Airport gives visitors preview of New Orleans

By FREDA YARBROUGH

Grey carpet and white floor tile. It's the first glimpse of the Crescent City that greets visitors landing at New Orleans International Airport.

Frequent flyers know the neutral color belies a different city, evident by the difference seen within the airport terminal. It could be that early glimpse of neon lights just beyond the metal detectors that does it, or perhaps the terminal gift shop where ceramic Mardi Gras masks are for sale that evokes the feeling you're in New Orleans. No matter, it's a feeling that can stir the blood of normally sedate tourists.

Outside the terminal building, lined up in a checkered row of black, white, yellow and beige, taxi drivers are patient in their wait for customers. Sometimes the row extends around the corner of the ramp and curves outside into a sunnier spot. It's in the sun that drivers often gather for a cup of coffee, small talk and morning news.

Wilbert Oliver has been driving a taxi for 15 years, working for one of the oldest black cab companies in New Orleans, Morrison's. His day can be long, sometimes 15 hours, taking fares from the airport to downtown hotels.

"Most people want to know about the best places to eat, best restaurants, weather conditions. And naturally during football season, they talk about the Saints," said Oliver.

His passengers are mostly convention-goers, a lot of whom are coming from colder climates.

"Of course they say that (getting away from cold); they have a lot of reasons. But they just enjoy coming here."

Near the baggage area, Al Robinson stands with a dolly waiting to help recently arrived passengers. He's a "sky-cap," someone who is there to help travelers in their comings and goings, and in the two months Robinson has been with Huntleigh Skycap, he's seen a lot, especially during the recent Mardi Gras.

"Some days it's pretty slow, not many flights, but sometimes it's real busy - that's what skycaps look forward to. The crowds coming in for Mardi Gras, that was pretty wild and fun. They were real happy being here," Robinson said. The tourists came expecting to have a lot of fun and got off the plane feeling that way.

"It's fun here. You get to see things other people don't get to see. I get to see a lot of stars. Last week I had Fats Domino. I've seen Demond Wilson from Sanford and Son and the O'Jays, lots of wrestlers," said Robinson. Most big stars, he said, don't hang around very long and get in cabs or limousines right away. Robinson said Wilson, who's a minister now, was one of the nicest.

"Most of them act normal. Most of them don't want that wild reaction. It's a professional service, and that's what they get."

When most people are getting their bags, they crowd around the same spot, grab their bag and get out.

"It's funny watching people get those bags." And while many bags look alike, Robinson said most people can pick out theirs in a crowd without any problem.

Upstairs in the main concourse, Linda Helmer stands in The Grove, a small booth that sells peanuts, pecans, caramel candies and other quick-grab snacks. A sophomore at the University of New Orleans majoring in marketing, she's been working there two years.

The most popular item is the Praline Pecan, individual pecans dusted with a praline covering. The most surprising thing Helmer said was not what, but the way she pronounced pralines with a short "A" instead of the usual soft, drawled, short "A" common to Louisiana. The rest of her accent was a mix of Southern drawl, a Louisiana patois and a twinge of Midwestern. After two years of greeting all manner of travelers, her speech reflects a mingling of accents. She's also an excellent salesperson, offering a small sample of the praline pecan. One bite and you're forced by sheer lack of willpower to buy a bag. She grinned when I couldn't resist the larger order.

"I do that all the time," said Helmer. "It never fails."