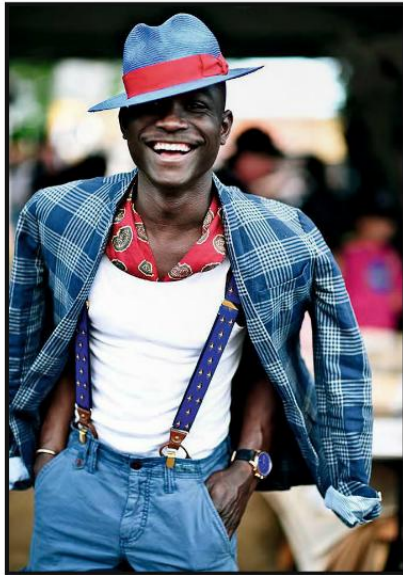


ULTRA CITY



A RETURN TO *THE BIG EASY*

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina a decade ago is history. New Orleans has not only healed, but is flourishing, with hip fashion quarters, rooftop bars and a buzzy music scene. *Douglas Rogers* goes in search of the high notes



CHANDLERS, MOSAICS
AND ALL THAT JAZZ
A musical brunch at Almond's
restaurant in the French
Quarter (above) and Dapper
Lou keeps it fun and stylish
at New Orleans Jazz &
Heritage Festival (left)
Photograph KRIS DAVIDSON



IT'S MY FIRST NIGHT

in New Orleans and I've stumbled into an argument. I'm sipping a Sazerac at The Carousel Bar in the Hotel Monteleone (Truman Capote is said to have had his first-ever drink here) and the Englishwoman next to me is telling her boyfriend she's lost all respect for him.

"Let's get this straight – you left this city for Los Angeles? What? Are you insane?"

"You've only been here three hours, what do you know?" he protests.

"Three hours is enough – I'm moving here! It's like nowhere else on Earth: the architecture, the gardens, the courtyards – the cocktails!" and she raises her glass and orders another.

I glance over and realise, to my astonishment, that I recognise the boyfriend from a television show. He's Steve Zissis, actor and co-creator of the hit HBO comedy *Togetherness*. I introduce myself. The Englishwoman is Kelly Marcel, a screenwriter living in LA, on her first visit to Zissis's home town.

"Written anything I know?" I ask.

"*Fifty Shades of Grey*," she mutters. "But I've never seen it. Oh, and *Saving Mr Banks*. Hey, join us, let's get a table; you need to move here too! Steve, tell him he has to move here too!"

And with that we're away, on a spontaneous bar crawl through the French Quarter – Zissis and his sister Maria as guides – that ends with me stumbling back to my hotel at 5am, the sun coming up over the Mississippi.

New Orleans gets its hook into you and doesn't let go.

I first visited in December 2005, just over three months after Hurricane Katrina, and, despite the devastation, I fell in love within three hours too. I recall checking into one of the few hotels open at the time, Soniat House, a gorgeous Creole inn with wrought-iron balconies and a palm-shaded courtyard, and going for a walk. The French Quarter resembled a ghost town, with a vague air of menace. There were soldiers on the streets, talk of a 2am curfew.



Neon-lit Bourbon Street was more frontier town than fun. But then, as the sun dipped, a strange thing happened. I turned down Toulouse and saw a horse tethered to a vintage iron hitching post. A policeman was smoking a cigarette with two girls under a gas lamp. On Chartres Street a brass band – six men in white suits and top hats – was playing ragtime tunes. I felt as if I had stumbled into another century; if Napoleon had appeared and asked me for a light I would not have been surprised. Addicted, obsessed, I've returned to New Orleans many times since, and would move here tomorrow if I thought my liver could last.

Of course, back in 2005 the world thought this city lost forever. Crime-ridden, corrupt, with a collapsing infrastructure before the storm (people forget it wasn't the hurricane but the broken levees that destroyed the city), no one gave New Orleans any chance after it. Yet something of a miracle has happened since. Although poor areas of the Crescent City are still deprived, tourism is booming. More visitors come now than ever before, there are some 1,400 restaurants (from 900 before the storm), swanky new hotels open all the time, and neighbourhoods that were once no-go zones are now flush with galleries, theatres, stylish bars and loft apartments. I was here to sample this glamorous New Orleans – its fanciest hotels, restaurants and areas – but also to ask a question: can this sleek new cosmopolitanism co-exist with the history, tradition and gritty authenticity that made New Orleans unique in the first place?

"Welcome to the Old No 77 & Chandlery," says a uniformed bellhop.

I had made sure to check into the city's coolest new hotel, a converted 1854-built coffee and tobacco warehouse in the Central Business District (CBD), three blocks from the French Quarter. Most New Orleans hotels fall into one of two categories: the gilded-age grande dame (The Roosevelt, Windsor Court) or the mass-market chain (Hilton, Sheraton). The Old No 77 is different: all exposed brick, hardwood floors, rustic wood tables and a handsome open-plan ground-floor restaurant. Compère Lapin, helmed by St Lucia-born chef Nina Compton, famous from the hit television show *Top*



Chef. An espresso bar – the new staple of any hip urban hotel – flanks the check-in desk. My second-floor room was loft-sized, with a low-slung king-sized bed splashed with a red throw. Some kinks needed ironing out – the light and ceiling fan went on in the middle of the night – but when you return at 5am that matters not.

Being hungover, I dedicated my second day to food.

New Orleans has a rich culinary culture, but if someone had told me a year ago that the hottest new restaurant in America would be that of an Israeli immigrant making his grandmother's baba ganoush for New Orleans sophisticates, I would have said you were mad.

I meet the chef in question, Alon Shaya, a beanpole of a man in computer-geek glasses, at Shaya, on Magazine Street, Uptown. If the Quarter is known for its venerable French-Creole institutions – Antoine's, Arnaud's, Galatoire's – Magazine Street is its modish cousin, and Shaya fits the bill: cool blue and white tones, plush seating, marble tables and wall-to-wall beautiful people. It opened in February; three months later Alon Shaya won the 2015 James Beard Award for the Best Chef in the South. A wood-fired oven churned out fluffy pitta breads the shape of rugby balls, and waiters ferried me delectable small plates: avocado toast with smoked whitefish; a roasted-pepper and aubergine purée called Lutenitsa; Louisiana shrimp shakshouka. This is not traditional New Orleans cuisine, of course, but its basis – fresh Delta farmland ingredients, abundant Gulf seafood, and immigrant roots – is perfect New Orleans. This is a port city, after all, with a melting pot of migrant cultures. "We have a unique food community," says Shaya. "The point is to embrace what's been and move it forward."

Magazine Street, linking the CBD with the Garden District and Uptown, is the Rodeo Drive of the South, and I visited its chicest boutiques. Southern belles snapped up flamboyant home décor in *Mad Men* actor Bryan Batt's store Hazelnut; debutantes cooed over the silver fleur-de-lis necklaces of jeweller Mignon Faget; I bought a cute posy-embroidered sundress for my daughter at Phippen Lane, a chic children's store owned by the wife of actor John Goodman.

The Garden District and Uptown (historically the American Quarter) has long been for the moneyed upper classes, though. I spent my third day in a revived neighbourhood, the Bywater, east of the French Quarter, adjacent to the Lower Ninth Ward – the epicentre of Katrina's devastation 10 years ago.

Back then, when I drove down the Lower Ninth, it was an apocalypse: houses on top of houses; Cadillacs in treetops. The Bywater was a ghost town and I gave it little hope. Yet, on visits since, I've observed its transformation. With so many cheap shot-gun shacks available, young creatives moved in to open cool artisanal shops and studios: corner wine store Bacchanal; glass-blowing operation Studio Inferno; an open-air theatre, The Old Ironworks which, fittingly for the 10th anniversary of a storm, was staging *The Tempest*. All very well, you say, but hardly luxe or glamorous.

But then there's Rice Mill Lofts, once the largest rice mill in America, empty for decades, now an industrial-chic apartment complex with an acclaimed Italian-American restaurant, Mariza, at the front. I was given a tour by its owner, Sean Cummings, a boutique hotelier (he owns International House in New Orleans) and urban design guru. A soft-spoken entrepreneur with dashing good looks, Cummings bought the building 20 years ago but could do nothing with it. Who wanted to be in the Bywater back then? Then came Katrina. "Everyone thought this city was finished with the storm," Cummings recalled, "but I thought: 'This is a new beginning.'"

Rice Mill Lofts opened in 2011 and affluent tennis drawn to cool urban living (the rooftop views of the city and the crescent in the Mississippi are spectacular) moved in. Among them was a pugacious New York financier, Ron Bienvenu, who relocated his hedge fund to New Orleans after meeting Cummings. "I never looked back," he grinned. "In New York you lose a little bit of yourself every day. New Orleans is the opposite – I feel more alive and joyous."

I spoke to him by the complex's swimming pool; giant white letters that read "You Are Beautiful" were stencilled on the brick wall above us. "Banksy tagged the building after Katrina," said Ron, grinning. "Sean made sure to keep it. We are beautiful."

With the influx of affluent outsiders, among them celebrities (Brad and Angelina have a house in the French Quarter; Sandra Bullock and soon Jay-Z and Beyoncé in Garden District), it's not surprising a VIP tour company has sprung up to cater to wealthy tourists. I met up with Jennifer Simpson, co-founder of Bespoke Experiences, who moved to New Orleans in 2012 from Canada.

"Luxury is well hidden here and I noticed a demand to access it."



HOT IN THE CITY
Clockwise from top left: Bourbon Street, in the heart of the French Quarter; the chef Alon Shaya with his fresh, fluffy pitta bread; Crescent Park featuring David Adjaye's rusted-steel Piny Street Bridge; Brad Pitt at his home in New Orleans

In New York you lose a little bit of yourself every day. In New Orleans I feel more alive and joyous





SHADES OF COOL
Clockwise from above:
tram travel; the *Old No 77 & Chandlery* hotel; *Warby Parker* Frame Studio on Magazine Street, which sells glasses



she said. Simpson can arrange everything from a ride on a Mardi Gras float to a picnic under the live oaks in Audubon Park. She got me private access to something even better: the rooftop of the Cabildo, the glorious 1790s Spanish colonial building on Jackson Square, site of the Louisiana Purchase transfer ceremony in 1803. The Cabildo houses rare artefacts, including Napoleon's death mask, but the highlight was access to the rooftop spire where I looked down on Jackson Square and steamboats on the Mississippi beyond. I felt I was stepping back to the time of Twain.

So what of my original question: what will happen to the classic New Orleans, its traditions and exotic atmosphere? The answer, I can report, is that it is thriving as never before. I got a glimpse of this at the historic Sazerac Bar in The Roosevelt hotel, where a dashing waiter in a white tuxedo and bow tie poured me a Ramos Gin Fizz as smooth as those that Governor Huey P Long had when he drank here. I sensed it in the birdsong and foliage of the courtyard below my room at the Audubon Cottages, the historic French Quarter inn that I checked into on my last night. Most of all, though, I saw it at Galatoire's classic 1905 Creole restaurant on Bourbon Street where I had the famous Friday lunch. Galatoire's is nigh impossible to get into on Fridays: it takes no reservations, so regulars send their clerks or servants to stand in line from 6am to secure a table. Through a friend of a friend, I was able to dine with Melvin Rodrigue, president and co-owner of the restaurant, and thus the most important man in the room.

And what a room. I entered a glorious museum piece of sea-green walls, white tablecloths, antique ceiling fans and glittering lamp-lit mirrors. By 11.30am it was packed: Houston oil men in cowboy hats, Mississippi lawyers in white linen jackets, local politicians, chefs, celebrities ordering shrimp remoulade and soufflé potatoes. Melvin pointed out actress Sela Ward in Jackie O sunglasses; I noticed Alon Shaya at a table of 10. That the city's hottest chef dines in its most revered restaurant says it all.

At about 4pm (it's usual for Friday lunch to last until dinner) something astonishing happened. A brass band appeared at the entrance – some drunken diner had lured it in from busking outside – and began belting out such a rousing rendition of Satchmo's *When the Saints Go Marching In* that the entire room of 160 people leapt to their feet, waved white napkins in the air, and sang along. Melvin looked at me with a wry grin. "Welcome to New Orleans," he said. "Where else in the world does this happen?"

I thought of my new friends Kelly and Steve. What the hell; I might move here too.

THE ULTRA GUIDE TO NEW ORLEANS

THREE HOTELS

OLD NO 77 & CHANDLERY

The loft-like rooms – exposed brick, hardwood floors, ceiling fans – come with mod cons such as espresso makers, but the charm is in the open-plan ground floor with coffee bar, cocktail lounge and restaurant, *Compère Lapin* (comperelapin.com), where chef Nina Compton serves up tropical Caribbean flavours: spiced pig's ears and red-snapper crudo. 535 Tchoupitoulas Street (001 504 527 527); old77hotel.com; doubles from \$107 (£70)

AUDUBON COTTAGES

Along with *Soniat House* (soniathouse.com), this 18th-century, seven-room Creole inn is the most intimate boutique hotel in the Quarter. I stayed in Cottage Four, a two-room duplex filled with antiques and oil paintings. My balcony overlooked a lush courtyard with a salt-water swimming pool. Only a block from Bourbon Street, this is a sanctuary from the chaos. 509 Dauphine Street (001 504 585 1516); auduboncottages.com; doubles from \$269

INTERNATIONAL HOUSE

Sean Cummings's 117-room LM Pagano-designed property in a towering downtown

building is a study in contemporary chic. Start with a Remington cocktail (mezcal, Benedictine) in the Loa Bar before taking a lift to your upper-floor room. My penthouse had lush rugs, crystal chandeliers, a seating area with grand piano and dramatic Mississippi views. 221 Conny Street (001 504 553 9550; ihotel.com; doubles from \$159)

THREE RESTAURANTS

SHAYA

Alon Shaya's award-winning contemporary Israeli restaurant lives up to the hype. Try the sabich: fried aubergine, preserved mango and soft-cooked egg. This is not his first rodeo. Along with his mentor, John Besh, he also runs the beloved Italian restaurant *Domenica* (domenica-restaurant.com) in The Roosevelt, and the acclaimed *Pizza Domenica* (pizzadomenica.com) on Magazine Street. 4213 Magazine Street (001 504 891 4213; shoyarestaurant.com)

SQUARE ROOT

Sixteen diners a night get to sample the spectacular 14-course tasting menu of chef Phillip L Lopez at this jewellery-box-sized space on Magazine Street.

Molecular creations include foie-gras cotton candy and Cohiba-cigar-smoked scallops. Allow three hours for dining. 1800 Magazine Street (001 504 309 7800; squaresootnola.com)

GALATOIRE'S

What to say? One of the great dining experiences on earth, particularly Friday lunch (pictured below). Founded in 1905, this restaurant's waiters, in tuxedos, present Creole classics such as crabmeat Yvonne, oysters Rockefeller and shrimp étouffée, to a Who's Who of Southern society. Queue



from 6am for the Friday table and dress smart (seersucker and bow ties for boys). 209 Bourbon Street (001 504 525 202); galatoires.com

THREE THINGS TO DO

VISIT HOUMAS HOUSE PLANTATION

Up until the Civil War the land along the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans had 250 sugar plantation mansions. Most are long gone, but the oak-fronted Greek Revival Houmas House, bought and restored by entrepreneur Kevin Kelly, stands strong. Order a mint julep from The Turtle Bar in the gardens and take a guided tour of antique-filled rooms. 40136 Highway 942, Darrow, Louisiana (001 225 473 9380; houmashouse.com)

WALK CRESCENT PARK

New Orleans's first green space along the Mississippi opened in 2014, the brainchild of hotel-developer Sean Cummings. The 1.4 mile-long park with landscaped gardens connects the French Quarter with the Bywater, the highlight being the rusted-steel Piety Street Bridge, aka the 'Rusty Rainbow', by superstar British architect David Adjaye. Stand on the Piety Pier and watch the steamboats chum the river.

DO A GUIDED VIP TOUR

For curated tours of behind-the-scenes New Orleans and private access to everything from French Quarter galleries to Louisiana State Museum collections or local jazz station WWOZ, contact Jennifer Simpson at Bespoke Experiences. (001 504 534 8874; bespokeprivate-tours.com)

BEST OF THE BARS

Sample the turtle soup and a brandy milk punch (the latter on a menu of "eye openers") for breakfast at the beloved Brennan's (brennansneworleans.com) on Royal Street. "Breakfast at Brennan's" is not a catchphrase for nothing. Savour a Pimm's Cup at Napoleon House (napoleonhouse.com), an elegantly decrepit Creole building on Chartres Street. Taste the French 75 champagne cocktail, made to perfection by Chris Hannah at the French 75 Bar of the historic Arnaud's restaurant (arnaudsrestaurant.com). And sup on a Sazerac at the legendary walnut-lined Sazerac Bar in the gilded Roosevelt hotel (therooseveltnorleans.com).

For further details on New Orleans visit neworleanscvb.com or discoveramerica.com