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DECEMBER 15 - 21, 2011

Happy Holidays

## Experiencing Music, Arts And Good Eats In New Orleans And Charleston



By Aaron Leventhal

For the past three decades I have traveled across America and abroad seeking adventure and increased awareness, then returned to Columbus to write features and share my experiences. This past year I explored the pleasures of New Orleans and the Southern gentility of Charleston, South Carolina. Both historic cities have been transformed over the past three centuries from major slave trading centers to progressive and sophisticated tourism destinations. In reality, they are flourishing oases in

the heart of the Deep South.

New Orleans and Charleston were settled by French, Spanish, British and African peoples, who influenced the architecture, music, cuisine and character of these storied communities. An Old World charm still permeates the ornately decorated homes and cobblestone streets.

Recently, I organized a small group travel company, [LeventhalTravel.com](http://LeventhalTravel.com), to take like-minded travelers on some of my adventures. Last spring, a group joined me at the incredible New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival ([www.nojazz.com](http://www.nojazz.com)). I will return in May with another group to attend one of the country's greatest music festivals. A dozen stages at the Fair Grounds are devoted to jazz, blues, gospel, folk,

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rock, country, Latin, reggae and more, with delicious local foods served up by restaurateurs and caterers. Creole and Cajun specialties range from Po' Boys and jambalaya to gumbo and shrimp 'n' grits, all reasonably priced.

We will stay at the elegant Hubbard Mansion Bed and Breakfast (504-897-3535, [www.hubbardmansion.com](http://www.hubbardmansion.com)), located on St. Charles Avenue in the heart of the Garden District. Yes, you want to party in the French Quarter, but stay in the most cosmopolitan neigh-

borhood in town, near Tulane and Loyola universities, Audubon Park and the very hip Magazine Street. Owned by African American businessman and native New Orleanian Don Hubbard, the stately Greek Revival mansion is modeled after his wife Rose's home in Natchez, Mississippi. Guest rooms features period antiques and family heirlooms. Full gourmet breakfasts are served each morning.

There are dozens of world-class attractions, dining spots and music clubs to explore and

enjoy when not at the festival. The St. Charles Avenue streetcar, the oldest operating railway in the country, stops in front of the Hubbard Mansion. It takes passengers on a 13-mile loop along St. Charles with one of the stops only a few blocks from the French Quarter. The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum traces the history and culture of Voodoo, which was brought by African slaves to America and still has a presence in New Orleans. The African and Oceanic Art gallery

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in the New Orleans Museum of Art is one of the best African art collections in the country. There are a dozen plantations within an hour's drive of the city, including Oak Alley and Laura Plantation, beautifully restored antebellum mansions with slave quarters and landscaped grounds. A number of tour companies offer guided half-day trips. My wife Beth and I loved the Jean Lafitte Swamp Tour through the bayou with a Cajun guide who points out the native plants and wildlife. In the French Quarter, Preservation Hall is a mecca for traditional jazz since 1961. Doors open daily at 8 p.m. and musicians play until midnight.

My friend Henry Butcher, chef and owner of Creole Kitchen at Mt. Vernon Plaza, is a Louisiana native and former New Orleans cook at Johnny's Po' Boys, a no-frills French Quarter institution. During our stay we will dine at two of Henry's favorite restaurants - Court of Two Sisters, housed in a former 1726 French governor's residence in the French Quarter and famous for its Jazz Brunch Buffet; and Mother's, a locals' favorite specializing in gumbo, caramelized black ham and grits.

Another Leventhal-Travel.com trip takes you on a Carolinas adventure that begins with a drive through mountains, valleys, farmland and quaint towns and villages off the beaten path to the South Carolina coast. We will spend a few days along the Atlantic Ocean's Grand Strand at the beachfront Royal Garden Resort (Sea Breeze Realty, 800-446-4010, www.royalgardenresort.com) in beautiful, furnished, condo suites with

ocean view and outdoor pool. Sightseeing options include Brookgreen Gardens, the largest sculptural park in America; 18th century Georgetown, with Miss Nell's Walking Tour of the historic district; and golf at Caledonia Golf & Fish Club, recognized as one of the top 100 public courses in the country. We will dine at Ocean One and Frank's Outback, both on Pawley's Island.

A few hours drive takes us to Charleston, settled by the British in 1676 and the South's oldest city and best-preserved Colonial town. It is the largest single historic district in the country, with a diverse array of Federalist, Georgian and Gothic Revival architecture in 98 square blocks.

Spoleto Festival USA is an annual cultural event that explodes with dozens of internationally acclaimed performances in theater, opera, dance, music and the visual arts. Simultaneously, Piccolo Spoleto showcases hundreds of regional performances held in churches, pubs, parks and other venues for free or low-cost admission. For example, every year Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church holds a foot-stomping spiritual Old Time Camp meeting, and the Charleston Symphony Orchestra's Gospel Choir performs classic selections.

When not attending the



festival performances, there are major attractions to fill your days, beginning with a Palmetto Carriage Tour with guides in mule-drawn carriages sharing colorful tales through 25 blocks of historic neighborhoods.

Other renowned attractions include Fort Sumter National Monument, where Confederate guns fired on Union troops igniting the Civil War; Old City Market, where vendors hawk goods and Gullah women weave and sell baskets in four 1800s open-sided buildings; Old Slave Mart Museum, chronicling the African slave trade; U.S.S. Yorktown aircraft carrier, World War II "Fighting Lady" anchored at Patriot Point; and nearby Drayton Hall built in 1738, the oldest plantation house in America.

Dozens of cafes and restaurants serve up Low Country specialties, with

fish, seafood, locally grown produce, grains and beans giving the dishes their distinctive taste. Some of my favorites include Jistine's Kitchen for shrimp Creole and oyster po' boys, Sticky Fingers for ribs and pulled pork barbecue; Fleet Landing on the waterfront for local seafood; and Vickery's in Mt. Pleasant for Southwestern and Cuban cuisine.

Our base for the four-day stay will be the Shem Creek Inn (800-523-4951, www.shemcreekinn.com) in Mt. Pleasant, just a 10-minute drive from downtown Charleston. Situated on the Shem Creek Marina, the inn has a large outdoor pool, all rooms have private balconies and Continental breakfast is served daily.

The adventure concludes with a drive through the mountains to Salisbury, North Carolina, established

in 1755 and the oldest city in western North Carolina. It is acclaimed for its Colonial, Antebellum and Civil War-era historic preservation. There is an excellent self-guided auto tour of the African-American Heritage Trail, as well as a narrated historic trolley tour. We will stay at the charming Rowan Oak House Bed and Breakfast (800-786-0437, www.rowanoakbb.com).

Golfers can take their final swings at Corbin Hills Golf Club, and we'll dine at Chef Santos, known for its Brazilian specialties.

For more information: New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau, 800-672-6124, www.neworleanscvb.com, Charleston Visitors Center, 800-868-8118, www.charlestoncvb.com, or Rowan County Visitors Bureau, 800-332-2343, www.visitsalisbury.com.

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