



Returning to New Orleans: A Sentimental Journey

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“Gonna take a Sentimental Journey, Gonna set my heart at ease. Gonna make a Sentimental Journey, to renew old memories.” —Lyrics by Bud Green, Les Brown, and Ben Homer

As soon as we passed through Mobile, Alabama, on our way to New Orleans, my heart began to thump. As an Air Force brat, I had grown up all over the U.S. but despite living in Atlanta for many years, the place I still call “home” is The Big Easy.

Entering the city via I-10 from the East was more like entering the Twilight Zone than taking a sentimental journey. Though it’s been more than a year after Hurricane Katrina, it took us a few minutes to realize that the miles of upscale apartments and expensive homes in New Orleans East remain eerily empty. No cars move about. Scant reconstruction is in progress. The only indication that a major mall ever existed is a wounded Dillard’s that stands forlornly amid a vast concrete wasteland.

With direct hits from breaches in the Industrial Canal and multiple levees, the city didn’t have a chance. Eighty percent flooded. My brother and sister-in-law’s neighborhood stood under as much as twenty feet of water for days. When the water finally receded and they were able to return weeks later, black mold and mildew had permeated every wall and their grand piano was flipped upside down in the living room. Like most New Orleanians, they lost the treasures of a lifetime. They were fortunate to escape with their lives.

The terrible statistics—200,000 homes and 184,000 apartments destroyed, 1,531 (and counting) dead, many still missing—are unfathomable until you see it firsthand. Everything I had heard and read had convinced me that the Green Acres neighborhood where I lived as a teenager had escaped the worst. But it fared only slightly better than many areas. FEMA trailers still dot the yards, roofs remain covered with blue tarp. Trees and shrubs are non-existent. Black plastic covered the windows, staring back at me with vacant eyes. I broke down briefly, mourning for the home of my youth where my parents opened the doors to a gaggle of giggly teens every Friday night.

Canal Street hit me the same way. As a teenager, it was Nirvana—THE place to shop, take in a flick, and flirt with the cute guys who flocked to all the Mardi Gras parades. Today, the two majestic theaters where my dates snuck timid arms around my shoulders now stand vacant. Many of the retail shops and restaurants remain tightly boarded. Hopefully, the recent re-opening of the Ritz-Carlton will jump start the return of other establishments.

The Upper and Lower Ninth Wards, where residents were trapped atop their roofs for days as TV cameras rolled were heartbreakers. Large “Xs” with dates and initials around the perimeter signified that rescuers had searched the ruins. Squares around the “Xs” meant an occupant had died before help came.

To jumpstart regrowth, Habitat for Humanity is constructing a [Musicians' Village](#) in the upper Ninth Ward. The idea was conceived by Harry Connick, Jr., and Branford and Ellis Marsalis to provide brightly painted homes for displaced New Orleans musicians and preserve the city's rich jazz heritage.

There are other positive signs. The elegant new Harrah's Hotel opened late last year amid grumbles from preservationists. But even die-hards admit that the hotel and block-wide casino across the street are drawing visitors from all over the country willing to spend some bucks in the cash-strapped city. Admittedly, we dropped a few quarters in the slots, too.

Once we stepped into the French Quarter, the New Orleans I knew reappeared. Most of the signature restaurants have re-opened and Brennan's chef continues to work his magic. The eclectic antique shops along Royal still lure me inside, and famous New Orleans jazz clubs like Preservation Hall and the House of Blues are in full swing. We feasted on café au lait and *beignets* (French puff pastries dripping with powdered sugar) at the famous Café Du Monde and strolled in and out of shops on the streets I once trod.

My sentimental journey was filled with pathos. But despite the ghost towns and lagging reconstruction, the spirit of the New Orleanians “set my heart at ease.” The city once called “America's Paris” may never return to its former glory, but it WILL make a comeback. From service personnel to executives, everyone was upbeat, looking ahead—not backward.

What the city needs most are tourists—before, during, and long after Mardi Gras—to bring a renewed spirit to the Big Easy I love. I plan to be among them.

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