



FROM QUÉBEC TO CAJUN COUNTRY

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE BICENTENNIAL

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FROM QUÉBEC

by Chris King

The coming year will be a good time for Americans to think graciously of France, and especially of the French in the Americas. In 2003 we will celebrate the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase, the greatest real-estate bargain in history. President Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory (more than 800,000 square miles of land) from Napoleon Bonaparte for about four cents per acre. A bargain even at 1803 prices, this deal doubled the national territory of the United States.

Traces of French culture remained, however. Those cultural remnants, France itself, and the historic deal cut between Napoleon and Jefferson will be celebrated in the coming year in the 15 states carved out of the territory—Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, North Dakota, Texas, South Dakota, New Mexico, Nebraska, Kansas, Wyoming, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Colorado and Montana—but especially in Louisiana, where New Yorkers craving a taste of France (hybridized with the spicy American South) have long known to go.

Québec, no stranger to celebrating French culture, has taken notice. This past August Québec City's annual Fêtes de la

Old Québec: a very French part of a very French Canadian city

TO CAJUN

The bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase brings ample opportunities to celebrate French culture in the Americas.

Nouvelle France (866/391-3383; www.nouvellefrance.qc.ca) paid tribute to Louisiana, in honor of the bicentennial, and will do so again in 2003.

Québec has an important historical connection to Louisiana—Montréal was the home base of the French-born explorer Rene-Robert La Salle, who in 1682 named the swampy land near the mouth of the Mississippi after a French king, Louis XIV. However, most people of French descent in Louisiana emigrated

from another area of Canada, Acadia, in what is now Nova Scotia. In fact, the word "Cajun" derives from the pronunciation of "Acadien."

So 2003 will be an especially appropriate time to visit Louisiana. And, of course, any time is the right time to visit the province of Québec if you want to feel a little French without traveling overseas.



Thanks, Napoleon

Any Louisiana Purchase celebrant should want to learn about the deal itself, and the original documents and other historical exhibits will be on display in Baton Rouge at the Louisiana Old State Capitol (800/488-2968) from Feb. 3 to Aug. 17. (For an online introduction to the exhibition, visit www.sec.state.la.us/purchase/purchase-index.htm.)

Baton Rouge itself, located in plantation country, is not the most French of cities, though on any weekend you can experi-

Louisiana, the logical aftermath to a weekend in Baton Rouge is a Sunday afternoon at Angelle's Whiskey River Landing (337/228-8567; www.angelleswhiskeyriver.com) just down I-10 in Henderson. Built on a dock hanging out over the Atchafalaya Basin, this is a real Cajun honky tonk, swamp and all. Its acoustics are primitive, but major Cajun artist Balfa Tojours cut a record there because the lively local crowd evokes the band's feistiest performances. (See Savings, p. 10.)

Henderson, in the heart of Cajun

COUNTRY

ence a feast of Cajun food and music. Each Friday evening the local chapter of the Cajun French Music Association (225/291-6216; www.cajunfrenchmusic.org) presents dances at the Fraternal Order of Police. Catfish and gumbo dinners are served in a roomy hall, where musicians and dancers thrive in the smoke-free, alcohol-moderate atmosphere.

The good times keep rolling on Saturday, one of the live music nights (Wednesday being the other) at Brunet's Cajun Restaurant (225/272-6226), a genuinely local dance hall. Diners may feast on crawfish prepared umpteen ways while enjoying a cross-generational dance fest that feels like a family reunion for the entire town.

If you are seeking the French flavor of

Country, is on the outskirts of Lafayette, which is home to many Cajun dance halls as well as Vermilionville (800/992-2968; www.vermilionville.org), a living history museum devoted to Cajun culture. Lafayette also stages an annual Festival International de Louisiane (www.festivalinternational.com), which celebrates the state's French heritage. Next year's event, to be held April 23-27, will commemorate the Louisiana Purchase.

The Empress in Louisiana

Napoleon's beloved Josephine—world-famous by one name, though born Marie-Josephe-Rose Tascher—is at the center of bicentennial exhibits in Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

The Louisiana Arts and Science



French Louisiana takes its New World flavors from swamps like the Atchafalaya Basin.

Museum (225/344-5272) in Baton Rouge will present *Josephine, le Grande Amour de Napoleon* from Oct. 8 to Feb. 29, 2004. On display will be objects that belonged to the empress, as well as paintings and furniture from Napoleon's summer home, Malmaison, where Josephine retired after their divorce in 1809.

The garden at Malmaison was very personal to Josephine, especially her violets. After her death in 1814, Napoleon visited Malmaison and collected violets from the garden, which he wore in a locket until his own death in 1821. Throughout the year, the New Orleans Botanical Garden (www.NewOrleansCityPark.com/garden) will feature re-creations of the gardens of Malmaison and Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's estate.

New Orleans, never to be outdone, will honor the Louisiana Purchase in other ways as well. The New Orleans Museum of Art (514/488-2631; www.noma.org) is touting its show *Jefferson's America & Napoleon's France* as the "premier exhibition" of the bicentennial, and with Napoleon's throne and the sword that the Marquis de Lafayette wielded in the American Revolution to be displayed, it sounds like just that. (The show runs April 12 to Aug. 31; advance tickets are recommended.)

And on Oct. 2 and 4, the New Orleans

French melodies and lyrics meet gutsy American rhythms at Louisiana venues like Angelle's Whiskey River Landing.





The original Louisiana Purchase documents will be on display in New Orleans and Baton Rouge in 2003.

New Orleans Museum of Art

Opera (800/881-4459; www.neworleansopera.org) will premiere *Louisiana Purchase*, an opera based on the life of the Baroness de Pontalba. Born in New Orleans in 1795 but tangled in trans-Atlantic disputes over her inheritance, she was eventually shot in Paris by her husband. She survived and returned to New Orleans to help renovate the dilapidated Place d'Armes—now Jackson Square in the French Quarter—where the Louisiana Purchase had been finalized.

Paris, Canada

New Orleans' French Quarter is not actually very French, at least not in its architecture, as the older French structures were destroyed by fires in 1788 and 1794. In fact, it had been the Baroness de Pontalba's dream to fully restore the city in a Parisian style. Still, it is one of the few places in North America that strongly evoke the feeling of an old Continental neighborhood. The historic centers of Québec City and Montréal are the others.

Vieux Québec, the old town within Québec City's stone walls, smacks most strongly of a Parisian neighborhood, though few of its original structures survived the British bombardment of 1759. Ironically, the stone walls that so strongly frame a visitor's experience of this very French city were actually built by the British—to defend against Americans.

The French lost Québec City to the British on the Plains of Abraham, which have been preserved as National Battlefields Park (Parc National des Champs de Bataille). It houses the Musée du Québec (866/220-2150; www.mdq.org)

Among the lodgings options for visitors to Carnaval de Québec: a hotel made of ice

and is a primary site for the granddaddy of winter festivals, Carnaval de Québec (888/522-3383; www.carnaval.qc.ca). The former battlefield becomes an icy playground as people climb an ice mountain, sled down an icy hill and carve fanciful shapes from blocks of ice. There is even an ice hotel (www.hoteldeglace.qc.ca), where you can sip vodka from a glass of ice and slip into something more comfortable, like an Arctic-strength sleeping bag, and spend the night. (This winter Carnaval runs from Jan. 31 to Feb. 16.)

Anyone on a Francotour of Québec City will want to visit the Musée de l'Amérique Française (866/710-8031; www.mcq.org) in the old city. And, down by the St. Lawrence River in Basse-Ville or Lower Town, is one of the most historic French sites in the New World—Place Royale, where Samuel de Champlain founded New France in 1608 and where many buildings have been restored to their original appearance.


For something less quaint and more swank, cruise the Grande Allée, a sort of smaller version of the Champs Élysées. Cafés, bistros, restaurants, wine bars, nightclubs—come to think of it, if you want those inklings of Paris, go to Montréal instead.

Located just 45 miles from the U.S. border, Montréal is like Paris with less attitude. The island of Montréal (nine times the size of Manhattan) is even shaped like a croissant, though it brags about its bagels (baked things that won't convince a New Yorker). With, at last count, 4,942 restaurants and 1,630 bars catering to every craving, Montréal rates as the Francophone food, drink and carousing capital of the Americas.

Yet you can find that quiet Old World flavor along the narrow cobblestone streets of Old Montréal with its stone buildings and monuments to the French founders of

the city. Americans may want to visit Chateau Ramezay, built in 1705. A former governor's residence dating back to the 18th-century French regime, it served as headquarters for the American revolutionary forces when they occupied the city in the winter of 1775. Benjamin Franklin slept here, seeking Montréal as an ally against the Brits. He was sufficiently persuasive to scare Britain into granting more cultural autonomy to the Québécois, which is how the U.S. indirectly helped to preserve the French flavor of Québec.

Chateau Ramezay has a sort of crude, blind beauty, unlike Notre-Dame Basilica (built in 1829), the architectural marvel of Old Montréal, where hockey legend Mario Lemieux and Celine Dion were married (not to one another, of course). The church's design was inspired by the Saint-Chapelle in Paris, a Gothic chapel built in the 1240s to house relics from the Holy Land believed to be the Crown of Thorns and part of the True Cross. Visions of Paris will be replaced by more local reflections when you go inside the Basilica. Among its many interior wonders are stained glass panels depicting the history of Montréal—but made by a famous French stained glass artisan, Francis Chigot.

From the stone walls of Québec City to the honky tonks of Cajun Country, from the cobblestones of Old Montréal to Napoleon's throne on loan in New Orleans—2003 will be the best of years to go journeying for fragments of France in the Americas, and to thank the French for one sweet deal. 

For more information on the Louisiana Purchase bicentennial, call 225/342-9149 or visit www.louisianapurchase2003.com. For more information on the province of Québec, call 877/266-5687 or visit www.bonjourquebec.com.



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