The road into Cajun country starts not too far to the east of Houston, beyond Baytown and the I-10 signs for Liberty and Anahuac. Sixty miles out, the tiny farming community of Winnie—hometown of music entrepreneur Huey P. Meaux—sits at a crucial juncture in the prairie. Here you start noticing Cajun names on mailboxes. This is about as far into Texas as the Cajun culture penetrated before dissolving into the redneck and cowboy influences.

From Winnie, most people continue east on a boring stretch of I-10 that speeds across the flat prairies of East Texas and Southwest Louisiana, reaches a high-point past Lafayette (where it skims over the moss-festooned surface of the Atchafalaya Swamp), and cuts briefly through Baton Rouge en route to New Orleans. A much more scenic route, however, begins at Winnie where Highway 73 splits off from I-10 and zigzags across 30 miles of rice fields and wetlands into Port Arthur, home of the largest concentration of Cajuns in Texas. From there, Highway 82 arcs over a 130-foot-high concrete span, turns south for a few miles, then cuts across a Sabine River drawbridge into the flat green wilderness of the Louisiana marshes.

Two hours out of Houston, you're on the Creole Nature Trail (Highway 27), a smooth two-lane path that follows Louisiana's marshy coastline past several wildlife sanctuaries and countless majestic groves of live oaks before turning northward (back on Highway 82) into Abbeville and the heart of Cajun country. From Abbeville, roads branch off to Lafayette and New Iberia, the twin hubs of Cajunland, and thence south along the "Evangeline Throughway" (Highway 90) past sugar cane fields, plantation houses, and occasional oil field equipment yards on the way to New Orleans.

Which route you take depends on what you want to see and how long you have to daily. Because of its proximity to Houston, Cajun country is excellent territory for a scenic, adventurous, and gastronomically rewarding weekend tour. Here are some of the things you are likely to find.

Jambalaya, crawfish pie, filé gumbo...

Some of the best Cajun restaurants in the state happen to be located in the tiny village of Henderson, just east of Lafayette on the edge of the Great Atchafalaya Swamp. The oldest and most legendary of these is Pat's, which has held its choice location overlooking Bayou Peyronnet for several decades. Coming up fast, however, are relative newcomers like Robin's (rhe-ban's) choice for best restaurant in Henderson; Las's (Iass'e) and Landry's Seafood Inn, both comfortable, quality restaurants; and Collette's, a tiny converted gas station renowned for its fried catfish (though its fried crawfish tails are even better).

Lafayette, which calls itself the hub city of Acadiana, is also home to a few Cajun restaurants, among them the famed Don's Seafood and Steak House downtown. Don's, founded in the 1930s, is the great-grandfather of Cajun eateries and has sired a sizable family of some 12 seafood restaurants in Louisiana and Texas (three of them in Houston). The flagship's reputation is far more substantial than its cooking these days, having even been surpassed by its Lafayette relative, Don's Seafood Hut on Johnston Street. (Differences in quality at any of Don's restaurants can be blamed on the fact that the entire group has only one thing in common: the name "Don's" or—in two instances—"Landry's." The original Landry brothers, who started the Lafayette Don's, have handed out franchises to their children and former employees in helter-skelter fashion—Don's on Post Oak and Landry's Seafood Inn on the Katy Freeway are managed by children of the clan; Don's on North Belt and in Beaumont are run by former employees. The patriarchs of the Landry clan thus exert little control over menu selection or food preparation.)

Half-shell-oyster lovers will find plenty of good eating this fall at two of the best oyster bars in the state, located within two blocks of each other in Abbeville: a sleepy old town on the banks of the Vermilion River about 20 miles south of Lafayette. Conventional wisdom has it that out-of-towners prefer Dupuy's (doo-pwee) while the locals go to Black's. I prefer Black's.

Abbeville has one other great Cajun restaurant. Richard's (ree-shards) Seafood Patio, south of Highway 14 just across the river from Abbeville, offers boiled crawfish and shrimp that are brought to the table in steaming, troughlike pans. When crawfish season gets into full swing (at the end of December) it will be well worth a visit.

Farther east, boiled crabs and crawfish (in season) are the specialty at the legendary Guiding Star, on Highway 14 west of New Iberia, and at the relatively new Boiling Point, on the Evangeline Throughway between New Iberia and Lafayette. (As a matter of fact, they are the only thing on the menu at the Guiding Star.) Such specialization allows wondrous concentration of culinary talents, as the superb boiled shellfish at both of these places shows.

In the far reaches of Cajun country, Opleousas offers the talents of Solfean's (swalows) Dinner Club, specializing in crawfish dishes. In the Bayou Lafourche country—the southeasternmost segment of Cajun country near New Orleans—lies the town of Thibodaux (tee-bo-doo's) and Bistro's Restaurant and Lounge, with oyster and crawfish specialties. The Yellow Bowl, on Highway 182 between Jennerette and Franklin, has long been renowned for its crawfish dishes and seems to be doing well under new management.

The best boudin (a spicy Cajun meat and
Cajun music is the catalyst for such goings-on—an earthy mélange of whining fiddle and complex accordion, occasionally backed by a steel guitar, a snare drum, or even an alto sax. There's no music anywhere quite like Cajun music. It can be manic and syncopated in a jeryk style that seems to slide from one style to another. There is no such thing as a pure Cajun style, much less a jeryk one. (Hank Williams' "Jambalaya" and Doug Kershaw's "Louisiana Man" are not Cajun music, and the latter could be considered a pop version of it. Classics like "Jolie Blanc," "Big Mamou," and Kershaw's "Did You Call" are what we're really talking about.)

South Louisiana blacks raised in the Cajun tradition have their own form of Cajun music, called "zydeco," that has enjoyed great popularity in recent years even among young whites. While white Cajun music is closely related to traditional folk and country-and-western music, zydeco (a mispronunciation of les haricots, the French word for snap beans, from a song named "Les Haricots Sont Pas Sale") relies heavily on rhythm-and-blues influences for its uniquely funky style. One of the most popular Cajun dance halls is Clifton Cherier, a native of Louisiana who now lives in Houston.

There are several Cajun dance halls with visiting Cajun folk music, try La Poussière (la poos-yehr) in Breaux Bridges or the Triangle Club in Scott. Black zydeco music can be heard at Slim's Waikiki Club in Opelousas or the Blue Angel Club in Lafayette.

Fun at the races

Perhaps more than any other ethnic groups, Cajuns have a passion for gambling. It would not be unusual to encounter a bank of oil-rush Cajuns training the streets of Las Vegas on any given night. In most little towns throughout South Louisiana, there is likely to be at least one bar or night club with a smoky back room in which a group of old Cajuns are gathered around a table playing bocce (boo-ray), a Cajun form of poker. And just as red Texas has a passion for dogfighting, some rural Cajuns like to bet their small change on the bloody outcome of cockfights. But the most ubiquitous form of gambling, and the one most accessible to outsiders, is the horse races. Although Lafayette's Evangeline Downs (open April through Labor Day), Vinton's Delta Downs (open September 11-August 2), and New Orleans' Jefferson Downs (open March through November) are the biggest and most luxurious, there are smaller county race tracks throughout Cajunland where farmers and other rural folks gather to swap bets.

Even so, Louisiana, gambling is not as widespread or as varied as it once was. At the age of 12, I played slot machines in South Louisiana cafés and watched crap games at numerous bars. Zealous law enforcement has virtually wiped out such diversions.

Grandes fêtes

Outsiders are generally amazed and delighted by the all-out carousing that accompanies most Cajun fairs and festivals, where you can expect to see a good bit of beer drinking and have to elbow your way around couples dancing in the streets. Some 34 festivals with a Cajun theme have sprung up within the last few decades. The most popular—probably because it is the most out-of-state publicity—is the Crawfish Festival held in Breaux Bridge in the spring of every numbered years. A new contender for best festival is the four-year-old Festivals Acadiens, a five-day tribute to Cajun food, music, and crafts held from September 17 to 21 this year in Lafayette. Though it's too late to catch the Festivals Acadiens or the Frog Festival in Rayne (September 19-21), there are plenty of others coming up soon:

- Sauce Piquante Festival, October 4-5, Raceland (south of New Orleans). Featuring turtle and chicken sauce piquante cookery, plus other Cajun foods, a boat show, pirogue races, live bands, and dancing in the streets.
- Lagniappe on the Bayou, October 6-8, Chauvin (south of Houma). Authentic Cajun cooking, crafts, fais-dodo, and carnival.
- Gumbo Festival, October 10-12, Bridge City (near New Orleans). Featuring Creole gumbo cookery, Mr. Gumbo bodybuilding competition, continuous live entertainment, gumbo-cooking and eating contests, and (continued on page 113)
Rice and gravy

By now you may have noticed that nearly every Cajun dish has rice in it. The most basic dish on Cajun tables is simply rice smothered with a ton of gravy. The Cajuns have a couple of stewslike dishes that are used in this way (besides the crawfish étouffée mentioned above), Friscue (free-cah-say) is a rich brown stew made with roux and some type of fowl or wild game. Sauce piquante (spicy pe-see-cahnt) is a thick, spicy tomato stew made with shellfish, game, or fowl and served over rice. (Shrimp sauce piquante is sometimes called shrimp creole.) R.B.

CAJUN COUNTRY

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beer-drinking contest.

Rice Festival, October 17-18, Crowley (between Lafayette and Lake Charles). Parades, dancing, frog derby, fiddle and accordion contests, and rodeo.

International Acadian Festival, October 21-23, Plaquemine (south of Baton Rouge). Boat parade on Bayou Plaquemine, fireworks, Cajun cooking, arts and crafts, and carnival.

French Food Festival, October 24-26, Lafayette (south of New Orleans). With over 25 specialty food booths, a boucherie (animal slaughter), fais-dodo, and carnival.

Andouille Festival, October 24-26, Laplace (west of New Orleans). Featuring gumbos and jambalayas made with andouille (a thick, salami-like sausage), music and entertainment, skydiving, exhibits.

Plaquemines Parish Fair and Orange Festival, December 6-7, Fort Jackson (at the mouth of the Mississippi River). Seafood-cooking contests, duck-calling contests, oyster-shucking contests, fais-dodo, and carnival.

Lagniappe

Lagniappe (lon-yap) is the Cajun word for "something extra." Here are a few extra sights—alternately odd and beautiful—to spice up your trip to Louisiana.

The Great Atchafalaya Basin. Nature’s loss is our gain. When the state decided to launch a superhighway across one of the nation’s last great wilderness areas, environmental considerations were thrown to the winds; but now that the project is a fait accompli we might as well enjoy it. I-10 between Lafayette and Baton Rouge is one of the most beautiful stretches of road in the country—25 miles of cypress trees, lakes, wetlands, and rivers. Though it seems dank and forbidding, the great swamp has been a cornucopia of fish, game, and furs for many generations of Cajuns. For a closer look at the swamp, try the Atchafalaya Basin Tour Service (318-228-2411) or McBee’s Boat Tours (318-228-8523), both near Henderson. Or you can drive along the scenic levee road from Henderson to Catahoula.

Jungle Gardens at Avery Island (south of New Iberia). Avery Island is actually a salt dome rising out of the surrounding marsh; it’s connected to New Iberia by two-lane Highway 329. There, in a picturesque old factory, the McIlhenny family produces its excellent Tabasco brand pepper sauce. Next door are the family’s gardens, planted by a progenitor who was in the nursery business in a big way. What might have been a mere tourist trap, however, is actually a verdant maze consisting of 200 landscaped acres of gardens, oak alleys, bird sanctuaries, and even a Buddhist shrine thrown in for lagniappe. Entry to the gardens is allowed by the 9 and 5 daily ($2.50 adults; $1.50 children). Tours of the Tabasco factory are available free from 8:30 to noon and 1 to 4.

St. Martinville. This ancient village on Bayou Teche is one of the first Cajun settlements in Louisiana. It’s also the setting of the legend of Evangeline. Here you can see the St. Martin of Tours church, originally built about 1765; a statue of Evangeline; a museum of Cajun memorabilia; the Evangeline Oak, where the star-crossed lovers were supposedly reunited; and a lovely state park filled with gnarled live oaks.

The Drive-In Way of the Cross and the Alley of Oaks and Pines (Highway 96 between St. Martinville and Catahoula). The more medieval aspects of Cajun culture show themselves in a slavish devotion to mystical Catholicism, with a cultlike fixation on the Blessed Virgin Mary and the crucified Christ. Precast concrete grottoes featuring Our Lady of Lourdes have been the hottest item in Cajun lawn ornaments for years. A more recent innovation is the rural Way of the Cross: nailed to every live oak along Highway 96 is a scene from the Catholic Lenten ritual that commemorates Christ’s march to Calvary. Though it was originally designed to be walked, devotees can now drive from oak to oak through the countryside and perform the entire ritual without ever getting out of the car.

Along the same highway, by chance, is the two-mile-long Alley of Oaks and Pines, the former entrance avenue of a now-demolished plantation house. The curious legend of this scenic alley can be found on a plaque at the entrance.

Plantation Alley (Highways 182 and 90 between New Iberia and Morgan City). This route winds through sugar cane country, the broad expanse of fertile delta land that stretches from New Iberia to New Orleans. Here the plantation system was once in full flower, and there are a number of old mansions along the route, among them Shadows on the Teche, Oaklawn Manor, Alabama Mansion, the Grevenberg House, Frances Plantation, and Dulcito Plantation. Though plantations are no-Cajun phenomenon (most were owned by Creoles or Anglo), it would be a shame to visit Louisiana without seeing some. Other concentrations of ante-
bellum homes can be found near St. Francisville and along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Acadian Village (off Highway 342 south of Lafayette). For the museum minded, a collection of Cajun shacks reassembled into a village on the prairie near Lafayette. Gardens, gift shop, and tours.

The Swamp. University of Southwestern Louisiana campus, Lafayette. A Cajun university, it seems, looks much like any other university. Except for the dark little swamp that was re-created right in the heart of the campus—gators and all.

R.B.

SOUND ADVICE

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ing an improvement. Since you’re not shopping for the first time, and are not as concerned with system prices, visit a lot of stereo stores, particularly independent dealers that carry some of the esoteric speaker brands. Some small companies offer stiff competition to the well-known names. There are definitely more great speakers on the market now than there were a decade ago.

The turntable should turn without a sound of its own. Because it is a mechanical rather than an electronic component, the turntable is the most likely candidate for replacement. It also makes the least direct difference in sound quality. The most important improvement is the low-mass tone arm. You might see a lot of advertising hype about direct drive (in which the platter is part of, or fits directly on, the motor), but it is not distinctly better than the belt-drive (where the motor spindle drives the platter with a rubber wheel). If you have an old idler-drive turntable, or if your machine has a big, heavy, clunky tone arm, it’s time to move up. Low-mass arms (provided they have good bearings) track warped and deformed records better than high-mass arms. More important, low-mass arms can take advantage of today’s best cartridges.

The cartridge is the most often neglected component in your stereo system. Most customers accept the one the dealer throws in with the system. The cartridge is as important to the sound, however, as the speakers are. Although the cartridge lasts a long time, the stylus (needle) doesn’t. You’re probably overdue for a stylus replacement, so take the big step and buy a better cartridge. The cartridge that comes with many systems has a retail value of about $20 (although, with discounting, you may find it on sale for $25). There are a dozen outstanding phonograph cartridges in the $100 to $200 price range (which means, with discounting, $75 to $150). These include cartridges from Shure, Audio-Tech nicer, Stanion, Signet, Pickering, Empire, Sonus, Ortofon, and ADC. Even if you have a top-of-the-line cartridge from five years ago, it’s time to trade up. The improvements have been extraordinary. Rely on the advice of a competent dealer about which cartridges