

LOUISIANA'S CAJUN BAYOU LAFOURCHE PARISH

In Louisiana's Cajun Bayou, It's All About ... Culture!

When you plan a visit to Louisiana, you start hearing and throwing around the word “Cajun,” but what does it really mean? An easy way to figure it out is to spend some time in Louisiana's Cajun Bayou, in the unique communities of Lafourche Parish.

Here's a quick history lesson: “Cajun” is an English corruption of the French word *Acadien*, which describes an ethnic group that was exiled from Canada's Maritime region in the mid-1700s because they refused to declare allegiance to the British crown. About a third of these people ultimately ended up in Louisiana, where they found others who spoke French and many who practiced the Catholic faith; otherwise, it was an unfamiliar territory to them. It was a much different topography and climate than they were used to, but they worked hard as farmers and fishermen and forged a new life in strange surroundings while clinging to those things they knew best – religion, music, food and family bonds.

There's a lot more to it, of course, but the short story is that the British attempt to eliminate the Acadian (the English spelling of the word) culture backfired completely, because the group made themselves quite at home in Louisiana and has had an undeniable impact on the state's culture – much to the delight of locals and visitors alike.

Perhaps the best place to get a hearty dose of all things Cajun is at the Acadian Wetlands Cultural Center in Thibodaux, one of the facilities of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve. The center highlights the music, religion, cuisine, recreation and livelihoods of the Cajun population through a series of exhibits and films. The facility also offers walking tours of downtown Thibodaux and boat trips along the famed Bayou Lafourche, but perhaps what's most interesting about this National Park site takes place in the evenings. On Monday nights visitors can come for the Cajun Music Jam, bringing an instrument to play along or simply listening to local musicians. And here's a bonus: It's not uncommon for members of the audience to get up and dance! On Tuesday nights the center hosts its *Cercle Francophone*, during which participants speak French as a way of keeping the language alive. There's no charge for either of these weekly events, but the glimpse into the life of Cajuns is priceless.

Throughout the year this special culture is acknowledged at festivals up and down the Bayou, with events celebrating everything from food to music to boat-building. But of course the highlight among these events is Mardi Gras, which is embraced by everyone in Louisiana but especially the Cajuns. Lafourche Parish offers a particularly family-friendly version of “Fat Tuesday,” with G-rated parades and festivities that are the perfect way to introduce your *bébé* to both the fun and the true meaning of the celebration.

And as a rule you can’t address the topic of Cajun culture without talking about food ... at length and with great passion and enthusiasm. Books have been written and songs have been sung about Cajun cooking, a rustic cuisine that stands out for its use of local ingredients and its utter simplicity. Popular ingredients include seafood – especially shrimp – sausage, rice, green bell peppers, onion and celery.

Wherever you go in Lafourche Parish, you’ll see, hear, smell and taste the impact and influence of the Cajuns. Perhaps the best part about time spent in this region is that there’s nothing contrived about these experiences you’ll have; they’re completely authentic and become the most memorable part of a visit.