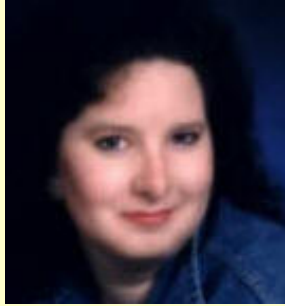


The New Orleans I Remember



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Recently, like many other people all over the World, I've been watching the news channels obsessively. I have been unable to tear myself away from the images of people fighting for their lives; shelter, medication and a million other things that I take for granted every day. I can't help but remember a different time, when New Orleans was a very different place for me; a place that represented relaxation and peace. I don't recognize the city I see on the news. Since I will never again get to see the New Orleans I saw in 2003, I wanted to take some time to revisit it in my heart and in writing.

A Quick Christmas Eve in The Big Easy

I arrived at the Louis Armstrong International Airport after dark on Christmas Eve, and waiting for me on just the other side of the security desk was my host, with one hand on hip and a ridiculous amount of luggage. I was gathered up into a lovely, warm hug. We headed to the rental desk to get our next four days' transportation. I asked for a compact car and got a lovely Monte Carlo, which was simply luxurious. I was so glad of this because, little did I realize, I would be driving that car for the next two hours while we hunted for the hotel (which, by the way, was approximately two minutes from the airport. The online map service really let me down.) The upside is that I got to drive through virtually every neighborhood my friend had lived



in, and it was a very interesting tour of outer New Orleans. Seeing the Holiday lights in front of all the homes was an excellent preparation for my next day in the City.

Christmas Day

New Orleans generally shuts down for Christmas, except for houses of worship, of course. It was a very quiet, but certainly beautiful day. The temperature was in the mid-60's and everyone we encountered was in a generous, kind frame of mind. After several months of a life that was ridiculously frenetic and over-scheduled, it was nice to relax and

not feel guilty about it. My traditional Christmas dinner consisted of fettuccine alfredo with enormous shrimp.

It's the Day After Christmas, and My Feet Are Killing Me

We got a very early (for us) start on our first day in the Crescent City when we could take full

advantage of the shops and sights. We found a parking space at the University and then took the bus down to

the French Quarter for touring. I loved seeing the horses and mules pulling carriages (they put flowers on the horses - it was so cute it made me weak). The first thing I noticed were the piles of powdered sugar all over, and the line that reached almost a block from the front door of the Café Du Monde. I realize that beignets are THE thing to get for EVERY tourist, but I really didn't feel like spending an hour of my

already too-short day in line for one, so we had breakfast at Krispy Kreme (which was just as messy in a 100th of the time).



We then started walking down Royal Street, which had the most wonderful antique shops. My poor friend - we didn't get very far very fast, because I stopped at every ...single ...window to look at the cameos, rare books and hinged boxes that I fell in love with. We then went to the oldest movie palace in the United States (which by that time was being used as a fast food restaurant). I am positive that my friend and I were the only two people in that place

who had any clue what its former use was - hilarious and very, very sad all at once.

We got on the streetcar and it went out St. Charles Street, where literally every house is a gorgeous step into the past. The silent film actress Marguerite Clark's beautiful home is now the library, and the only house on a hill (approximately 10 feet higher than any of the surrounding property).

I don't think I ever uttered an actual coherent sentence – my entire vocabulary was made up of "OOOH!!! THAT house!! OOOH, I want THAT one!!!" We got to the end of the line, switched sides, and I oohed and aaahed over the houses all the way back up the other side of the street. We traveled under the shelter of oaks all the way out and back, and it is my understanding that Katrina removed many of these. I want to keep the gracious and gentle St. Charles Street of my memories – I can't fathom the descriptions I read about it now.

Next stop was the D-Day Museum, which was the late great Stephen Ambrose's pet project, and a wonderful tribute to the memory of those who served in WWII. The oral histories were fascinating, and we took a solid two hours wandering through all the exhibits. Moving, interesting, exhausting and powerful. I would have liked to stay longer, but my aching legs, and the late hour, were catching up with me.



We stopped at a wonderful book shop on the way back to the Quarter - they had all these marvelous volumes, and nothing priced over \$10. I think if I'd had more time and an empty suitcase, I could have done some serious damage. We generally wandered the premises enjoying being surrounded by literature. I'm always happy in a library or old book store, and so I felt quite at home.

Once we got back to the car, we took a drive to City Park for a drive through the Christmas Lights. It was a Christmas display like nothing I've ever seen before, and I loved every moment of it. Everything from bowers completely covered in lights so that you feel as if you're driving through a tunnel of lights, to a Victorian mansion created using nothing but the lighting, to a carousel, to (for the kids, but I loved it, too), Christmas dinosaurs. The lake had a whale, and leaping fish, and there was so much to look at I'm sure I'm leaving some things out. Beautifully done, and I wanted to go back to the entrance and drive through it again.

The Plantations

December 27 was my last full day in the area, and I felt I should see some plantations. However, I was so tired from the day before that I spent more time than I should have in the arms of Morpheus. We finally got ourselves in gear about 1:00 or so, and wandered next door to a lovely restaurant for lunch before we headed out to Vacherie to Oak Alley Plantation. We could not have asked for a prettier day - bright and sunny with temps in the 70s or so, and the drive was gorgeous (at least, I thought so - my friend kept saying, "you do realize this is swamp, don't you?" but I thought it was lovely), and the directions to the Plantations were extremely Grace-friendly. I'd been wanting to see Oak Alley for at least 10 years, and was finally getting my chance.

The guide's script was a bit too "canned" for my taste, but it was informative, and the house was beautiful, especially as viewed from the lane of oaks. This is where I took all my pictures. There was a big dog wandering the grounds, and he was having a rest near the entrance to the property - I knelt down to offer him my hand to sniff, and he took two sniffs and rolled on his back so I could give him a tummy rub. It was so adorable I just wanted to plunk down next to him on the ground and cuddle on him (I was missing my cat so terribly by this point in the trip - and I miss having a dog in general - this was such a treat).

I then went to the gift shop and discovered that they offer UPS shipping of whatever you buy there, so I proceeded to go insane and burn a hole through my credit card, buying books, videos and various other Oak Alley-abilia. Nothing particularly touristy - mostly historical literature and the like, but boy did that tab add up fast!

Before we headed back to New Orleans, we stopped at the end of the lane and stood on the levee looking at the Mississippi River and the sunset. Our timing for seeing the sunset was perfect and we just enjoyed the peace of the place and the moment. It was like a movie set: "okay, cue the sunset."

It was rather a quiet drive back to the City; I was starting to get kind of blue over the fact that I had to be at the airport by 4:30 the next morning and I was basically lost in my own thoughts. Worn out from a long day, but so happy and relaxed, more relaxed than I'd been in months.



I had to have that Fettucine Alfredo one more time before I went home, so that's what we indulged in for our last meal in New Orleans. After that we relaxed with our books, occasionally sharing something interesting we'd just read, but in general just enjoying the last bit of quiet either of us was going to get for a while. The clock was ticking though, and given that I knew I had to be up and out of the hotel by 4:00 or so if I wanted to get to the airport on time, I zonked out relatively early.

Its Over? Already?

I crawled to the airport, returned the car, VERY reluctantly took my jacket from the back seat where it had been all weekend, and checked in. I curled up by the gate waiting for my flight to be called. I felt right at home surrounded by other exhausted people and once on the plane, I tried to read a little bit but generally stared out the window and felt crabby that my trip was coming to an end.



I was thoroughly spoiled, pampered and any other similar terms you can think of. My host tailored the entire trip to things that he knew I would enjoy, and made Christmas 2003 utterly unforgettable. I am thankful that he did, and sorry that we didn't have time to visit places like Jefferson Davis's home at Beauvoir, and the string of antebellum homes along the Gulf in Mississippi, because those buildings are either severely damaged or completely gone now.

My friend's home was the only one in his neighborhood in Picayune, Mississippi to survive Hurricane Katrina. Thankfully, he and his family are safe. Two friends lost their homes, and one, who lived in Waveland, Mississippi, lost her entire city. It's a completely different part of the Country now, but I remember a different and more beautiful time. I can only pray that something similar returns to this gloriously beautiful section of the Country, so that others can fall in love with it as I did.

How you can help:

https://secure.hsus.org/01/disaster_relief_fund_2005

<http://www.redcross.org/>

http://www2.salvationarmy.org/ihq/www_sa.nsf

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