

French Flair



It's 8:30 on a Saturday morning at Buck & Johnny's in Breaux Bridge, just outside of Lafayette, Louisiana, and the weekly "World Famous Zydeco Breakfast" is about to get under way. Excitement fills the air because today's entertainer—Grammy winner Chubby Carrier, a third-generation Zydeco musician and a local favorite—will soon take the stage. In fact, the effervescent Chubby and his accompanying Bayou Swamp Band (pictured at left) can barely contain their own energy. After what can only be described as a musical explosion when they start to play, dozens of couples, old and young, Black and white, pour onto the dance floor, dancing the two-step with gusto.

Forget breakfast. It's time to dance. They do so sporting cowboy hats, glittery fedoras, and cardboard tiaras on their heads. The men are adorned in tie-dye T-shirts or Western wear, the women in paisley or leopard-print blouses, some of them with knee-length skirts that billow outward when they twirl. There's even a woman in multihued green, gold, and purple bib overalls—Mardi Gras colors—and a man in an electric wheelchair spinning in circles. The dancers cut a rug for upwards of 2 hours, with Chubby and his band delivering favorites like the "Zydeco Shuffle" and "Don't Mess with My Toot Toot." The music is so infectious, even people seated at the tables, myself included, are tapping their feet and bouncing to the beat.

of south Louisiana known as Acadiana. You can find music nearly every night of the week in Lafayette and surrounding towns. Visit enough venues and you'll start to see the same couples dancing in different locations, sometimes on the same day, making you wonder, *Don't Cajun folks' feet ever get tired?*

As you put your own feet to the ambitious test, start them in Lafayette. Use the metropolis as a home base, savoring the city's delights while also launching out on day trips to enjoy the charming small towns surrounding it. In short order, you'll discover why Lafayette has been called the "Happiest City in America." Residents exhibit a *joie de vivre*, French for "buoyant enjoyment of life," and you'll likely come away feeling the same after sampling the music, food, history, and memorable landscapes.

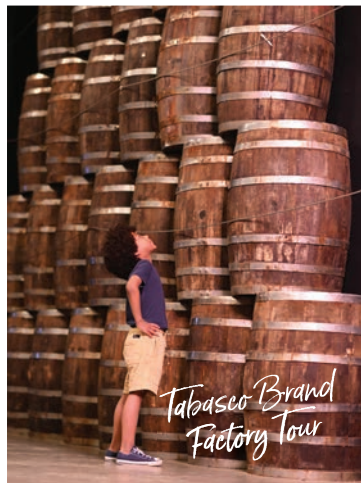
Music, both Zydeco and Cajun, is one of the principal draws to this area

Savor the cuisine, music, and history of Louisiana's Acadiana region

BY RICH WARREN



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY LAFAYETTE TRAVEL.COM (3); COURTESY LOUISIANA OFFICE OF TOURISM



Culture and Cuisine

As you begin exploring the area, you'll find French flavor everywhere, including on signs in both French and English. You'll even occasionally hear French spoken among locals, many of whom have French last names—Breau, Berthelot, LeBlanc, and hundreds of others. Many are descendants of the French-speaking settlers who arrived in the late 1700s from Acadie, now known as Nova Scotia. Expelled by the British for their refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to the crown, exiled Acadians were lured to southern Louisiana by reports of fertile farmland and lazy bayous filled with wildlife.

Over the decades, *Acadian* got transformed to *Cajun* and nowadays embodies a distinctive culture that adapted to thrive in its new surroundings. Stop in at the Acadian Cultural Center, which is part of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, to get an overview of that storied history. Exhibits, ranger-led programs, an interesting film, and even occasional front-porch concerts focus on Cajun traditions passed down through the centuries.

Then step back in time at the Vermilionville Living History Museum and Folklife Park, a re-created village of

historic homes and public structures that includes a school, homes, and a chapel showing what life was like for Cajuns, as well as Native Americans, Creoles, and people of African descent from 1765 to 1890. Chat with costumed living historians who demonstrate crafts such as blacksmithing, spinning, weaving, woodworking, and basketmaking. Musicians and storytellers also offer a glimpse of Cajun heritage on the 23-acre site that hugs the banks of Bayou Vermilion.

Across town, Acadian Village provides a more rustic interpretation of Cajun life. Its unpolished historic homes, reassembled from sites across the region, give insight into the simple, mostly agrarian lifestyle of rural areas, where people used the materials available to them. For example, they not only grew corn to eat but also used the corn shucks to make dolls and brooms, and they stuffed mattresses with moss.

Born out of that culture, a robust cuisine combines French, Spanish, West African, and Southern cooking techniques and ingredients. Flavorful Cajun favorites like jambalaya, étouffée, and endless variations of gumbo grace the menus of the region's restaurants,

and crawfish reigns as culinary king. Resembling tiny lobsters, these freshwater crustaceans have meat just as sweet and sumptuous as their larger cousins.

And you simply can't go home without sampling boudin (pronounced *boo-DAN*), a highly seasoned sausage made with ground meat—often pork but sometimes shrimp or even alligator—mixed with rice and stuffed in sausage casing. A regional staple, it's practically Cajun fast food.

For an excellent overview of the area's zesty menu options, don't miss Cajun Food Tours, operated by the spirited and personable Marie Ducote-Comeaux, whose passion for local culture is contagious. Her never-dull tours last from 3 hours to all day and showcase a host of eating establishments. On my tour, we sampled gumbo, crawfish, boudin, and even alligator bites. You'll even learn a bit of French—Ducote's rallying cry at each

stop is "*Allons manger!*" (Let's go eat!), signaling that it's time to move somewhere else to continue noshing.

Spices and Swamps

Cajun cooks often reach for hot sauce to add zing to their recipes, and you can see where one of the world's most popular sauces is made on nearby Avery Island, about 30 miles south of Lafayette. Take the Tabasco Brand Factory Tour to watch the fiery pepper sauce being manufactured in the same place that the McIlhenny family has produced it for more than 150 years. One especially fascinating area depicts marketing practices over the years, including a Super Bowl ad from 1998 featuring a mosquito that bursts into flame after taking a chomp out of a person who's just consumed the sauce. Dig into some Tabasco-seasoned fare yourself in the on-site Tabasco Restaurant 1868!, named for the

company's founding year.

Afterward, drive through the adjacent Jungle Gardens, a beautifully landscaped 170-acre oasis where live oaks extend their lengthy branches over a series of lagoons, and stands of azaleas and camellias offer colorful splashes here and there. Stop along the way to take a short walk to the garden's Bird City, a rookery where thousands of snowy egrets raise their young on man-made platforms above a lake.

Discover more of the region's beauty on swamp tours of the gigantic Atchafalaya Basin, just east of Lafayette. At 25 miles wide and 150 miles long, it's the largest continuous river swamp in the United States (larger than the Florida Everglades) and a major source of crawfish. Among several concessionaires, I opted for a leisurely 90-minute boat ride with McGee's Swamp Tours, which offers a host of adventures. Slowly cruising past



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flooded cypress trees, I watched ospreys dive for fish, bald eagles preparing a nest, and a far-off flock of ibises making circular flights, resembling a tornado made of birds.

And of course, we saw dozens of alligators basking on the banks of small islands or floating in the water with only their eyes and the tips of their snouts breaking the surface. Our guide recognized a few of them, including one he'd named Leroy—identifiable because a small portion of his tail was missing.

Consider timing your visit during one of the many festivals Lafayette and its surrounding communities hold each year. This fall, the Acadiana Po-Boy & Plate Lunch Festival on September 10 will combine 2 of Lafayette's favorite culinary offerings in Parc Sans Souci. And enjoy 3 days of nonstop music, dancing, food, and crafts during the Festivals Acadiens et Creoles. Held from October 14 through 16 in Girard Park, the event began nearly 50 years ago and celebrates the best of Acadiana's Cajun and Creole culture.

If you visit in the spring, the Festival International de Louisiane fills multiple downtown stages with 5 days of world music. Food festivals also abound then, including the Scott Boudin Festival and the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival. And of course, there's Mardi Gras. Lafayette's version is family friendly, offering at least half a dozen parades of costumed revelers and Mardi Gras royalty passing on elaborate floats.

During my short 5-day visit this year, I barely scratched the surface of everything there is to see and do in Lafayette. There wasn't enough time to visit the Acadiana Center for the Arts, the Hilliard Art Museum, the Lafayette Science Museum, and the Children's Museum of Acadiana. I'm looking forward to relishing even more flavor on my next trip and joining the whirling medley of Cajun life—on the dance floor and beyond.

RICH WARREN is a freelance writer from Columbus, Ohio.

If You Go

For more details, call Lafayette Travel at (800) 346-1958 or visit lafayettettravel.com.

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Eat, Dance, Sleep

You can never go wrong ordering gumbo or crawfish étouffée, and I reveled in those dishes and more across Acadiana. Among many exceptional restaurants to try are Bon Temps Grill, Don's Seafood, The Cajun Table, Acadian Superette, and Olde Tyme Grocery. Excellent boudin can be found nearly everywhere, but I particularly liked the versions served at Earl's Cajun Market and at Johnson's Boucaniere.

Popular musical venues include the Hideaway on Lee, the Blue Moon Saloon, or the unique Rock'n'Bowl, where you can throw a few strikes in addition to hearing live music. For total cultural immersion, stop in at La Poussiere, an old-time Cajun dance hall in Breaux Bridge where French is often spoken—and sung—from the stage, generally on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Even in coffeehouses, you may encounter a "Cajun Jam," with young performers seated beside grizzled old-timers re-creating the French music of their heritage.

Most of the major hotel chains can be found in Lafayette, including the comfortable and centrally located DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Lafayette that overlooks the Vermilion River. Rates start at \$115. For more intimate accommodations, consider the Maison Mouton Bed and Breakfast, constructed in 1820 in the Sterling Grove National Historic District (rates start at \$139), or T'Frere's House Bed & Breakfast, with a pleasant courtyard and eclectic mix of period pieces and modern decor (rates start at \$135).

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