



◀ Clockwise from left: Kayaking on Lake Martin; a jam session at the Blue Moon Saloon, in Lafayette; diver scallops with chard and sweet corn at Café Vermilionville, in Lafayette.



BORN ON THE BAYOU

Most travelers come to southern Louisiana expecting to find gumbo, accordions, and maybe a few gators. But, as **ELENI N. GAGE** discovers, the mix is far richer.

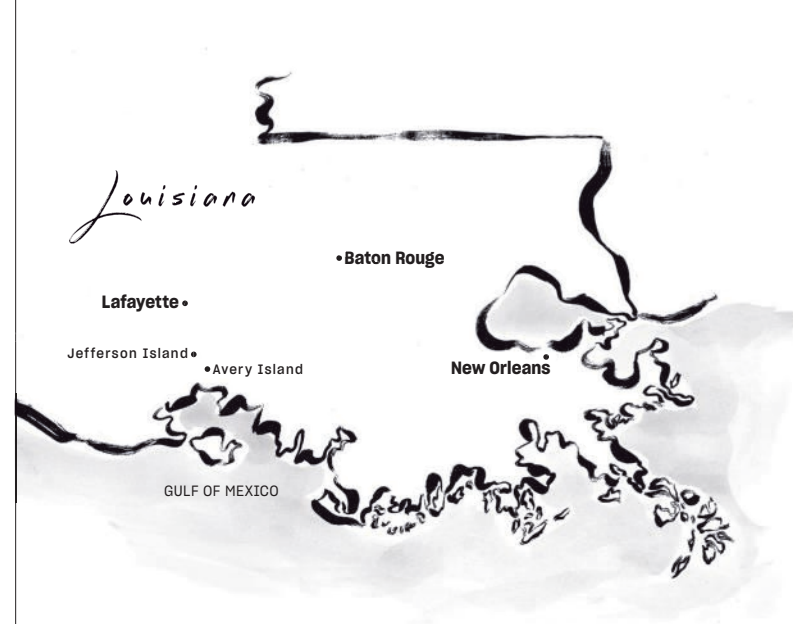
THE SOUTHWESTERN region of Louisiana is officially called Acadiana, but when I told people I was planning a road trip there, I found myself saying, “I’m going to Cajun country.” I was drawn to the region’s heritage, and hoped to eat Cajun food, listen to zydeco, maybe head out on the swamp. What I didn’t expect: soul-stirring natural beauty and a unique community, with a layered history that continues to thrive and adapt.

I was traveling with my friend Katherine, who lives in New Orleans. Together, we set off on the three-hour drive to Lafayette Parish, which welcomes roughly 3 million people each year. Here, in the center of Acadiana, there are weekly Rendez-vous des Cajuns concerts, which

showcase the region’s fiddle-and-accordion-driven music, and cultural events like the Festivals Acadiens et Créoles.

Canadians make up the largest group of international visitors, which makes sense. The word *Cajun* is an anglicization of *Acadien*, the French Catholic ethnic group that, in the 18th century, was expelled from eastern Canada by the British in what became known as *Le Grand Dérangement*, or the Great Upheaval. Thousands ended up on the bayous of Catholic, French-speaking Louisiana.

Our first stop was Vermilionville, on the outskirts of the city of Lafayette. This living-history museum showcases the groups that resided along Bayou Vermilion in the late 18th and the 19th centuries. In the old schoolhouse, Katherine and I were surprised to see the chalkboard filled with a repeated line, “I



▼ Co-owner Walt Adams behind the counter at the hotel Maison Madeleine’s Jesus Bar, near Lafayette.

will not speak French on the school grounds.” Evidently, the current celebration of Cajun culture is a renaissance, a response to a time when that heritage was denigrated. (English was mandatory in Louisiana public schools from 1921 until 1974, leading to a significant decline in the population of native French speakers by 2010.) Today, there’s a concerted effort to bring back the culture, the language—even the Acadian brown cotton spun by the refugees.

But while the Acadian experience is an important story, it’s not the whole story.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

Outsiders often conflate the Cajun and Creole cultures (and cuisines) of Louisiana, and it’s true that the definitions can be slippery. In Louisiana, the term *Creole* refers to “the children of the colonies”—the descendants of those who lived in the area during European colonial rule. Vermilionville is a site of many histories: Native American, French, Spanish, West African.

“The Acadians didn’t get here until 1764,” D’Jalma Garnier III, a Creole musician at Vermilionville, told us. “People think gumbo is Cajun,” he added. “It’s from Senegal! *Gumbo* comes from the West African word for okra.” Before European colonization, Louisiana was home to more than a dozen tribes, including the Chitimacha and Choctaw. The French brought enslaved Africans, who were forced to work the indigo and tobacco fields alongside captive native peoples. Whether they were there by choice or by force, each group added its own traditions to Louisiana, creating something entirely new—or, as Garnier put it, *creolizing*. “I like to spread our *créolité*,” he said, playing a Creole tune with “clear Caribbean African” roots.

Like Creole music, the rest of our trip was partly improvised. We took an airboat ride on the bayou—having signed a waiver absolving our guides of responsibility for the actions of mosquitoes, alligators, and Asian carp, which tend to jump out of the water and into your lap. What struck me even more than airborne fish was the serene beauty of the Atchafalaya Swamp—the country’s largest wetland, situated between Lafayette and Baton Rouge. The sound of flapping alerted us to the presence of egrets, their flight rippling the reflection of cypress trees in the water.

Lush nature surrounded us again at Rip Van Winkle Gardens, 15 acres of semitropical parkland on the banks of Lake Peigneur, half an hour south of Lafayette. Home to roseate spoonbills, white egrets, and peacocks, the property is also the site of an 1870 Steamboat Gothic-style house built for Joseph Jefferson, an actor who became famous touring the country in an adaptation of the Rip Van Winkle story. The gardens are actually located on Jefferson Island—which isn’t an island at all, but one of five salt domes, mounds of minerals pushing up through the sedimentary rock, that are attached to the shore of the lake. Some of them formed traps for oil and natural gas, and in 1980, a salt mine under Jefferson Island collapsed after being punctured by a Texaco drilling rig. The Jefferson home was spared, but as Lake Peigneur drained



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Diners in the courtyard of Café Vermilionville.

into the breached mine, it became a whirlpool, swallowing up another house recently built on its banks. Today, only the house's chimney stands, rising mournfully out of the water.

The next night, at the Wednesday Cajun Jam at the Blue Moon Saloon, in Lafayette, fiddlers and accordionists accompanied a twenty-something woman singing in French as Katherine accepted an older gentleman's invitation to dance. He turned out to be an engineer who had come here in 1970 to work for Morton Salt, and remembers the day the dome collapsed. It was one of a few coincidences that left me feeling Acadiana was a place where the past two-steps with the present.

We spent our last day kayaking among the tupelo and cypress on Lake Martin, following Janenne deClouet, founder of Duc in Altum tours and a paddling philosopher who believes in the healing power of nature. "It's kind of a ministry," she said of guiding kayakers. "You get people out into Creation and see them rest." As we rowed, she showed us alligators, egrets, and duck blinds, then pointed to a leaning cypress that formed a sort of arch. "I call this the torii gate of the lake."

It echoed the bright red, and entirely real, Shinto gate we had seen at Jungle Gardens on Avery Island, another salt dome about an hour

south of Lafayette. (It's most famous for being home to the Tabasco factory. The torii leads the way to a 900-year-old Buddha, a gift to hot-sauce scion Edward Avery McIlhenny in 1936.) "When you pass through the torii," deClouet said, "you let something go that has been weighing you down."

Once a year, deClouet helps lead the Eucharistic boat procession along nearby Bayou Teche that celebrates the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Acadiana is deeply attached to the Catholic faith of its French forebears—and yet the ancient Buddha appears at home here, too. We had come to learn one people's story and, instead, discovered something richer: that everywhere we went and everyone we met was a living embodiment of this region's *créolité*. 🍷

Cajun Country Must-Sees

WHERE TO STAY

Spend a night in Lafayette, a city of 125,000 at the center of Acadiana. There are chain hotels, but we loved the food-focused **Maison Madeleine** (maisonmadeleine.com; doubles from \$180) just outside town. Don't miss the Jesus Bar, a cocktail spot filled with Catholic icons occupying an outbuilding on the property. Near Avery Island, **Olive Branch Cottages** (olivebranchcottages.com; from \$125), which once housed cane cutters, has a canoe for paddling on Bayou Teche.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

In Lafayette, the elegant **Café Vermilionville** (cafev.com; entrées \$28–\$45) serves old-school fare like alligator Dijon and

duck roulade. The Cajun Jam at the **Blue Moon Saloon** (bluemoonpresents.com) is the place to be on Wednesdays. For nouveau Cajun cuisine, try **Café Sydnie Mae** (cafesydniemae.com; entrées \$17–\$30), in Breaux Bridge. Near Abbeville, close to Avery Island, **Suire's Grocery** (suire.yolasite.com; lunch \$3–\$17), a plate-lunch general store famous for its turtle sauce picante and pecan pies, is the best kind of throwback.

WHAT TO DO

Rip Van Winkle Gardens is a fascinating piece of Jefferson Island history. You can even rent a cottage there (ripvanwinklegardens.com; from \$135) and wake up to peacocks outside your window. **Jungle Gardens** (junglegardens.org), on Avery Island, is known for its bird-watching and wildlife. Head out onto the bayou with **McGee's Louisiana Swamp & Airboat Tours** (mcgeesswamp.com), which offers airboat, motorboat, and canoe tours helmed by Cajun guides. **Duc in Altum** (ducinaltumkayak.com) leads small-group kayaking excursions and photography tours. For an immersive understanding of Acadiana's complex past, the living-history museum at **Vermilionville** (vermillionville.org) is an essential stop. — E.N.G.