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'People want to get in their car right now and just drive' series tours 'Da Parish'

BY JESSICA FENDER | CONTRIBUTING WRITER SEP 30, 2020 - 6:00 AM 4 min to read

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The view of the New Orleans skyline after a rainstorm, seen from the levee in Old Arabi.

FILE PHOTO



Jessica Fender



The aroma of chargrilled oysters drifts past an impromptu dance floor, where couples sway to King Harvest's "Dancing in the Moonlight." A trio of pageant queens in sashes, tiaras and rain boots share a tray of freshly boiled shrimp, standing out among the other diners beneath the white canopy.

A darkening sky doesn't seem to worry the lively locals who've shown up on a recent Saturday morning to buy shrimp straight off the trawlers docked along Bayou La Lautre.

The semiannual St. Bernard Parish Seafood Market in Hopedale is just one of a surprising variety of attractions — from a burgeoning arts district and idyllic fishing villages to cultural deep dives and centuries of history — awaiting New Orleans day trippers in the parish right next door.

Tom Gregory, host of New Orleans Public Television's travel program "GO Coast: Louisiana," spent a year exploring St. Bernard Parish for a multiepisode special on New Orleans' "most historic neighbor," which debuted this month and runs through the fall on WLAE.

The parish's population is booming. In fact, the series found, St. Bernard is among the state's five fastest-growing areas, and Arabi is the sixth-fastest-growing suburb in the United States.



Locals line up to buy shrimp by the cooler-full at the St. Bernard Parish Seafood Market in Hopedale.

PHOTO BY JESSICA FENDER

It's an attractive destination for New Orleans-area visitors, Gregory said.

"People want to get in their car right now and just drive," he said. "St. Bernard is so close, and there are so many interesting sights."

Pastry, art, history

Scenic Highway 46 links the major stops like a string of pearls. But no matter how far into St. Bernard visitors intend to go, Gregory recommends starting just over the parish line in Arabi with an apple fritter from **Gerald's Donuts**, 6901 St. Claude Ave.; there's also a Chalmette Gerald's at 2101 E. Judge Perez Drive. The diner offers takeout as well as a patio. (Menu at geraldsdonuts.com)

The pillow-y pastries, roughly frisbee-sized, are sticky with sugar glaze, and Gerald's Old Arabii location in the heart of the Cultural District is just as sweet. The four-block stretch of St. Claude between Angela Street and Friscoville Avenue has been a target of recent revitalization efforts.

Within the 7,000-square-foot maze of treasures that is **Old Arabi Marketplace**, 7002 St Claude Ave., it's easy to lose an hour or two browsing curios from more than 100 consigners.

Vintage minks hang on antique bureaus, gilded retro carafes in colored crystal rest on stylish bar carts and ornate frames compete with the art and aged portraiture they surround. The stock changes weekly.

"Once people find us, they keep coming back. We're a bit of a secret destination," proprietor Lynda Catalanotto says of her shop, though she may just as well be talking about the district itself.

Just across the street at 6707 St. Claude Ave. sits the shops, galleries and artists studios of **St. Claude Arts** — open to studio tours during healthier days. The Cottage Shop is open by appointment.

The old neighborhood

Beloved indie theater [Zeitgeist Multidisciplinary Arts Center](#), 6621 St. Claude Ave., moved its mix of arthouse cinema, blackbox productions and burlesque from New Orleans to Old Arabi last year.



St. Bernard Parish is among the fastest growing communities in the nation.

PHOTO BY JESSICA FENDER

a standalone restaurant this October. The current address is 2239 St Claude Ave.

“There is a lot of cool stuff happening there,” Kristin Gile said. “It reminds us of old New Orleans with a real neighborly feel.”

Just a little farther down Louisiana 46’s oak tunnels and plantation ruins, travelers find hundreds of years of history at two unique sites.

Recently reopened, the **Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery** tells the story of the Battle of New Orleans, which took place here between the British and the United States. Though the War of 1812 had ended before fighting began, the U.S.’ underdog victory helped define an ethos for the emerging nation.

Its new, stylish digs boast historic bragging rights of their own as the former Joy Lounge, one of the first Black music clubs in Louisiana.

And a brightly colored storefront awaits another New Orleans transplant. Kristin and Nick Gile are expanding their backbar pop-up **Fry and Pie**, which serves creative gourmet poutines from a window behind the Hi-Ho Lounge, into



Christopher Moore Jr. reads through the names on headstones as volunteers take part in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Chalmette National Cemetery Volunteer Month in Chalmette, La., Saturday, March 17, 2018. Working with the National Park Service, the drive helps to clean, document and align many of the 14,000 veterans gravesites. Initially a resting place for Union soldiers killed in the Civil War, the Chalmette National Cemetery includes the graves of soldiers and veterans from the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, and the Vietnam War.

Advocate photo by Shawn Fink

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Placards along the driving and walking tour of the national park also describe Fazendeville, a historic Black community established just after the Civil War and named for the Black New Orleanian grocer who inherited the land. Fazendeville's two churches, schoolyard, baseball diamond and homes were torn down in the 1960s to restore the battlefield.

An audio tour of the cemetery offers a glimpse at the lives of Union soldiers buried beneath the tidy rows of Civil War-era tombstones, like the woman who disguised herself as a man to enlist. (Dial (504) 799-0803. Charges apply.)

While restrooms are available, the National Park Service has closed the visitors center over health concerns.

Los Isleños complex

And just past the community of Poydras, the **Los Isleños Museum Complex**, 1357 Bayou Road, highlights the centuries-old culture of some of the area's first non-Indigenous inhabitants: Spanish settlers from the Canary Islands who colonized Bayou Terre-Boeuf in the late 1700s.



Nine historic buildings like this trapper's cabin greet visitors to the Los Isleños Museum complex.

PHOTO BY JESSICA FENDER

Historic homes, a replica dancehall, two small museums and a nature trail form a little village for visitors to wander on 22 neatly landscaped acres. Cultural programs, like the annual la Fiesta de los Isleños in March, bring history to life through costume, art and demonstrations of the the Los Isleños communities particular brand of Spanish language.

Abbreviated, docent-led tours are available by appointment only during the coronavirus pandemic.

As day trippers continue their drive, shady oaks give way to cypress. Towns become villages. And instead of bucolic fields, the road runs level with active bayous framed by piles of crab traps and signs for fishing guides and charters. Delacroix, Shell Beach and Hopedale are all top destinations for anglers.

Locals perch along docks just off the road, socializing and hoping for redfish and trout.

Back at the seafood market in Hopedale, raindrops are starting to fall, but the lines at the trawlers don't let up.

Harry and Jennifer Alfonso from the nearby community of Violet hoisted their gray cooler loaded down with 60 pounds of shrimp into a pickup truck.

"It's fresh, right off the water," Harry Alfonso said, explaining why the couple comes back each month.

"And we're supporting our local businesses," Jennifer Alfonso said.

GO Coast airs on WLAE-TV in New Orleans on Fridays at 9:30 pm and Sundays at 8:30 pm.