Bringing Tradition to Light

Historic Natchitoches brightens up with a Southern-style Christmas.

It's easy to picture Southern belles sitting on the long galleries of the plantations along the Cane River. Or to imagine carriages bouncing along the red-brick street that passes through Natchitoches' historic district. Hollywood turned to Natchitoches to capture the southern pride and charm of Steel Magnolias. The oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase territory, the town and the surrounding countryside overflow with tradition.

Established in 1714, the 33-block historic downtown area of Cane River Lake has been designated an Historic Landmark District. Queen Anne, Victorian and Creole-style architecture intermingle in the shops, churches and homes that line the shady street. Balconies above the shopfronts and home one side of Front Street look out at Cane River Lake and the homes on the far bank. Benches along the river afford plenty of opportunities for enjoying the flow of the water or the flow of foot traffic along the sidewalks.

Art galleries, craft and gift shops, cafés, restaurants and a bookstore fill the historic buildings. Eight antique shops preserve everything from farm tools to antique doll furniture. The Old Courthouse Museum guards Natchitoches Parish history within its imposing brick walls.

Within a few miles of the dense historic district, the buildings become sparse.

Getting There

Take I-49 to the Natchitoches exit and turn right. Pass by Northwestern State University and look for signs for the historic district. Turn left on Jefferson Street and pass through the residential area to the historic downtown. From downtown, take Keyser Street, which crosses the river and turns south through plantation country before meeting up with I-49. Reservations are needed to tour some plantations. For more information, call 352-8072 or 1-800-258-1714.
and the countryside opens up into a vast cotton-growing region. Congress designated this rural agricultural landscape the Cane River National Heritage Area in 1994. The 45,000-acre stretch is mostly in Natchitoches Parish.

The planters who kept homes in downtown Natchitoches for social events have built elegant mansions among their cotton fields for everyday living. These stately plantations still line the river, with old gins interspersed between them along a highway that crisscrosses the Cane River for 35 miles.

The highlight of the weekend is the lighting of more than 300,000 standard sized multicolored lights and 77 huge set pieces along the Cane River. A full-scale replication of the Natchitoches settlement and to the raised cottage of Kate Chopin, author of The Awakening. Her home houses the Bayou Folk Museum. If the abundance of historic sites isn’t tempting enough, over 500,000 people find another reason to visit Natchitoches in December — The Christmas Festival of Lights. This year’s 73rd annual festival takes place Dec. 3 through 5, and features a parade, live entertainment, food, carnival rides, a river cruise, carriage and street tours and a fireworks show. At the edge of the river, the Santa House opens to children who want to visit with St. Nick.

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As advertising in Louisiana, Natchitoches will proudly host the closing ceremonies for FrancoFête. On Dec. 11, Gov. Foster, Lt. Gov. Blanco, Natchitoches Mayor Sampite and a host of local dignitaries and townpeople will officially close the year-long celebration. The day starts with a Mass in French at the historic Church of the Immaculate Conception, and continues with entertainment, a procession from the top of the riverbank, the dedication of the millennium capsule, fireworks over the Cane River and the lighting of the town. Nearby, Fort St. Jean Baptiste will reenact a Natchez Indian attack and local plantations will open their doors to a holiday tour.

With so much going on, you’ll want to spend more than a day in the Natchitoches area, and with dozens of bed-and-breakfasts, you’re sure to find accommodations. You’ll find Southern hospitality is as well-preserved as the other traditions in Natchitoches.

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12-1-1999 P312 COL 2