Acadiana calling

They come from Marseilles and Quebec, Montgomery and Kansas City, lured by bayous, boudin and Beausoleil. The mass marketing of Cajun culture has become big business — good news to a region bit hard by the oil bust.

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CROWLEY — It was just another day at work for David Guidry, minding his own business and trying to do his job while strangers peppered him with questions. Primarily a commercial shrimper, Guidry started working about 150 acres of crawfish ponds as a sideline about 15 years ago. Since then, the number of tourists driving across the Cajun prairie on Interstate 10 has increased steadily, and many of them feel compelled to stop and check him out.

Often, they’re steered his way by the folks at the nearby tourist information bureau, whose mission it is to spread the word about what the area has to offer visitors and, hopefully, keep them interested enough in the Cajun way of life to stick around for a meal, shopping, maybe even stay the night.

This time, it was a couple from Illinois, roaming the countryside while spending a week at a campground in Lafayette. Guidry putt-putted his flat aluminum boat to the

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FAUX CAJUN

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but some of these so-called Cajun products and the entertainers who poke fun at the culture are at best just plain embarrassing. Page 13

SPREADING THE WORD

Fiddler Dewey Balfa spent his life introducing Cajun culture not just to the world, but to younger generations at home. Today, those he influenced carry on the tradition. Page 14
Acadiana economy changing as Cajuns target tourism

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edge of the point and was met by a barrage of familiar ques-
tions posed in unfamiliar ac-
cents. What are those white
things sticking up out of the wa-
ter? How do the crawfish crowd
into those cages? How can that
beast go in only six inches of wa-
ter? How do you cook a craw-
fish? How do you eat one?

Guidry was glad to oblige,
once again, even though there
was work to be done. It comes
with the territory these days.

"It's good that other people
want to know about us — who
we are, what we do, what our
heritage is," Guidry said. "You
try to do a little bit with the
time you have. It's good to
show there isn't someone who could
be out here to do this full time."

On the same day 22 people
from Cap Rouge, Quebec, en-
joyed a pig roast in Gonzales with
the families there who were host-
ing them in their homes. Down in
Hammond, a Ten-Member task
force, organized by the Louisiana
Tourist Development Council,
photographed the Atchafalaya
River Basin that they visited.

On the Vermilion Coast, 18
people from Indiana, who were
all part of a sportsman's group,
visited a Creole Heritage Park
in Lafayette. A couple from France
traveled to Rendez-vous Des
Cajuns at the Vermilionville
living history museum in Acadiana.

Although the Cajun mystique
can be a difficult sell, it's a
valuable one for tourism.

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According to the Louisiana
Office of Tourism, the number of
visitors to Cajun country has
doubled since the 1980s, from
138,902 to 502,575.

During that same time, hotel
occupancy in the Cajun region,
including restaurant, hotel and
motel occupancy, in the re-
defined Cajun region jumped 36 percent.

However, inducing people in
the area's tourism efforts. "We are
selling ourselves, our culture, our
people. So we are drawing our peo-
ple to deliver that quality experi-
ence. That's already allowing
them to deliver their natural
sense of hospitality."

It sounds simple enough,
However, inducing people in
far-flung places to travel to
tourism to Cajun country is
worry the many people
outside of Louisiana wrongly
view the Cajun people as sim-
ple-minded swamp rats who
never met a subject that agreed
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The first thing this man said to me was, "You sure know how to work in those pirogues." I had just arrived at his home in Erath, a small town in the bayous of southern Louisiana. Waving as alligators swim past, he was ready to show me the real dilemma for many across his region. "I can't believe we're living on the edge of the bayous, with alligators swimming around us," he said.

New Orleans, was the home of authentic Louisiana Boudin," he told me. "We've been making it here for over 200 years, but people come into this area looking for that. He's done a great job exposing fake Cajun products, even from countries like Canada, the Midwest and even Europe."

Many of the Cajuns I met were just like this man. They were proud of their heritage and unapologetic about their culture. They had been living the same way for generations, and they were determined to keep it that way. "I'm not going to let anyone tell me what Cajun food is," one of them said. "I grew up eating this stuff, and I've never known any other way."

The Cajuns are a unique people, with a rich history that dates back to the 17th century. They were the first people to settle in this area, and they have been living here ever since. "We're not just a bunch of rednecks," one man said. "We're a people with a rich history and culture."