

ON THE great RIVER ROAD

Graham Howe follows the blues and jazz notes from New Orleans along the mighty Mississippi

"Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin' for a train, And I's feelin' near as faded as my jeans. Bobby thumbed a diesel down, just before it rained. It rode us all the way to New Orleans." —Janis Joplin, "Me & Bobby McGee"

We're walking in the shadow of the massive concrete levee breached by a runaway barge

when Hurricane Katrina hit the Mississippi Delta on 29 August 2005. This is where it all began. A decade ago, where I'm standing on terra firma was all deep underwater as hurricane winds and water destroyed everything in their path, surging through the lower 9th Ward: a poor working-class neighbourhood of New Orleans.

Katrina has left her indelible mark. Exploring the worst-hit ward, where a thousand residents died and 4 000 homes were destroyed, I climbed the steps leading to cracked foundations in overgrown lots and dilapidated, boarded-up shotgun shacks. Some still bear a biblical white cross on the door, painted by national guardsmen who went house to house retrieving bodies and residents, evacuating the city after the hurricane.

On the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in 2015, the mayor declared New Orleans "the biggest comeback story in American history". But many of the wrecked districts were slowly rebuilt, notably the eco-friendly, elevated flood-resistant homes built for the residents of the hardest-hit ward by a few of the world's top architects who supported actor Brad Pitt's "Make It Right" campaign to restore the city.

We walked past the magnificent heritage houses crowned by replica pilot cabins where the steamboat captains of the Mississippi—legends like Mark Twain—once lived next to the river. On eponymous Flood Street, I met a resident walking the dogs she rescued from the flood waters; survivors like everyone else around here. Anyone who lived through the apocalypse in New Orleans has a story to tell: of triumph over loss.

The bright-yellow façade of the home of Fats Domino, the piano laureate of New





Orleans, is a landmark in the lower 9th. Rescued by helicopter from his home destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, the 88-year-old is a musical legend, symbolising the indestructible spirit of the city. Credited as one of the inventors of rock 'n' roll, Fats has influenced generations of artists from John Lennon to Elton John. I fancied I could spy him in a rocking chair on his porch painted with "FD" pop stars.

It seemed the right place to set out on the first stretch of the Great River Road, an epic trip that follows the course of the Mississippi River for 4 000km from the Gulf of Mexico to Minnesota. It takes 36 hours of straight driving through 10 states on the National Scenic Byway Route that follows the winding course of Ol' Man River, marked by pilot wheel signs—though you could float the leg from St. Louis to New Orleans the old-fashioned way by riverboat.

Crossing the river on one of the mighty steel span bridges over the Mississippi, I headed back to the city. Founded in 1717, New Orleans celebrates its tricentennial in 2017. It is the most exotic of American cities: a sublime mix of Spanish, French, African, Caribbean, American, Creole and Cajun culture. The French Quarter, the heart of the city, is the funkier neighbourhood in the USA, where live jazz, blues and zydeco

spill out of every bar and café and on the streets. The city is known as the birthplace of jazz and the blues; the home of giants, from Louis Armstrong to Jelly Roll Morton.

The Great River Road is also a musical journey, a blues highway taking the music north all the way to Chicago. So I visited Congo Square, where slaves from West Africa and the Caribbean who were forced to work on the cotton and sugar-cane farms of Louisiana gathered on Sundays to dance and play music in the 1700s. The rhythms of West Africa blended with Caribbean influences, giving birth to the rich melting pot of culture and music in New Orleans. The French Cajuns played spoons on the washboard—creating the distinct sounds of zydeco. I also visited The House of the Rising Sun, home of one of the city's legendary anthems.

Music still fills Congo Square, but I spent Sunday listening to hot jazz, zydeco, gospel, African and Caribbean live music at the Orpheum, a magnificent three-gallery vaudeville theatre built in 1918, which was badly flooded in 2005. Exquisitely restored—from the art-nouveau mosaics to wedding-cake stucco of the three-tier galleries—this city landmark reopened to mark the rebirth of the city on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Today, it

is the home of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra.

The annual Mardi Gras festival in New Orleans grew out of these slave traditions and now features hundreds of colourful floats manned by clubs called krewes (old slave crews) and marching brass bands. Curiously, one of the 50 parades during the marching season from January to March is led by the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, one of the oldest African-American carnival clubs—presumably also the descendants

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The *Mark Twain* riverboat, one of the grand old paddle steamers of the Mississippi

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Tarantino filmed *Django Unchained* at Evergreen Plantation, one of the historic sugar estates near New Orleans; Graham at Bubba's II PoBoys, a landmark for authentic Cajun seafood in Thibodaux, Louisiana

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: The avenue of ancient trees draped in Spanish moss at Evergreen Plantation; Keep your hands in the boat on a swamp safari down the bayous!

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: One of the mighty swing bridges across the Mississippi; A riverboat taking tourists on rides in New Orleans

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: The giant copper kettles—a "Jamaican train"—used to crystallise sugar; The Preservation Hall Jazz Band of New Orleans

of slaves. The Catholic Church authorised the original "carnival" in the early 1700s, which literally means "farewell to flesh": a period of celebration before the fasting of Lent building up to Mardi Gras.

The old riverboats were once built at Mardi Gras World: the waterfront warehouses where over 280 colourful carnival floats are now constructed every year. A ride on a grand three-tiered riverboat, the *Creole Queen* or the *Natchez*, is a tourist must-do. The sight of paddle steamers tied up at the downtown quay is quintessentially Mississippi—as is a mint julep and fine southern fare served on board. "Big wheel keep on turnin'... rollin', rollin', rollin' on the river."

The Great River Road starts out on the first stretch through plantation country from the delta around New Orleans to Baton Rouge—immortalised by Bob Dylan in his great 1960s album *Highway 61 Revisited*—on a highway that is dramatically suspended in places above the waterways and bayous, criss-crossing a submerged forest of telephone poles.

At almost 6 000km long, the Mississippi is the third longest river in the world after the Nile and the Amazon. A historic 18th century map shows the hundreds of

plantations settled along the river in Louisiana in the late 1700s, when cotton and sugar were king and queen from Natchez and Baton Rouge to New Orleans. Today, nine grand old plantations under the umbrella of New Orleans Plantation Country offer guided tours of the "big house" (main house), museums of heritage, slavery and the old slave quarters, restaurants and luxury accommodation. Many display rows of old cast-iron kettles used to crystallise the sugar, once called a Jamaican train.

The "sugar palaces" are built in grand architectural style: from Greek neo-classic to French villas, raised creole cottages and Victorian mansions. Many were built in the late 1700s to mid-1800s by French, Irish and German colonists who became the sugar barons of Louisiana. The colonnaded porticos of these antebellum mansions all face the river—the raised grassed levees along the Mississippi—so the old barges could load the sugar cane and take it downstream to the refineries at the port of New Orleans. Sugar was a valuable commodity, known as white gold.

We visited Oak Alley Plantation that's famous for its magnificent avenue of 300-year-old "live oak" trees that lead up to a gracious mansion built by a wealthy

creole planter in the late 1830s. Guides in period costume, right down to hoop bell dresses, lead conducted tours of the "big house", announced by the ringing of the old slave bell. In the sumptuous dining room, during meals a young child slave would pull the fabric shoo-fly fan. We also learnt about the superstitious mourning rituals of the settlers: They covered all the gilded mirrors in black fabric for a year so the souls of the departed were not trapped inside.

A memorial wall at some plantations lists the names and origin of many slaves. A row of slave cabins at Oak Alley depict the harsh working and living conditions—from the house slaves who did the laundry and cleaning to the cooks, gardeners and plantation workers—and the annual sugar planting, growing, harvesting and grinding seasons in the life of a plantation. We stayed over in one of the delightful luxury cottages and enjoyed mint juleps on the veranda and a fabulous breakfast of crawfish omelette, creamy grits, cornbread and beignets served with local cane syrup at the outlaw shack.

At sunset, I climbed one of the levees and enjoyed an ice-cold Dixie Blackened Voodoo lager on the banks of the Mississippi while watching the barges





LEFT TO RIGHT: Buskers on stilts in New Orleans; Welcome to the Cajun Pride Swamp Tour—LaPlace, Louisiana

and showboats pass by. I never spotted the *rougarou*, a malevolent spirit that lives in the sugar-cane fields and emerges under the full moon to exact justice on the wicked. I heard you first have to drink a midnight jar of the local rum made from blackstrap molasses and raw sugar from a local distillery. They swear that if you circle your bed or home with 13 pennies, those mischievous southern spirits of the cane stay away. I slept too soundly after a nightcap of Sazerac rye whiskey to worry about evil spirits...

We also visited St. Joseph Plantation next door on plantation parade on the banks of the Mississippi. The original owner was known as the Louis XIV of Louisiana. Built in 1830 by Creoles (meaning the first-born colonists), this large manor house is one of the few working sugar plantations today. Although many of the plantations changed hands over time, especially after the slump in sugar prices and the emancipation of slaves after the Civil War, the German Waguespack family have kept it thriving for 135 years—and the big house built of swamp cypress and oak is a lovely sight with its crepe myrtles, jasmine, resurrection ferns, roses and white magnolia in the gardens.

Each plantation tells a story. While some tours focus on the lavish lifestyles of the sugar barons—from the antique furniture and crystal chandeliers to the marble floors—others focus on the harsh realities of slavery. The history of slavery is an essential part of the African-American experience, and the guides are animated storytellers who make this history come alive in an open, honest way. Often I had this strange sense of déjà vu: Many of the

plantations are recognisable from all the TV series and movies on slavery shot on location here, including *Queen Sugar*, *Roots* and *Twelve Years a Slave*, filmed at nearby Felicity Plantation.

We also visited Evergreen Plantation, the most intact plantation complex in the South, famous as the location where Tarantino filmed *Django Unchained*. The spiral staircase leading to the grand veranda and the maze gardens are iconic, and the guided tour was one of the best we did in plantation country. The guide talked extensively about slavery conditions on a walking tour of the original slave cabins set in sugar-cane fields along an avenue of 100 old oak trees bearded with Spanish moss.

Laura Plantation, named the Top Travel Attraction by the Louisiana Office of Tourism, has the largest collection of original family heirlooms of any plantation. The memoirs of the fourth mistress of the plantation, Laura Locoul Gore, provided much of the history and details of daily life of the old Creole family dynasty. Gore inherited the plantation and ran it as a sugar business until she sold it to Aubert Waguespack in 1891. The Senegalese folktales of the slave *Compair Lapin* and *Compair Bouki* (the clever rabbit and the stupid fool), known worldwide as *Brer Rabbit*, originated here.

Another highlight was Whitney Plantation, which tells a moving story with its slave testimonies and marble memorial walls enshrined with the names of more than 100 000 slaves held in bondage in Louisiana from 1719 to 1820. In the Field of Angels, a poignant monument of a slave mother and child commemorates the 2 200 infants born to slaves who died of

disease and malnutrition before reaching the age of 2. Silent statues of child slaves stare back inside the St. John the Baptist Parish church, their only refuge.

Heading toward Baton Rouge, we stopped at the River Road African American Museum in Donaldsonville, a pretty historic town on the banks of the Mississippi. This village museum is set in a cabin on the underground railroad that runaway slaves used to flee to freedom in the north before the Civil War. The artefacts—leg irons, steel collars, whips and branding irons—are chilling reminders of the brutality of slavery. The curator told us inspiring stories about legendary slave leaders and jazz musicians who came from here and took the blues highway north to freedom.

Along the Great River Road, we visited wonderful homely roadside diners. At Spuddy's Cajun Foods, a legendary local spot in the tiny town of Vacherie, we enjoyed fried oyster, shrimp and home-made double-smoked andouille sausage filled into an over-stuffed po' boy (baguette). At B & C Seafood Cajun Restaurant, one of the best diners for what they call "soul food" in the Deep South, we enjoyed platters of fresh crawfish (mudbugs), shrimp, deep-fried catfish and soft-shell crab, served with okra, sweet corn and yams—washed down with a ragin' Cajun lager and Abita root beer. We also dined on gumbo and jambalaya: rich, spicy soups and stews with smoked Cajun sausages, served over rice.

Along the way, I won a coveted silver spoon in a Tabasco heat test, for braving the hot peppers that go into one of Louisiana's most famous exports, made at a factory on Avery Island, a major tourist destination. (I didn't know it was okay to spit out the raw peppers!) I also tasted homemade pecan pralines, the signature candy of Louisiana. I learnt that the history of sugar has bitter roots... ☺

Graham Howe attended IPW 2016 as a guest of British Airways, the US Travel Association, and the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau. See www.ba.com, www.VisitTheUSA.com and www.visitNOPC.com.



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