DELIVERING TOURISTS

Cajun Country Tours fills a need

By RENE HARRISON

It was while walking the streets July 4 during the Festival Internationale de Louisiana that Helen Bellamy’s idea for a travel agency specializing in Cajun tours first crystallized. She says that although the Lafayette festival was a success, the city failed to its ability to give both foreign and national visitors information about what to do and where to go to experience Acadiana.

Part of my job at the festival was to walk around and make sure nothing was broken, Bellamy says. "While I was doing this, visitors would walk up to me and ask me what to do and where to go in the Lafayette area. I realized from this that Lafayette was lacking a place where visitors could easily get information," she says.

As a member of the Louisiana Tourist Promotion Association and the Lafayette Tourist Commission, Bellamy knew that marketing of Acadiana was being done, but she said the information that was being marketed was vague and often difficult to use.

Says, "The cow was there with the milk, but she deliveryman wasn’t there to deliver the product."

Announcement of Cajun Country Tours in October of last year by Bellamy and her husband, Ray, the public now has its deliveryman. Trademarking the business was the easy part. Getting the tours the company was to provide proved to be more difficult, she says.

"I was already in the retail travel business with Summit Travels which has been incorporated for eight years and of which Bellamy is president," she says. "So I knew how easy it was for a travel agent to get a tour company set up." But the biggest problem was finding the right operators for the tours. Bellamy says she traveled to Europe and the Caribbean, where she says operators and groups were very receptive to the idea of a tour company.

"I used to travel to the Bahamas and the Caribbean and took a lot of time and money in phone calls just to set up a tour. It was an exhausting search which probably discouraged potential investors."

Now, a few months and a few contacts later, Bellamy has set up shop on Jefferson Street and has a view of Cajun tours to offer—everything from components and stay-and-ride programs to all the way to the Acadiana Queen. She says travel to Acadiana is gaining in popularity, especially in the senior citizen age group.

"I originally thought our target market would be Canadian visitors, but instead it has been New England," Bellamy says. Bellamy says Bellamy will try to foster potential exposure received from publications such as Arthur Frommer’s Travel Linder, in which Cajun Country Tours recently was mentioned and a colorful description of Lafayette was included.

But support from publications is not enough, Bellamy says. To make the concept of Cajun tours a success, she says these necessary ingredients—participation from owners and landlords of apartment complexes, motels, and hotels, and participation of area residents in continuing to stress their French background.

"We want to make prices in Lafayette competitive with prices of similar properties elsewhere," she says. "Also, we must continue stressing that Lafayette is the French capital of Louisiana, especially so to make French visitors feel welcome."

Bellamy says she’s excited about the evolution of tourism in Lafayette. "I feel confident that we can keep the current Cajun state that’s promoting the country under control."

"Cajun is hot, but the question is how to get tourists dollars into the state, not bastardizing it," she says.