraordinary, a fusion cuisine that New Orleans native Executive Chef Chris Montero calls *Creole Italian* and is inspired by his grandmother. His signature style is using the abundant local seafood and produce and marrying them with homemade pastas, and sauces. The BBQ Shrimp in Abita Amber butter sauce, the Grilled Red Fish and Lobster Shrimp Ravioli are a must.

Roaming around the Quarter, I pop in and out of boutiques meeting a warm and eclectic mix of people who are fiercely opinionated about what I should eat, drink, and see, making us feel immediately accepted, adored, and downright cosseted. New Orleans natives are rightfully proud of their city and what it has to offer, and since many stayed to help rebuild it, have well deserved bragging rights. The city also has a seriously spooky vibe, and fascination with the afterlife: people speak of hauntings and ghost sightings like we talk about the weather. The eccentricity is charming and endlessly entertaining if you keep an open mind.



"they love to live, and live to love"



Hungry and thirsty, it's time for a muffletta, etouffee and a Pimms cup at the **Napoleon House** or gumbo and homemade praline bread pudding across the street at **Pierre Masperos**. After three days in the Quarter, I realize that I don't really say no to anything consumable, and maybe this isn't a good thing. But being on a diet or on the wagon in New Orleans is like trying to breathe underwater: quite impossible.

Fortified, we begin the hunt for a venetian mask, and our new friends said look no further than **Maskerade**, where fantasy meets decadence. There is an entire industry set up to adorn the revelers who attend around the city's many balls, festivals and parties. A walk down **Magazine Street** will reveal a treasure trove of dusty antique shops flanking hip boutiques that have every type of glittering, impractical, fashion accoutrement your heart desires.





Photography by Susan Strippling Photography, www.susanstrippling.com



The owners of **The Absinthe Museum** invite us in for afternoon cocktails, and show us vintage paraphernalia used to prepare the decadent libation. I'm getting the sense that every nook and cranny of NOLA is a good time waiting to happen.

After a spectacular dinner of Oysters Rockefeller, jambalaya and cold Abitas, at **Star Steak and Lobster** we wander over to **One Eyed Jacks**, a gorgeous red velvet, chandeliered, music hall channeling a Victorian burlesque club, and jam packed with attitude-free hipsters and great local music.

The next morning, we're starving for beignets and chicory coffee, and a bike ride through the Garden District. First stop, **Café Du Monde** for the coveted steaming hot treats and next, a tour of the cities storied cemeteries downtown where we discover the final resting place for many prolific writers and musicians.

Local legend **Galatoire's** is a destination dining experience with a menu that hasn't changed since 1905. Tuxedo clad waiters, black and white checkered floors, creamed spinach, crab au gratin, icy manhattans, a 50th wedding anniversary announced every five minutes, and jackets for gentlemen required, *go*, if only to soak up the ambiance of a bygone era.

Afterwards, we hit the hip and happening **Le Phare** for fresh blueberry mojitos and champagne as we sit in a sleek banquette and watch the cream of the demi-monde groove to inspired DJ mixes. Team Decadence votes "Oui" on the subject of a nightcap, so we order up one last round at the lavish **W Poydras Whiskey Blue** cocktail lounge.

I washed back up on the shores of S.F. sporting an extra five lbs, a little fuzzier in the head, some great new friends, and a certainty I would be heading back soon to one of my all time favorite cities, the elusive, elegant and eccentric exception to every rule, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Special Thanks To:

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NEW ORLEANS HAS DOUBLE THE

W



The rooms are the usual modern simplistic design you're used to, but there are signature New Orleans elements only the W could get right. One of the biggest complements to the hotel is the mouthwatering Zoe restaurant with local Head Chef Roberto Bustillo running the show.

With his recent change, you'll now find a tapas fare menu with a sampling of light bites such as braised Kobe beef short ribs, seared sea scallops on a bed of cheese grits and Gulf Coast crustacean shooters. His inspiration? Family favorites of course! "We serve a dish with potatoes and chorizo, pan fried with a sunny-side egg on top. It's a dish that's traditional to my family, and is inspired by what I've eaten through my life at home. I like creating things in a traditional yet progressive way," says Bustillo.

Just downstairs from Zoe is Whiskey Blue, complete with a "casual sophisticated" atmosphere. Start the evening here with a signature cocktail, or end it with a nightcap since they're open until 4.am.

However you spend your time here, the W New Orleans delivers their signature "Whatever, Whenever" service with a smile that will win your heart over ensuring you'll be back for another visit.
www.whotels.com

ido!

On the outskirts of the French Quarter, you will find another exceptional W Hotel on Poydras Street. Complete with roof-top pool and a hipster vibe, The W New Orleans again hits a home run.



Photography provided by: W Hotels