
Welcome to New Orleans, Louisiana

By Judy Rittenhouse

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has chosen the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans for its 1985 World Conference. The delegates will visit a city celebrated for its jazz, seafood, naked women and architecture. Tour recommendations for Adventists presumably will be long on architecture.

But New Orleans (it does not rhyme with "new jeans") is distinctive in many ways that tourists may not observe. Here is the part that tourist manuals leave out. Here are sweeping generalities about New Orleans and its ways. Here's what is good and bad in its soul.

Over the centuries the people of New Orleans have worked hard to make a life here. They wring their existence from a swamp that puddles between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi.

The French originally settled it in order to protect La Salle's claim to all lands the river drained. Its purpose was commerce, and all its colonists had to do was stay alive and do business. That proved difficult.

The French and then the Spanish, and the many nationalities that joined them, developed levees, canals and pumps to drain their saucer of a port. (New Orleans has four times as many canals as Venice.) They laid out a small city and saw it flattened by hur-

ricanes, engulfed by floods and razed in fires. They endured yellow fever, cholera and typhus in the unpromising wet.

Although they were soon an amalgam of Europeans and Africans, they spoke French, sent their sons to school in France and called themselves Creoles. In the 19th century, immigrants of every description packed into the few dry habitable spaces. It was a close fit and necessitated civic tolerance. A hybrid way of life developed that is foreign to Northern Louisiana and the rest of the South. In its civic attitudes, religion and famous cuisine, New Orleans to this day is not Southern but Caribbean.

In New Orleans, nature could wipe out your family. Epidemics stole your children. Something you ate in the summer took you in an afternoon. Passion killed your neighbor. Men of honor died in duels. Death was everywhere. The creoles outreached it by relishing life, as survivors sometimes do. A hard life could be eclipsed by moments of intense pleasure.

Religious devotion and a good time: both are suitable responses to life in New Orleans. In 1821, John James Audubon wrote of a Sunday morning with "church bells ringing and billiard balls knocking." A person had to trust in faith or luck. The factors that determined survival—disease, hurricanes and fickle kings—were largely out of control.

When French, Spanish, Italian and Irish Catholics all met here, eventually they composed a lenient church with a wide tolerance of unorthodoxy. Walker Percy observes in

Judy Rittenhouse just came up to Pennsylvania from two years in New Orleans and gets back as often as she can.

Lancelot that it's not the religion "that informs this city, but rather some special local accommodation to it or relaxation from it."

A nun and a well-educated career woman are having lunch. They mention their mutual friend, a middle-aged man who has left his wife and moved in with a woman who is about to have his baby. The women are matter-of-fact. Their friend is much happier now. These women, devout women of correct behavior, are wholly New Orleans: They accept human frailty as they accept the weather.

Fortunately their tolerance extends to fundamentalists. Informed about the Seventh-day Adventist way of life and why Adventists won't partake of all that New Orleans has to offer, a local historian reviewed the precepts several times and said, "I don't question people's beliefs. I just hope that in this case they're wrong." She grew up in New Orleans and is patient with practices that strike her as crazy.

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When the General Conference delegates parade in the street in their national dress during the first days of their conference, they will be honoring centuries of parade and pageant tradition in their host city. They may be ignored, their orderly procession making much less of a sensation than it did in Dallas. But if the timing is right and their music is good, if they happily include onlookers and don't faint in the heat, then they will have a good time. And that is the criterion for success here. In New Orleans, charm is the entering wedge of the gospel.

It is easy to believe—and it might be true—that most folks have a good time, some of the time, at least. The privileged class has made gaiety its goal—and has achieved it. The unprivileged class leaves the impression that it does when it can.

The different classes define the other aspect of New Orleans, the stark class contrast that is as distinctive to the city as cast iron balconies. In New Orleans, the inflexible aspects of human nature have seized on social strata. Its class structure, based on lineage, is perpetuated through vigilance, exclusion and private education. The different layers are separate from one another; there is little mingling of concern and little sense of general community.

Mardi Gras is the clearest demonstration of the city's social layering. Every strata is represented and ratifies itself. At the top, the oldest, most prestigious krewes (celebrating organizations) ritualize their aristocracy—as they do in private clubs and debutante balls for their children.

Mardi Gras parades go on at least daily for two weeks before Fat Tuesday ushers in the start of Lent. These should be seen, if only for anthropological insight. The parading krewe members ride on floats. The crowds stand down on the ground shouting, "Throw me something, Mister," and try to catch the trinkets and junk that trickles down. Imagine what unsympathetic social analysts do with that!

Although money can't buy its way into the elite, the economic layers in New Orleans bunch up into two major groups—the well-off and the poor. The cleavage between them is enormous.

New Orleans' population is about half black, and almost 40 percent of the city's black families live in poverty, afflicted with poor education and underemployment. Six years ago, a mayor's study found that the 20 percent of the families with the lowest incomes receive four percent of all money earned here. Wealth is probably "more unequal" here than "in any other major city in the U.S.," according to the mayor's report.

In between the big blocks of rich and poor, is a relatively small middle-class of both black and white. Most middle-class people, especially white middle-class, live in the surrounding suburbs, leading an existence that

is as featureless as the city's is distinctive.

A sizable upper class is at the top, composed of the true *ancienne riche* mixed with some new money. New Orleans doesn't have the great fortunes of \$25 million or more. Its affluence is conspicuous, but the magnates earning a million dollars a month are in Dallas and Houston. Capital has not been wildly venturesome and lucky here.

New Orleans is a city of two layers: rich and poor. The local press describes this condition, and special reports detail it for the mayor. But even a tourist can appreciate the economic cleavage.

Some analysts contend that the class system of New Orleans would crumble in a generation if it weren't supported by two distinct school systems—public and private. Eighty-three percent of the black children are in public schools. Almost two-thirds of the white children attend private schools. Having one's child at the right school is a telling detail of social prominence. A doctor, treating the father, asks the child where she goes to school. The family can be designated accordingly. When we first moved to New Orleans, I learned that the uptown preschool to which my daughter had obtained a scholarship enrolled no black children. White parents explained it by saying the tuition alone was prohibitive for most people of color.

Public education here has not served the lower class well. Leave a note in easy English for a delivery person and observe that your request isn't followed because the man can't read it. The condition of mass under-education is one factor in New Orleans' low industrial development. It is commonly believed that more industry will come when it can find educated, literate labor.

However, that's not the entire explanation for the city's low industrial base. In the past two decades New Orleans has lost light industry to the suburbs for several reasons, including white flight that quickened with school integration. In this respect, the city almost strangled on racism.

Twenty percent of local employment is tourist related. Tourist services, however, use unskilled labor seasonally. Almost invariably those receiving the services are white, and the folks cleaning up, cooking, serving, singing and dancing for them are black—and underpaid. The average hotel housekeeper in New Orleans earns \$3.88/hour compared to \$6.15 in Washington, D.C., or \$5.60 in Boston. Living is not a lot cheaper here, but labor is.

In New Orleans we can see what society will be like when no one pays taxes. (State limits on property tax, a legacy of Huey Long's populism, result in 80 percent of property owners in New Orleans paying no

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property tax at all.) The resultant need is out on the surface.

It is not as easy to see that an unsung community of folk try to respond to the need. The people who survive as progressives vary in their makeup, but share this: they are patient. Many of them are religious.

New Orleans, Louisiana, is often abbreviated NOLA. Nola sounds like a woman with a past, who is worn and lovely and likes a good time. The name suits the city. It is a commercial center, but it doesn't buzz with mercantile hustle bustle. Its animation springs from life for its own sake, with French emphasis on the amenities: good food, good music, good talk and fancy clothes. Life here has a strong, slow pulse that sounds like snoring once the parades are past. It's the land of dreamy dreams, alright.

Semitropical growth is fragrant in March and rank in July. In the summer, moss grows

on the sidewalk and the yards are heavy with rot. But life isn't spent. People persist with lethargic spark. They run through the killing heat to jump on the bus and shuffle to a seat in air-conditioned relief.

There is a certain risk to being out alone in the evening, but I like to take the streetcar down St. Charles at twilight after rush hour. My son rides free. We take our seats in the middle of the car and raise the window. Then he sits up on my lap to feel the breeze.

Three kids are jiving around in front of the K B Drug Store at Broadway, a big silver radio sitting on the sidewalk. Stevie Wonder sings "Superstition" as they dance. One guy puts his head back with his eyes shut and purses his lips.

The sky we see through the oaks is dimming to lavender. Trees loom purple as we rock along. The mansions on the avenue recede, except for light from their chandeliers. Splintered through the beveled glass of big front doors it plays through the facets like bells. The streetcar slows to a stop; an appropriate burning smell of brakes comes up through the floor.

A heavy-set black woman climbs on. The driver nods as though he knows her and she sits by me. She is wearing a white uniform and duty shoes. She speaks to one of the four women on the car who are wearing uniforms, too.

To us she says, "How are you, Baby?" I know she is addressing me, not my son. She calls white women baby because she raised them when they were little. She adds, "I have a little boy just like you." She's not talking about her own family. This woman has actually been in one or two of the mansions we're passing. I don't know if they are more accessible to her than to me.

We get off at St. Andrew together. The light is almost gone. It will be cooler as we walk toward the river. I hope she does not live in the housing project at the end of the street.

Cicadas are singing in the first block. In New Orleans they remind me of the poor people—filling in the background for the lucky ones, making a claim by their presence and enduring song.