Cajun Days and Cajun Ways
Girl Scouts savor unique Cajun lifestyle

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Staff Writer

The Girl Scout promise didn't say anything about having fun. But fun was the theme when 42 scouts from 19 states and three foreign countries toured the outer and inner reaches of southern Louisiana.

From New Orleans to St. Martinville to Hackberry to Catahoula, the girls converged on the state to explore its unique people, industries and culture.

The Bayou Girl Scout Council hosted the trip, a program called "Wider Opportunities." Of 334 Wider Opportunities ideas submitted by councils across the country, Cajun Days and Cajun Ways was one of 17 selected by the national group, Bayou Council spokesperson Carol Spizak said.

This is the first time the Bayou state has ever hosted the event. Because it was so successful, it won't be the last.

"We'll offer it again," Spizak said. "It was special."

The 15-day intensive tour provided many opportunities — a chance for girls to share their own cultures while experiencing a new one, and a chance to bridge differences and strengthen ties for teenage Girl Scouts from all over.

"Not only will the girls go away with a better understanding of south Louisiana, they will return to their homes to share their experiences with family and friends, troops, Girl Scout board members and with the organizations who sponsored them, spreading the good word about Louisiana far and wide," Spizak commented.

Spizak said 60 scouts applied to take part in Wider Opportunities on the Bayou, but the council could only accept 29 from the U.S. and four from abroad, including two from Canada and two from Austria.

This was the first trip to the United States for Lily Leveque, a 16-year-old from Graz, Austria. What she didn't know until she got here was she wasn't visiting America, she was visiting a separate country altogether.

"I liked learning about the Cajun culture, food and music," she said.

They stayed with host families and at the Academy of Sacred Heart while they visited the Conoco oil field in St. Martinville, the St. John Sugar Plantation, Oak Alley, the Simms Brothers Shrimp Processing Plant, Prejeans Restaurant cooking school, a New Iberia sugar cane farm, and marshlands in Cameron Parish.

They also packed in a cochon-du-jail, a two-step session, a visit to Shadows on the Teche, a tour of the Atchafalaya Basin, crawfish in Catahoula, and plenty of Cajun cuisine.

But Lily, Patricia Velleit and Annie Sylvain of Quebec claimed in unison to tell about their favorite place: "New Orleans."

"I like the atmosphere in the street," Annie, 16, commented. Patricia enjoyed seeing the swamps and oak trees with their Spanish moss, but said "it's too humid."

"I love the oak trees," Miriam Reiter of Austria said. "It's such a big land, very different from Europe in every way."

Lily also like the paddleboat ride on the Mississippi and the lacy balconies in the French Quarter. Annie, however, made a face — she didn't care for crawfish.

And for riotous Louisiana fun, you can't beat another favorite destination. They all spoke in unison again: "Faubourg Street."


Most of the expenses were paid by the scouts themselves. In many cases, civic and community groups, businesses and Girl Scout boards in their hometowns helped subsidize the fees.

Locally, the Heymann Foundation and the Zigler Foundation contributed to the event.

Patricia will bring home a chank-a-chank tape of Cedric Benoit and Belton Richard. All of the girls will bring home photographs, and Spizak will mail each a videotape of event highlights.

But the scouts also return with a wealth of memories and friendships, and a true experience in Louisiana's Cajun Days and Cajun Ways.