



Cajun Country: Small Towns, Big Fun

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French Louisiana, spread across the bayous, rice paddies, and canebrakes to the west of New Orleans, is famous for two things: its food (jambalaya and blackened fish) and its music (Cajun and zydeco). You'll also enjoy excellent antiques shopping, ecotourism, and historical sights. Here you'll find much of what the Big Easy has to offer, but in a family-friendly, small-town setting. Welcome to Cajun Country.

CREOLE VS. CAJUN

Cajun cuisine relies on locally available ingredients, such as pork, seafood, smoked meats, yams, and rice. Most dishes have the trinity of celery, bell pepper, and onion as a base; traditional examples include boudin and *maque choux* (a corn stew, usually served with crawfish tails). Creole cuisine is more cosmopolitan, incorporating French, Spanish, Italian, African, and French Caribbean influences. While many dishes use the same trinity, Creole dishes, like their French counterparts, are defined by their sauces. Examples include shrimp Creole, crawfish bisque, and oysters Rockefeller.

South Louisiana, cradle of the Cajun population, is decidedly French in flavor. In small communities along the coast and in the upland prairie, Cajun French is still spoken, although just about everyone also speaks English. After a hard day's work fishing or working crawfish ponds, rural residents of Cajun Country often live up to the motto *Laissez les bons temps rouler!*, which means "Let the good times roll!"

Music beats at the heart of Cajun life. Ensembles of fiddles, accordions, and guitars produce eminently danceable folk music, with songs sung in a mélange of English and Cajun French. Zydeco, closely related to Cajun music, adds washboard and drums to the mix and has more of a blues-rock feel. Saturday morning and afternoon are devoted to Cajun music, played in small gatherings and in bars beginning at 8 AM. Zydeco music rocks back-road barns and country clubs on Friday and Saturday nights. Many Cajun clubs and restaurants host Sunday-afternoon jams.

Cajun culture is decidedly rural, rooted in a smattering of tiny towns and in the swamps and bayous that wind among them. Driving from one village to the next, antiques shoppers and nature lovers alike will find bliss. Live oaks with ragged gray buntings of Spanish moss form canopies over the bottle-green bayous. Country roads follow the contortions of the Teche (pronounced *tesh*), the state's longest bayou, and meander through villages where cypress cabins rise up out of the water on stilts and moored fishing boats and pirogues scarcely bob on the sluggish waters. At the centers of these same villages are wonderful bakeries, historic churches, fresh oyster bars, and regional antiques for sale in small, weathered shops.

Central Cajun Country is the heart of it all and is made up of seven parishes: Acadia, Iberia, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, and Vermilion. Each parish has its own flavor, and none is lacking in *joie de vivre*.



CONTENT PROVIDED BY

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(left) St. Martin Parish; (center) Iberia Parish; (right) Coerte Voorhies, Lafayette Parish

LAFAYETTE FESTIVALS

The biggest bash in this neck of the woods is the **Mardi Gras** festival (February or March, depending on when Lent occurs), which showcases colorful parades and King Gabriel and Queen Evangeline.

The **Festival International de Louisiane** (☎ 337/232-8086 🌐 www.festivalinternational.com), which takes place on the last weekend of April, is a free music festival, rivaling the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, that fills the streets with entertainers, artisans, and chefs from French-speaking nations and communities. 2011 marks its 25th anniversary.

The annual **Festival Acadiens et Créoles** is a huge music-and-food fest held in late September or early October (October 14-16 in 2011).

LAFAYETTE

Lafayette, 136 miles west of New Orleans and the largest city in Cajun Country, is a major center of Cajun life and lore, the big city in the middle of the countryside. The town has several historical and artistic sights you shouldn't miss, as well as the simulated Cajun villages **Vermilionville** and **Acadian Village**. Excellent restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts make Lafayette a good jumping-off point for exploring the region. The city has also had an infusion of new restaurants and nightclubs—particularly downtown, which is lively even on weeknights.

What to See

Acadian Cultural Center. A unit of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, the center traces the area's history through food, music, and folklore. ☎ 501 Fisher Rd. ☎ 337/232-0789 🆓 Free 🕒 Daily 8-5.

Acadian Village. A re-creation of an early-19th-century bayou settlement, this park is on 10 wooded acres with a meandering bayou crisscrossed by wooden footbridges. ☎ 200 Greenleaf Dr., south of downtown ☎ 337/981-2364 or 800/962-9133 🌐 www.acadianvillage.org 🎫 \$8 🕒 Mon.-Sat. 10-4.

Alexandre Mouton House and Lafayette Museum. Built in 1800 as the *maison dimanche*, or "Sunday house," of town founder Jean Mouton, this galleried town house with a mid-19th-century addition preserves local history. The museum contains Civil War-era furnishings and a Mardi Gras exhibit. ☎ 1122 Lafayette St. ☎ 337/234-2208 🎫 \$3 🕒 Tues.-Sat. 10-4, Sun. 1-4.

Vermilionville. Directly behind the Acadian Cultural Center, a living-history village re-creates the early life of the region's Creoles and Cajuns. Cajun or zydeco music is played every Saturday afternoon. ☎ 300 Fisher Rd., off Surrey St. ☎ 337/233-4077 or 866/992-2968 🌐 www.vermilionville.org 🎫 \$8 🕒 Tues.-Sun. 10-4.

Where to Eat

Café Vermilionville. This 19th-century inn with crisp white napery and old-brick fireplaces serves French and Cajun fare to a well-dressed crowd. ☎ 1304 W. Pinhook Rd. ☎ 337/237-0100 🌐 www.cafev.com 🕒 Closed Sun. No lunch Sat.

Prejean's. People gather at tables with red-and-white-check cloths to partake of Prejean's seafood platter (gumbo, fried shrimp, oysters, catfish, crab cakes, and maque choux) and some of its legendary gumbo (choose from four varieties). There's live Cajun music and usually dancing nightly. ☎ 3480 U.S. 1-49 N ☎ 337/896-3247 🌐 www.prejeans.com.

Where to Stay

Bois des Chênes Inn. This bed-and-breakfast is housed in the 19th-century Mouton Plantation, in a quiet residential area of Lafayette. ☎ 338 N. Sterling St. ☎ 337/233-7816 🌐 www.boisdechenes.com 🛏 5 rooms 🐾 In-hotel: some pets allowed 🍳 Breakfast.

Juliet Boutique Hotel. This newish hotel (opened in late 2007) is the only boutique property in downtown Lafayette. ☎ 800 Jefferson St. ☎ 337/261-2225 🌐 www.juliethotel.com 🛏 20 rooms 🐾 In-room: Wi-Fi. In-hotel: pool, gym.

Nightlife and Music

El Sid-o's is a family-run zydeco club with music on weekends. ☎ 1523 N. St. Antoine ☎ 318/235-0647.

Randol's, a Cajun restaurant, has music and dancing nightly. ☎ 2320 Kaliste Saloom Rd. ☎ 337/981-7080 or 800/962-2586 🌐 www.randols.com.

Events

Downtown galleries are open and the streets are hopping during the popular **ArtWalks**, held on the second Saturday of each month.

On Friday evenings from mid-March through June and September through November, **Downtown Alive!** draws dancing crowds to downtown Lafayette, where bands play on an open-air stage. ☎ Jefferson St. at Main St. ☎ 337/291-5566 🌐 www.downtownalive.org.



(left) Vermilion Parish; (center) St. Landry Parish; (right) Jefferson Davis Parish

FESTIVALS

The area surrounding Eunice is the major stomping ground for an annual event, **Courir de Mardi Gras**, which takes place on Mardi Gras Day. Costumed horseback riders dash through the countryside, stopping at farmhouses along the way to shout, “*Voulez-vous recevoir cette bande de Mardi Gras* (Do you wish to receive the Mardi Gras krewe)?” The answer is always yes, and the group enlarges and continues, gathering food for the street festivals that wind things up.

Plaisance, on the outskirts of Opelousas, holds a **Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival** the Saturday before Labor Day. ☎ 337/942-2392
 🌐 www.zydeco.org.

ST. LANDRY

Between Eunice, the heart and soul of Cajun music, and Opelousas, the home of zydeco, St. Landry Parish is a must-visit for any music lover. Beyond that, history buffs will love the historic towns of Washington, Sunset, and Grand Coteau, and families will appreciate the friendly, small-town vibe of all 12 cities that make up this culturally rich region.

EUNICE

As home to some of Cajun music’s most prominent proponents and establishments, tiny Eunice lays claim to some heft within the Cajun music world. Saturday is the best time to visit: spend the morning at a jam at the Savoy Music Center; spend the day exploring the museums; end at the variety show *Rendez-Vous des Cajuns*, in Eunice’s Liberty Theatre.

What to See

The **Eunice Depot Museum** is in a former railroad depot and contains modest displays on Cajun culture, including Cajun music and Cajun Mardi Gras. ☎ 220 S.C.C. Duson Dr. ☎ 337/457-6540 or 337/457-2565 📧 Free ☺ Tues.–Sat. 1–5.

The **Prairie Acadian Cultural Center**, part of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, has well-executed exhibits tracing the history and culture of the Prairie Acadians. Food, crafts, and music demonstrations are held on Saturday. ☎ 250 W. Park Ave. ☎ 337/457-8490 📧 Free ☺ Tues.–Fri. 8–5, Sat. 8–6.

Savoy Music Center and Accordion Factory includes a music store and, in back, a Cajun accordion workshop. On Saturday morning, accordion players and other instrumentalists tune up during jam sessions in the shop. ☎ U.S. 190, 3 miles east of town ☎ 337/457-9563 🌐 www.savoymusiccenter.com 📧 Free ☺ Tues.–Fri. 9–noon and 1:30–5.

Nightlife and Music

In addition to showcasing the best Cajun and zydeco bands, **Rendez-Vous des Cajuns**, a two-hour variety program, presents local comedians and storytellers

and even a “Living Recipe Corner.” The show has been dubbed the Cajun Grand Ole Opry; it’s held every Saturday at 6 PM in a 1924 movie house. ☎ *Liberty Center for the Performing Arts, 200 W. Park Ave., at 2nd St.* ☎ 337/457-7389 📧 \$5.

OPELOUSAS

In the heart of St. Landry Parish, Opelousas is the third-oldest town in the state. It is a sleepy spot with a historic central square, a provincial museum, and several excellent zydeco clubs.

What to See

Between 1854 and 1929, more than 2,000 New York orphans were transplanted via train to Louisiana. The **Louisiana Orphan Train Museum**, housed in an old depot building, has more than 200 photos and articles of clothing of the orphans who made the journey. ☎ 233 S. Academy ☎ 337/948-9922 www.laorphantrain.com 📧 \$5 ☺ Tues.–Fri. 10–3, Sat. 10–2.

The **Opelousas Museum and Interpretive Center** traces the history of Opelousas from prehistoric times to the present and includes an exhibit on the town’s brief stint as state capital, during the Civil War. ☎ 315 N. Main St. ☎ 337/948-2589 📧 Free ☺ Mon.–Sat. 9–5.

Where to Eat

Palace Cafe. On the town square, you can step back in time at this old-style diner serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Try one or all six kinds of gumbo. ☎ 135 W. Landry St. ☎ 337/942-2142 ☺ Closed Sun.

Where to Shop

Opelousas Tourist Information Center has Cajun and zydeco CDs. ☎ 828 E. Landry St. ☎ 337/948-6263.

Nightlife and Music

The roads surrounding Opelousas are *the* place to catch authentic, sweaty zydeco music.

Zydeco Hall of Fame is a rural, wood-frame zydeco club west of Opelousas with music most weekends. ☎ 11154 U.S. 190, *Lawtell* ☎ 337/349-8827.



(left) Acadia Parish; (center) Robin May, Lafayette Parish; (right) St. Landry Parish

WASHINGTON

Antiques lovers will want to stop in Washington, located north of Opelousas. It's a 2-mile diversion from the main route if you're traveling from Opelousas to Ville Platte. Settled in 1720, Washington has many buildings on its main street that are on the National Register of Historic Places. Lots of B&Bs and more than 10 antiques stores cluster within walking distance of one another. Most of these stores are open only Friday to Sunday.

For more information, contact the town's **museum and tourist information center** (☎ 337/826-3626).

ACADIA, IBERIA, JEFFERSON DAVIS, ST. MARTIN, AND VERMILION PARISHES

Cajun Country's five other parishes are made up of small towns big on charm. Nature lovers and history enthusiasts will love the swamp tours, gardens, small museums, and old plantation homes. The following are our favorite stops.

ST. MARTIN

Breaux Bridge

A dyed-in-the-wool Cajun town, Breaux Bridge is known as the Crawfish Capital of the World. It has attracted a small arts community and has traded its honky-tonks for bed-and-breakfasts, antiques shops, and restaurants.

Where to Eat

Café des Amis. The culinary heart and soul of downtown Breaux Bridge rests in this large, renovated storefront where locals gather to enjoy hospitality that is second only to the food. Saturday mornings bring the popular Zydeco Breakfast. ☎ 140 E. Bridge St. ☎ 337/332-5273 🌐 www.cafedesamis.com ☺ Closed Mon. No dinner Sun. and Tues.

Where to Stay

Maison des Amis. This 19th-century house on the bank of Bayou Teche was renovated with comfort and relaxation in mind. ☎ 111 Washington St. ☎ 337/507-3399 🌐 www.maisondesamis.com 🛏 3 rooms, 1 suite ☺ Breakfast.

Nightlife and Music

La Poussière is an ancient Cajun honky-tonk with live music on Saturday and Sunday. ☎ 1301 Grand Point Rd. ☎ 337/332-1721. 🌐 www.lapoussiere.com

Atchafalaya Basin

The Atchafalaya Basin is an eerily beautiful 800,000-plus-acre swamp wilderness, the storybook version of mystical south Louisiana wetlands. The basin is best viewed from a tour boat.

Where to Eat

Pat's Fishermans Wharf Restaurant. Adjacent to Bayou Amy, Pat's is the real deal, with heaping platters of seafood. ☎ 1008 Henderson Levee Rd. ☎ 337/228-7512. 🌐 www.patsfishermanswharf.com

St. Martinville

St. Martinville, along winding Bayou Teche, is the heart of Evangeline country. Known as Petit Paris, this little town was once the scene of lavish balls and operas, and you can still roam the original opera house on the central square.

What to See

Shaded by giant live oaks draped with Spanish moss, the 157-acre **Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site** has picnic tables, pavilions, and early Acadian structures. A small museum traces the history of the Acadians. Maison Olivier, a plantation house on the park grounds, was built in the early 18th century of handmade bricks, and it contains Louisiana antiques. A lively one-hour tour includes many interesting details of life on the indigo plantation. ☎ 1200 N. Main St. (Rte. 31), ½ mile north of St. Martinville ☎ 337/394-3754 or 888/677-2900 🌐 www.crt.state.la.us/parks 🎫 \$2 ☺ Daily 9-5.

FESTIVALS

The first full weekend in May, Breaux Bridge's **Crawfish Festival** draws visitors to Bayou Teche. (www.bbcrawfest.com May 6–8, 2011).

Enjoy two days of music and barbeque in Jennings at **Roastin' with Rosie Barbeque Festival**, September 9–10, 2011.

With music, food, two parades, and carnival rides, Abbeville's **Louisiana Cattle Festival** is fun for all. (337/385-2397 www.louisianacattlefestival.org Oct. 7–9, 2011).

The **World Championship Gumbo Cook-off**, in New Iberia on October 7–9 in 2011, features cooking contests and music. (337/364-1836 www.worldchampionshipgumbocookoff.blogspot.com).

Crowley's 75th International **Rice Festival** is one of Louisiana's oldest agricultural festivals, with Cajun and Zydeco bands and food. (www.ricefestival.com Oct. 20–22, 2011).

Abbeville sponsors the **Giant Omelet Festival** each November.

St. Martin de Tours is the mother church of the Acadians and one of the country's oldest Catholic churches. (133 S. Main St. 337/394-6021).

Where to Stay

Old Castillo Bed & Breakfast. In the late 19th century the Castillo Hotel, a two-story redbrick building next to the Evangeline Oak and Bayou Teche, was an inn for steamboat passengers and a gathering place for French royalists. (220 Evangeline Blvd. 337/394-4010 or 800/621-3017 www.oldcastillo.com 7 rooms In-room: Wi-Fi Breakfast).

IBERIA

New Iberia

The town of New Iberia is the hub of lower Cajun Country, second only to Lafayette as an arts-and-culture draw. The grand homes of sugarcane planters dominate the residential section of Main Street, just off Bayou Teche, pointing to a glorious past at the center of a booming sugar industry and anchoring the current cultural revival taking place here.

What to See

Shadows-on-the-Teche, one of the South's best-known plantation homes, was built on the bank of the bayou for wealthy sugar planter David Weeks in 1834. In 1917 his descendant conducted one of the first history-conscious restorations of a plantation home. The result is one of the most fascinating tours in Louisiana. (317 E. Main St. 337/369-6446 www.shadowsontheteche.org \$10 Mon.–Sat. 9–4:30).

Where to Eat

Clementine. Named for folk artist Clementine Hunter, Clementine favors cuisine that might be called nouveau Cajun: inspired by local ingredients and traditions but subtly seasoned and artfully presented. (113 E. Main St. 337/560-1007 www.clementinedowntown.com Closed Sun. No lunch Sat. No dinner Mon.).

Where to Stay

Bayou Teche Guest Cottage. There could scarcely be a better way to appreciate the Queen City of the Teche than to spend a night in this simple, two-room, 18th-century cottage on the bank of the bayou, down the road from downtown attractions. (100 Teche St. 337/364-1933 www.bayoutechecottage.com 1 cottage No credit cards).

Music

The intimate **Sliman Theater for the Performing Arts** on Main Street is the site of the "Louisiana Crossroads" concert series, which features mainly Louisiana musicians. (337/369-2337).

Avery Island

The Louisiana coastline is dotted with "hills" or "domes" that sit atop salt mines, and Avery Island is one of these. They are covered with lush vegetation,

and because they rise above the surface of the flatlands, they are referred to as islands.

What to See

The 250-acre **Jungle Gardens**, on Avery Island, has trails through stands of wisteria, palms, lilies, irises, and ferns and offers a lovely perspective on southern Louisiana wilderness. **Bird City**, a bird sanctuary on the southeast edge of Jungle Gardens, is sometimes so thick with egrets that it appears to be blanketed with snow. The largest egret colony in the world (20,000) begins nesting here in February or March. (Rte. 329 337/369-6243 junglegardens.org Jungle Gardens and Bird City \$8, toll onto Avery Island \$1 Daily 9–5).

VERMILION

Abbeville

Abbeville has a number of historic buildings and two pretty village squares anchoring the center of downtown; many buildings in the 20-block Main Street district are on the National Register of Historic Places. It is a good stop for pleasant town walks and for oysters on the half shell, a local fetish.

What to See

St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church is a fine Romanesque Revival building with stunning stained-glass windows. (N. Main and Père Megret Sts. 337/893-0244 Mon.–Sat. 8–5; Sun. mass 6:30 AM).

Where to Eat

Dupuy's Oyster Shop. This small restaurant has been serving family-harvested oysters in the same location since 1869. (108 S. Main St. 337/893-2336 www.dupuysoystershop.com Closed Sun. and Mon.).

Maurice

Maurice lies between Lafayette and Abbeville and is considered the gateway to Vermilion Parish. Many overlook this small town, but it's well worth the stop for Hebert's Specialty Meats' world-famous turducken and the Maurice Flea Market.

Where to Eat

Hebert's Specialty Meats. A visit to Cajun country is not complete without stopping at Hebert's, rumored to be the spot where turducken (a turkey stuffed with a duck, stuffed with a chicken) was invented. (8212 Maurice Ave. (Rte. 167) 337/893-5062 www.hebertsmeats.com).

Where to Shop

From fine antiques to slightly rusted kitchen utensils, the **Maurice Flea Market** is a treasure-hunter's paradise. Be prepared to spend more than an hour here. (9004 Maurice Ave. [Rte. 167] 337/898-2282 Wed.–Sat. 10–5).

ACADIA

As you head west from Lafayette, farmland dominates the view. You are now entering the Cajun Prairie, Acadia Parish, where rice is king and the real prairie beckons.

Crowley, also known as the Rice Capital of America, was founded in 1887 and is the heart of the Cajun Prairie. Downtown Crowley seems unchanged from the turn of the 19th century and in fact has more than 200 homes, churches, and commercial buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. Rayne, on the other hand, allows its eccentricity to leap right at you—and why not, it's the Frog Capital of the World. Not only is the festival held here, the town is adorned with frog murals and other frog-centric emblems.

What to See

The downtown **Crowley City Hall/Crowley Motor Company Ford Building** holds four museums: the Ford Automotive Museum, the J.D. Miller Music Recording Studio Museum, the Rice Interpretive Center, and the History of Crowley Museum. ☒ 425 N. Parkerson Ave., Crowley ☎ 337/783-0824 ☺ Weekdays 8-4 and by appt. Free

Where to Eat

Fezzo's. Any day is fine to dine here, but Sunday is when families (grandparents, parents, children) come here to dine on fresh seafood—oysters on the half shell, crawfish in season, gumbo, and seafood specials—as well as steaks and Cajun cuisine. ☒ 2111 N. Cherokee Dr., Crowley ☎ 337/783-5515 ☉ www.fezzos.com.

JEFFERSON DAVIS

A blend of farm and industry can best describe Jeff Davis Parish, named after the president of the Confederacy. The Parish seat, Jennings, is known as the Cradle of Louisiana Oil, as it was here on September 21, 1901, that the state's first oil well was drilled. Visitors will also notice the abundance of crawfish ponds in the area, and tours of the farms are



Jefferson Davis Parish

available during the season, February to May. Jennings's downtown has many turn-of-the-19th-century buildings, including the Strand Theatre, where you can catch live entertainment and old-time music.

What to See

Hold baby alligators or watch from a distance at **Gator Chateau**. ☒ Jennings Oil and Gas Park, 100 Rue de l'Acadie, Jennings ☎ 337/821-5521.

Part of a major migratory flyway (the "**FlyWay ByWay**"), Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge is a wintering area for water fowl. Established as a refuge in 1937, it is a popular place to hike, bike, canoe, fish, and hunt (during designated seasons). ☒ 209 Nature Rd., Lake Arthur ☎ 337/774-5923 ☺ Daily sunrise-sunset.

The **Zigler Art Museum** opened in 1963 and showcases European and American art, including the largest collection of works by William Tolliver. ☒ 411 Clara St., Jennings ☎ 337/824-0114 ☺ Tues.-Sat. 9-5, Sun. 1-4. \$3

Where to Eat

Cajun Tales Seafood has the parish's best crawfish and Cajun cuisine. ☒ 501 N. Adams St., Welsh ☎ 337/734-4772.

Peto's I-10 has the best boudin balls and cracklins. ☒ 15125 Highway 395, Roanoke ☎ 337/753-2042.

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