

THE 16 BEST THINGS TO DO IN NEW ORLEANS

(Courtesy of Nomadic Matt, www.nomadicmatt.com)



Posted: 5/23/2023 | May 23rd, 2023

[New Orleans](#) is one of the best cities in the world. Synonymous with debauchery, it's become famous for the boisterous [Mardi Gras festival](#) that takes over the city each February.

But there is more to "NOLA" than just partying. Much more.

I first went in 2006 and have been drawn back countless times, diving deeper and deeper into the city. From feasting on delicious Creole food to learning about voodoo and its cultural roots, New Orleans is a city with layers — layers that are often overlooked by partying tourists.

New Orleans is magic. It is such a phenomenal place. I've never not had a great time there. It's one of my favorite places in the WORLD! That's how good it is!

To help you have fun and make the most of your visit beyond the tourist trail, here's my list of the best things to do in New Orleans:

1. Celebrate Mardi Gras



Mardi Gras — French for “Fat Tuesday” — is one of [the most popular festivals in the world](#). It kicks off in January and lasts until Ash Wednesday. There are parades with floats and live music, balls, and a nonstop party atmosphere known for getting rowdy. Upwards of a million visitors flock here each year to celebrate, turning the city into a giant party.

While it can be a blast, make sure you book everything well in advance, as prices skyrocket and everything sells out quickly. But it’s a party not to be missed!

2. Listen to music on Frenchmen Street

Buskers, jazz, blues, big band: you can find it all in NOLA. Live music is hugely popular here, and there are tons of bars and clubs in which you can take in a performance. The main area to find them is on Frenchmen Street, which grew to prominence in the 1980s and has been a staple of the music scene ever since.

3. Take a ghost or voodoo tour

New Orleans is considered one of the most haunted spots in the country, thanks to the city’s voodoo roots. Voodoo is a set of underground religious practices that came out of the African religious traditions that enslaved people brought to America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Over the years, voodoo and the occult became synonymous with New Orleans. From stories of ghosts and vampires to Marie Laveau (the most famous voodoo practitioner), New Orleans has a certain unsettling aspect.

To learn more, take a voodoo tour through the French Quarter and its cemeteries. [Witches Brew Tours](#) and the [Ghosts, Vampires, and Voodoo French Quarter Tour](#) are two of the best.

400 Royal St, +1 504-454-3939, witchesbrewtours.com. They host multiple tours daily, including some only for adults. Its Cemetery Insiders Walking Tour lasts two hours and costs \$35 USD.

4. Visit the Voodoo Museum

This small museum is the place to learn more about voodoo and to actually see objects used in its practices. Comprised of just two rooms, it opened in 1972 and is packed with all kinds of artifacts, talismans, taxidermied animals, and voodoo dolls. And if that's not enough, the museum can facilitate psychic readings and other rituals with local practitioners if you're so inclined.

You can visit the museum at your own pace via the self-guided option, or take the walking tour, which includes a guided tour of the museum.

724 Dumaine St, +1 504-680-0128, voodooomuseum.com. Open daily 10am-6pm. Admission is \$10 USD for a self-guided tour or \$32 USD for the guided museum and walking tour.

5. Tour the French Quarter



The famous French Quarter was settled by the French (hence the name) in 1718. The district is now a haven for revelers on Bourbon Street, antique shoppers on Royal Street, and foodies seeking some of the best Cajun food in town. Here you'll also find Jackson Square, St. Louis Cathedral (the oldest in the country, dating back to 1789), beautiful homes, bars blaring top-notch jazz, and iconic 18th century French-style homes with wrought-iron balconies.

I start off every visit to a new city with a free walking tour. Try the one from [NOLA Tour Guy](#). You'll learn about the history of the neighborhood and get access to an expert local guide who can answer all your questions. Just be sure to tip your guide at the end!

For a more in-depth tour, go with [Take Walks](#). It is my go-to company when it comes to detailed walking tours that go above and beyond the guidebook.

For more suggestions, here's my list of [the best walking tours in NOLA](#).

6. Stop by Sazerac House

Opened in 2019, Sazerac House is part bar, part museum, highlighting the importance of the Sazerac cocktail, born at this very location and considered by many to be the oldest American cocktail. This is an immersive experience, with several floors of interactive exhibits. You can chat with virtual bartenders about their favorite drinks and see what the French Quarter looked like in the 1800s. It's a super detailed and fun experience that's one of the best in New Orleans.

You can also take a 90-minute free tour (which includes samples) or attend one of the events or workshops (which start at \$30 USD), such as a whiskey tasting or a workshop that teaches you how to craft whiskey-based cocktails.

101 Magazine St, +1 504-910-0100, sazerachouse.com. Open Tuesday-Sunday 11am-6pm. Admission is free, but booking in advance is required.

7. Cruise on the Steamboat Natchez



This boat launched in 1975; however, it's the ninth steamboat to bear the Natchez name (one of its

predecessors took part in the most famous steamboat race in history, in 1870). Today, it's the city's only authentic steamboat and makes for a touristy (but fun) way to spend the afternoon. There are brunch and dinner cruises and live jazz music. You'll also get to enjoy the scenic skyline as you cruise on the placid waters of the Mississippi.

400 Toulouse St, +1 800-233-2628, steamboatnatchez.com. Cruises depart at 11:30am, 2:30pm, and 7:00pm. [Evening jazz cruises](#) cost \$50 USD (\$95 USD with dinner); the [Sunday jazz brunches](#) are \$68 USD.

8. Learn about 1850 House

For the centuries leading up to the Civil War, the widespread reliance on slavery in the South allowed white plantation owners to get incredibly wealthy (there were around four million slaves in the US then, about one-eighth of the entire US population). Like the rich and powerful today, they built elaborate homes to show off that wealth — and some of those are still standing today.

Located next to Jackson Square, 1850 House is an example of what many of those townhouses looked like before the Civil War. Built by the wealthy aristocrat and 19th-century New Orleans personality Baroness Micaela Almonester Pontalba, this particular edifice had many different occupants over the years. When the Louisiana State Museum took it over, it decorated the building to be representative of upper-class life at the time of its construction. It's the best place to get an immersive understanding of just how affluent white slave owners were in the south (because they were wealthy!).

523 St Ann St, +1 504-524-9118, louisianastatemuseum.org. Open Tuesday-Sunday 9am-4pm. Admission is \$5 USD.

9. Take a Bayou tour



The bayou, a swampy section of a slow-moving river, provided early settlers with trees for homes, fish for eating, and waterways for commerce. It's still the lifeblood of the region and an important part of its culture. Spend your morning in this beautiful and relaxing area by getting back to nature.

Kayak tours cost around \$50-60 USD and last a couple of hours. [Wild Louisiana Tours](#) offers guided outings that will get you out on the water and teach you about the ecosystem. It also offers rentals from \$40 USD if you don't want a tour.

1047 Piety Street, +1 504-571-9975, neworleanskayakswamptours.com.

10. Relax in the park



When you need to rest your legs, grab a book, pack a picnic, and head to one of New Orleans' stunning parks, both with ponds, trees, walking and biking trails, and plenty of space to relax.

City Park is a massive green space 50% larger than NYC's Central Park — one of the biggest urban parks in the country! It is home to centuries-old oak trees, the New Orleans Botanical Garden, the New Orleans Museum of Art, cafés, and restaurants, among other attractions. Audubon Park was formerly a plantation, a staging area for both the Confederate and the Union armies during the Civil War, and host to a World's Fair in 1884–85.

11. Visit Oak Alley



Over a dozen oak trees (each of them over 250 years old) line the lane leading to this antebellum manor right on the Mississippi River. Once a sugar plantation and a cattle ranch, it opened to the public in 1976.

Personally, I found the home's interior to be less impressive than the exterior. However, wandering the grounds was absolutely worthwhile, as the signs/placards have a lot of information on the horrible institution of slavery. It's a very sobering but important experience.

It's located an hour from the city by car. Try to arrive early (or stay late) to avoid the day tours that come from New Orleans, so you can beat the crowds.

3645 Highway 18 (Great River Road), +1 225 265-2151, oakalleyplantation.org. Open daily 8:30am-5pm. Admission starts at \$25 USD. For [tours that include transportation from New Orleans and admission to the plantation](#), expect to pay \$70-80 USD per person.

12. Tour the National World War II Museum

Opened in 2000 as the National D-Day Museum, this is the largest museum dedicated to World War II in the entire United States. The exhibits focus on the American contribution to the war, which lasted from 1939 to 1945 (the US entered the war in 1941).

Even if you're not a history buff like me, I highly recommend visiting. Many veterans spend time here, and you can listen to firsthand accounts of the war, as well as see some of their pictures. It's sobering but incredibly insightful.

945 Magazine St, +1 504-528-1944, nationalww2museum.org. Open daily from 9am-5pm. Admission is \$31.50 USD (buying [advance timed tickets](#) is highly recommended).

13. Take a food tour



From po'boys to gumbo and everything in between, food, culture, and history are part of the city's DNA. If you want to learn more about New Orleans' best eats, take a food tour. You'll not only get to eat more of the best chow in town, but you'll learn how and why certain dishes came to prominence. A tour will add much more insight and nuance to your time here.

[Doctor Gumbo Tours](#) runs one of the best food tours. It also offers a cocktail history tour that goes to historic venues (with a cocktail at each stop, of course) while teaching you about famed drinks and liquors.

+1 504 473-4823, doctorgumbo.com. Tours last three hours and cost \$75 USD per person.

14. Explore the Confederate Memorial Hall Museum

This is one of the oldest museums in the state and is home to the second-largest collection of Confederate items in the world. I'm always intrigued by Civil War history museums, especially those in [the Deep South](#), where the memory of "Northern aggression" is still very strong.

The museum contains over 5,000 historical artifacts, including the uniforms of Generals Bragg and Beauregard and personal items owned by Confederate President Jefferson Davis (including his Bible and a piece of the crown of thorns he received from the Pope). The museum highlights Southern patriotism and reiterates the historic argument that the South was fighting for "honor" and "states' rights."

I found the absence of a discussion of slavery here unsurprising, given that the museum wants to pretend that that wasn't the main cause of the war. It's always fascinating to learn how people frame their history, even if they do so in such a biased light. Despite the one-sidedness — and in fact, because of it — this museum is worth visiting.

929 Camp St, +1 504-523-4522. Open Tuesday-Saturday 10am-4pm. Admission is \$10 USD.

15. Tour the NOLA Jazz Museum

I love jazz: listening to it, learning about it. I can't get enough. This museum not only has a ton of artifacts (over 25,000) but it hosts lots of concerts and over a dozen festivals throughout the year. The museum is housed in an old US Mint building and features instruments, artwork of and by musicians, memorabilia, and more. Most events are free, and many of them are broadcast live as well, so you can watch them for free from home too.

400 Esplanade Ave., 504-568-6993, nolajazzmuseum.org. Open Tuesday-Sunday 9am-4pm. Admission is \$8 USD.

16. Visit Studio Be

Located in the hip, artsy neighborhood of the Bywater, Studio Be is a unique art gallery created by local artist Brandan "Bmike" Odums. In the 35,000 square foot warehouse, you'll find colorful spray-painted murals and large-scale pieces as well as multimedia installations by Bmike and other local artists, largely focused on social justice issues. Meandering through is a moving way to glean insights into the Black experience in New Orleans.

2941 Royal St, 504-252-0463, studiobenola.com. Open Wednesday through Saturday, 2pm-8pm and Sunday 2pm-6pm. Admission is \$15 USD.

[New Orleans](#) is one of the liveliest (and popular) destinations in the USA. But there's much more to it than letting loose on Bourbon Street. With incredible live music, delicious food, a rich history, and world-class museums, NOLA has something for everyone. It's a place with layers and, if you take the time to explore beneath the surface, you'll discover one of the most unique cities in the country.