



Travel: Around the World

DECADENCE, SOUTHERN STYLE

At 300 years old, New Orleans Sure Isn't Showing Its Age.

By Rich Warren

New Orleans turns 300 this year, but the folks down there never need much of an excuse to party. In fact, "Southern Decadence" could very well describe their lifestyle, not just the huge gay and lesbian festival over Labor Day weekend. As an Ursuline nun in one of the city's convents put it in 1728: "The devil has a vast empire here."

Obviously, things haven't changed much in three centuries. Then and now, the Big Easy is a place to have fun.

I recently had a total immersion into LGBT New Orleans when I attended the annual Saints and Sinners conference, a festival dedicated to contemporary gay literature that attracts writers, editors, publishers and activists from all over the country. Speakers are a virtual who's-who of today's LGBT literary scene. Notables this year were Felice Picano and Andrew Holleran, while attendees in years past have included Dorothy Allison, Edmund White, Michael Cunningham and Christopher Rice (Anne's son).

A highlight this year was Jaffe Cohen, one of the screen writers who brought us the FX mini-series, "Feud: Bette and Joan." A former gay stand-up comic, the effusive Cohen didn't hesitate to dish and offer some behind-the-scenes observations. His take? Jessica Lange did a bang-up job as Joan Crawford. (He was less enthusiastic about Susan Sarandon's Bette Davis.)

The conference was held at the venerable Hotel Monteleone, for decades a destination for Southern writers, gay and straight. Truman Capote long claimed he was born there, which turns out to be another one of his, oh, shall we call them embellishments? His birth record shows his mother made it to the hospital on time.

Don't miss the Monteleone's world-famous Carousel Bar, which is indeed an actual carousel that spins, not all that slowly, with bartenders in the middle serving stiff drinks. And the more beverages you consume, the more you risk motion sickness.

Part of the conference was a Gay History Walking Tour, led by local

historian Frank Perez, who schedules these tours all year long. It's a hodgepodge of fun facts. We learned that in the early 20th century when the entire French Quarter was threatened with demolition, it was a coterie of gay men who united with Uptown society matrons to raise the call for preservation.

And did you know the city's founder, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, lived into his late 80s and never married, which doesn't mean anything at all, does it? (Wink, wink.)

Following the literary theme, we learned that straight writer William Faulkner had a gay roommate, who occasionally would join him huddled up on a fire escape, firing BBs at passing nuns. We also paid homage to gay playwright Tennessee Williams, passing by the apartment on St. Peter Street where the rumblings of a streetcar half a block away inspired "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Tennessee called New Orleans his "spiritual home," and he spent almost every night while he was in town at the bar Cafe Lafitte in Exile on Bourbon Street. It's the oldest continually operating gay bar in the United States, a place where Perez always ends his tours.

As regards the famed Bourbon Street, yes, it's the location for the renowned bar as well as two others: Oz and Bourbon Pub & Para which are popular magnets for out-of-towners, especially during Southern Decadence. But it's a pretty sleazy place. Even by day you'll see plump grannies and suspended grandpas strolling, cocktails in hand (You can do that in NOLA). But by night, you're likely to see hordes of drunken frat boys thumping their chests like gorillas and puking theatrically, the aroma of which lingers into the next morning.

At least the LGBT bars are at the quiet end of the street.

Thankfully, Bourbon Street is not the center of the LGBT universe in New Orleans. Although the French Quarter and the nearby neighborhoods of Marigny and Bywater come close to qualifying gayborhoods, there are actually "little pockets of gay everywhere" according to one local I talked to.

Quieter bars can be found in the northern section of the French Quarter along Burgundy and Dauphine Streets. In Marigny, there's the Phoenix, catering to the leather/Levis scene, and All Ways

Lounge, offering events as diverse as drag shows and lubed jock strap wrestling. In Bywater, there's the Country Club, which invites you to "shed your clothes and cool your (high) heels at the city's only pool and hot tub party!"

Other miscellaneous tidbits I gleaned during my visit:

- Want to experience Gay Mardi Gras? Although there are five LGBT "krewes," the organizations throwing balls and parades during the Carnival season, only two of them—Armeinuis and Lords of Leather—host balls for which out-of-towners can buy tickets. (For the other three, try to go as the guest of a local.) On Mardi Gras Day itself, there's a huge costume street party outside the gay bars on Bourbon Street.
- There's no "party central" for Southern Decadence. More than 200 events take place, offering ample choices at multiple venues for the more than 200,000 people who descend on the city. Other lesser-known events throughout the year that are popular with LGBT visitors include Halloween, with costume parties and a floating tea dance on the Mississippi; the New Orleans Film Festival, also in October; and in recent years, gay Easter parades.
- For my money, the most fun you'll have is on the Scandalous Cocktail Hour tour, where you'll go from one of the city's famed watering holes to another, hearing a different scandal at each one. Murders! Adultery! Betrayals! By the last stop, I was so schnoekered I could make neither heads nor tails of the guide's narration, something to do with Lee Harvey Oswald's NOLA connections.

The grand finale for my stay in New Orleans was the annual Stella Shouting Contest, wherein 25 contestants reproduce the famous scene from "Streetcar" where a hormone-crazed Marlon Brando pleads and shouts for his angry wife Stella to come down the spiral staircase so they can.... well, you know what he wanted.

This year, there was a beer-bellied Stanley, a Stanley wearing horn-rimmed glasses and pontificating in a Shakespearean oration, and a



fair amount of women shouting for their choice of Stanley or Stella. One of them was an iddy biddy thing who nevertheless had a voice that could part fog. And needless to say, there's lots of shirt-ripping among the men.

This year's winner was from Great Britain, shouting so hard the muscles in his neck looked like they'd rip right out of his head. But the runner-up was a gay man wearing a pink shirt and shorts embroidered with birds. It was Stanley he was waiting for.

The judges remarked at how they were especially impressed by how he flicked his long hair. Though he failed to take the grand prize, he hopefully found another Stanley later that night on his own time.



Photos courtesy of Paul Broussard and New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau