



# BORN ON THE BAYOU

**Coastal Louisiana intrigues visitors  
with natural wonders,  
warm welcomes and deep roots**

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSH JAGOE



## DRIVE ANY DIRECTION FROM NEW ORLEANS AND THE PACE OF LIFE DOWNSHIFTS EXPONENTIALLY THE MINUTE THE MERCEDES-BENZ SUPERDOME APPEARS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR.

Vowels open up like the spaces between houses and highways, and slowly that normally useful “g” slips from gerunds. Suddenly people are fishin’ and crabbin’, and I’m singin’ while drivin’ along the small roads that lace the tattered wet sole of Louisiana’s boot. I was last in the Bayou State more than a decade ago, pre-Hurricane Katrina, and I didn’t make it beyond the borders of the French Quarter. Call it age or liver preservation, but it’s wildlife of a different kind that I seek now.

It’s hard to believe it’s already been

10 years since Katrina unleashed on the eastern coast of Louisiana the morning of Aug. 29, 2005. The images still gnaw at the nation’s collective memory. Millions of gallons of seawater pushed into marshes and swamps, neighborhoods and homes, decimating delicate ecosystems, local economies and lives. Just three weeks later, Hurricane Rita slammed into the state’s western coast, a salt-in-the-wound reminder of nature’s indiscriminate power.

The edict is true, though: Time heals

most wounds, and as I zigzag my way around the Louisiana coast, I discover stunning natural wonders, indelible optimism and Cajun hospitality, plus a little something extra.

“**A**ny alligators?” I ask Shannon Villemarette, my guide for the morning, as I slip a blue plastic kayak onto Bayou Lacombe.

“You probably won’t see any too close,” she says, “but if ya do, just slap the water with your paddle. They won’t hurt ya.”

Villemarette is the owner of Bayou Adventure, which she runs from a bait-and-tackle shop in Lacombe, an unincorporated town on the northeastern shore of Lake Pontchartrain. In the 15 minutes I’m with her at the shop, before we drop into the bayou, a half dozen fishermen and neighbors pass by, honk and wave, and drop in for live bait, equipment or just to say, “Hey, Miss Shannon!”

Tourists who manage to find the place rent bikes and pedal the scenic Tammany Trace, a 28-mile former railroad corridor



**CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT:**  
Houses on stilts at  
Holly Beach; an  
alligator at the  
Sabine National  
Wildlife Refuge;  
Shannon  
Villemarette of  
Bayou Adventure



that passes just in front of Villemarette's shop and through five Northshore communities, including picturesque Covington and Abita Springs, home to a popular local brew, Abita.

Within a few paddle strokes, I forget about jagged-toothed reptiles and study the moss-dripping oaks and craggy trees that line the banks of the inky water. There's a serene and ethereal beauty to the bayou that feels a million miles from New Orleans, where Villemarette grew up, but we're just 50 minutes away.

"I used to fish here as a kid with just a cane pole and a cricket," she recalls.

I ask her what drew her back.

"You'll see. The bayou just kinda gets under your skin."

**W**hether it's a larger city or a one-fishing-pond town, daily life and livelihood in coastal parishes (counties) hinge on the water.

This mass of perforated earth stretching between Mississippi and Texas is riddled with thousands of inlets and bays, swamps and marshes, estuaries and bayous, and it accounts for 41 percent of the nation's wetlands. It's a habitat for millions of migratory birds and other mammals, as well as a nursery for shrimp, fish, crab, crayfish, oysters and other seafood, the base of an industry that has a 400-year-old history in Louisiana, provides one of every 70 jobs in the state and supplies 25 percent of the country's seafood demand.

One of the best places to appreciate the breadth and ecological significance of Louisiana's coastal wetlands is along the Creole Nature Trail All-American Road. The 180-mile scenic byway rolls out near the eastern city of Lake Charles through wildlife refuges and coastal plains, with plenty of stopping points to observe the abundant fauna. The Pintail Wildlife Drive at Cameron Prairie National Wildlife

Refuge, a three-mile auto loop through a soggy terrain, and the Wetland Walkway at Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, a 1.5-mile paved trail with a boardwalk traversing the marsh, are among the best for up-close viewing. But for the occasional chenier (pronounced shuh-neer), raised ridges on which oak trees grow, the watery landscape sprawls, flat and unvarying, toward all four horizons like a sea-level Serengeti of the Southern states.

At Cameron Prairie, Diane Borden-Billiot, visitor services manager for the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife



CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT:  
A crawfish po'boy  
from Bon Creole  
in New Iberia;  
wildlife on Avery  
Island; Sulphur,  
Louisiana



# "Nowhere in the U.S. is there more concentration of wildlife than in Louisiana's wetlands."

Refuge Complex, greets me along the wooden boardwalks that overlook the marsh.

"Nowhere in the U.S. is there more concentration of wildlife than in Louisiana's wetlands," she says. "It's an area second in diversity only to the rain forest in South America when you count the various insects, small mammals, crustaceans, invertebrates, plants and flowers."

Storm surge from Hurricane Rita removed marsh vegetation and grass — a crucial buffer against major storms; it's estimated that about 2.7 miles of healthy marsh reduces storm surge by a foot — killed plants and animals, and spewed thousands of acres of southwest Louisiana's wildlife refuges with debris, closing them for approximately two years.

"Our culture here in southern

Louisiana is based on the land and water, and we can't help but be immersed in it, even in our off time," says Borden-Billiot. "Getting outside is part of our mental recovery. It's where we go to find peace, so it was important to reopen as soon as possible."

Part of the Creole Nature Trail piggy-backs Louisiana Highway 82, which skims the Gulf shoreline through Cameron and Vermilion parishes. Remnants of Rita remain. Cement pads on which buildings once stood have weeds growing between the cracks, and beach communities wiped clean of houses now have simple trailers with wheels for easy decampment. On Holly Beach, newly built orange, blue and green stilted houses stand defiant, like painted ladies holding up their skirts, daring water to run over their ankles while the rest of Louisiana holds its breath. Rutherford Beach, I'm told, is the place for shell collecting, and I am not misled. The variety and density available are staggering, and though I try to tread carefully, they crack like bones beneath my feet.



Throughout the coastal zone, whether it's on beaches or inland, lakes, rivers, marshes and swamps, the invitation to explore beckons. I see signs for swamp tours and airboat rides, paddleboard rentals, and canoe and kayak treks. Hunting, fishing and boating is practically a birthright for locals who grew up going to "camps," and I don't mean the s'more and capture-the-flag variety. A camp is Louisiana-speak for a cottage or cabin, and it's used as a base for outdoor sport. There are commercial camps like Grosse Savanne Waterfowl and Wildlife Lodge, which is set on 50,000 acres of wetlands, with organized hunting, fishing and eco tours, but most are private.

Wendy Billiot (no relation to Borden-Billiot), owner of Bayou Woman

Adventures, is a passionate wetlands educator and has invited me to her camp on Bayou DuLarge near Houma, a city 57 miles southwest of New Orleans and deep in the shreds of Louisiana's coast. Aboard her touring-and-fishing boat, we speed across a glassy lake and turn into a pin-straight canal. I don't notice the shape until she points it out.

"Bayous curve naturally and slow down saltwater pushed inland by storms," she explains. "These canals allow seawater to come in faster and reach further into the wetlands, which eats away at the roots of healthy marsh."

Oil and gas companies who've dug thousands of wells and buried thousands of miles of pipelines in wetland mud have carved these canals. Billiot's three sons work in the industry, which provides for hundreds of thousands of high-paying jobs across the state. It also supplies the nation with a quarter of its natural-gas supply and close to a fifth of its refining capability. But such beneficence isn't without cost.

The dredging of canals and the persistent encroachment of seawater, combined with dams and levees along the Mississippi River depriving the region of the needed sediment deposits for land fortification and creation, means Louisiana's coastal wetlands are eroding at an estimated rate of 25 square miles a year. An acre every 33 minutes lost for good.

"We don't want to bite the hand that



Avery Island  
(above) and  
houses at  
Vermilion Bay

## WHEN YOU GO

### STAY

**COVINGTON**  
Southern Hotel  
[Southernhotel.com](http://Southernhotel.com)

**LAKE CHARLES**  
Aunt Ruby's Bed & Breakfast  
[Auntrubys.com](http://Auntrubys.com)  
Lauberge Casino Resort  
[Llakelouisiana.com](http://Llakelouisiana.com)

**NEW IBERIA**  
Bayou Teche Guest Cottage  
[Bayoutechecottage.com](http://Bayoutechecottage.com)  
Estorge-Norton House Bed and Breakfast  
[Estorge-nortonhouse.com](http://Estorge-nortonhouse.com)



### DO

**WETLAND ECO AND EDUCATIONAL TOURS**  
Bayou Woman Adventures  
[Bayouwoman.com](http://Bayouwoman.com)

**DRIVE, EXPLORE**  
Creole Nature Trail  
All-American Road  
[Creolenaturetrail.org](http://Creolenaturetrail.org)

**KAYAK, FISH**  
Bayou Adventure  
[Bayouadventure.com](http://Bayouadventure.com)

**BIKE, HIKE**  
Tammany Trace  
[Tammanytrace.org](http://Tammanytrace.org)

### HUNT, FISH, BOAT TOURS

Grosse Savanne Waterfowl and Wildlife Lodge  
[Grossesavanne.com](http://Grossesavanne.com)

**SHELLING**  
Rutherford Beach,  
Louisiana Highway 82

**CAJUN DANCING**  
The Jolly Inn  
[Thejollyinn.com](http://Thejollyinn.com)



### SEE

**TABASCO**  
[Tabasco.com/avery-island](http://Tabasco.com/avery-island)

**LOUISIANA SHRIMP & PETROLEUM FESTIVAL**  
[Shrimppandpetroleum.org](http://Shrimppandpetroleum.org)

**GIANT OMELETTE CELEBRATION**  
[Giantomelette.org](http://Giantomelette.org)

**SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA BOUDIN TRAIL**  
[Visitlakecharles.org/restaurants/swla-boudin-trail](http://Visitlakecharles.org/restaurants/swla-boudin-trail)

**JUNGLE GARDENS**  
[Junglegardens.org](http://Junglegardens.org)



### TRAVEL PLANNING

**LAKE CHARLES SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA**  
[Visitlakecharles.org](http://Visitlakecharles.org)

**LOUISIANA'S NORTHSHORE**  
[Louisiananorthshore.com](http://Louisiananorthshore.com)

**HOUMA AREA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU**  
[Houmatravel.com](http://Houmatravel.com)

# Food (and feeding people) is as important a part of the culture here as the land on which it's eaten.

feeds us, but we also need to respect where we live and manage this delicate balance because our lives are tied to these wetlands in every possible way," Billiot says.

She invites me to stay for a lunch of blackened fish and white beans over rice, which we eat at her kitchen table.

**F**ood (and feeding people) is as important a part of the culture here as the land on which it's eaten. Whether it's gumbo, jambalaya or an oyster po'boy, meals arrive with a side of "my mama's famous" or "the best you'll taste in Lew-siana." Crawfish boils go hand in hand with Cajun music and dancing and are the backyard barbecues and clambakes of Louisiana, while quirky annual food festivals, such as the nearly 80-year-old Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival in Morgan City and the Napoleon-inspired Giant Omelette Celebration in Abbeville, are cherished traditions.

But it's a ubiquitous sausage called boudin (pronounced boo-dan) that's left a stretch mark on my memory and waistline. This popular snack food is made with loose, precooked pork, sometimes

liver, onions, rice and seasoning stuffed into an inedible casing. It's found at fine restaurants, gas stations and mom-and-pop shops like B&O Kitchen and Grocery in Sulphur, where I meet third-generation proprietor Jeff Benoit.

"Making boudin is a dying art," he says. "It was something you had to be taught how to do, and people stopped doing it. Luckily my family kept going, and so am I."

He shows me how it's made — like any sausage. Then how it's eaten — by squeezing the filling from the casing into his mouth. The consistency is similar to a stuffing — juicy and delicious.

The garage behind Benoit's kitchen smells like bacon on Saturday morning, and I'm introduced to another Louisiana mainstay: cracklins. A squat metal cauldron bubbles with hot oil, and in it, pieces of pork fat and skin fry in the greasy whirlpool. Benoit dips a mesh basket in and scoops up a batch of golden-brown, crispy chunks.

"You know why they call them cracklins? Cause when they get cookin', the skin starts talkin' to ya, poppin' and cracklin,'" he laughs.

CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT:  
Every Island;  
shrimp boats;  
stuffed seafood  
gumbo



Want excellent shells?  
Rutherford Beach is the  
place to scour the sand.

## It's the harmony and counterbalance of all of it that are by turns resilient and endangered, and held together by deep yet fragile roots.



Before I go, Benoit fills a brown bag full of cracklins. Oil seeps through the paper, forming dark splotches.

"Here's a little *lagniappe*," he says.

Pronounced lan-yap, it means "small gift" or "a little extra." It's my favorite of the Cajun words I've learned, not just because it's fun to say, but also because it embodies the region's hospitality.

**O**n my last morning, I head to Avery Island, home of the McIlhenny Company and family, makers of Tabasco pepper sauce.

Much of the 2-mile-by-3-mile parcel is dotted with elegant Live oaks dripping in Spanish moss, inaccessible to visitors. The 170-acre flower- and bird-filled Jungle

Gardens are open, and daily tours of the bottling factory show how modern equipment and technology make it possible to ship Tabasco to more than 180 countries in the world and to just about every restaurant and grocery store in America.

As CEO of the company, Tony Simmons spends mornings with his head inside white oak barrels — once used to age bourbon, now used to age tabasco peppers for up to three years — sniffing and tasting "mash," the crushed pepper-salt base from which the sauce is made. In his office, his lab coat and hairnet removed, he recalls youthful summers of fishing, hiking and getting lost with cousins on Avery Island.

He's the seventh in a chain of direct descendants of founder Edmund McIlhenny who have run the company since 1868. He tells me that only 12 percent of family businesses in America have made it to the third generation. I ask his thoughts on McIlhenny's staying power.

"Part of it is this place," he says. "Our

family has been on the island since 1818, since before the Civil War. When the company turns 150 in three years, the family will have been here for 200 years. This is not just where we come to work, it's also our family home and history."

His words strike a chord.

All week I've been trying to pinpoint what it is about this place that intrigues me. I finally recognize it's not one single thing. It's the harmony and counterbalance of all of it — the history, tradition, culture and wetlands — that are by turns resilient and endangered, and held together by deep yet fragile roots.

It's difficult to see, even harder to explain, but I feel it everywhere.

It's a little *lagniappe* I'll take with me when I go, one I hope still exists when I return.

**GETTING THERE** — American Airlines offers a total of 26 weekday flights to **New Orleans (MSY)** from 6 hub cities, including **Charlotte (CLT; 6 flights a day)**, **Chicago (ORD; 3)**, **Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW; 7)**, **Miami (MIA; 4)**, **Philadelphia (PHL; 1)** and **Washington, D.C. (DCA; 5)**.

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