



PHOTO: JEFFREY M. HARRIS

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

▲ Diners in the courtyard of Café Vermillionville.

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 Vermillionville** (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** (cafe-sydniemae.com; entrées \$17–\$30), in Breaux Bridge. Near Abbeville, close to Avery Island, **Suire's Grocery** (suires.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** (jungle-gardens.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-tours.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 **Vermillionville** (vermillionville.org) is an essential stop. — E.N.G.