Cajuns plan to sample Belgian culture

By Richard Rees
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Acadiana residents are heading to Belgium this summer, to visit their French-speaking "twins" and, at the same time, promote tourism and trade.

The cultural exchange program, designed to help preserve Acadiana's heritage, began in 1988 and has resulted in the twinning of several cities across Acadiana with those in Belgium.

"First of all is the mere fact that we exchange hospitality and knowledge from one to another has untold benefits, because it makes us and our world a little better," said Eunice Mayor Curtis Joubert, about the benefits of twinning with La Roche, Belgium.

About 80 residents of La Roche visited Eunice in 1990, according to Sharon Fontenot, executive director of the Eunice Chamber of Commerce.

Many of the visitors, she said, stayed in the homes of host families.

While there is a French language connection, there are some interesting cultural differences, Fontenot said, like the Belgian fascination with the American tradition of cowboys and western clothing.

The cultural exchange has continued, with several visits between continents — including one in April 1991, when 375 Belgians visited their twin cities in Acadiana.

In addition to Eunice, eight other cities participated in that exchange.

Those cities and their twins include Lafayette (Namur), Crowley (Vaux Sur Sure), Rayne (Neufchateau), Gueydan (Virtos), Ville Platte (Durbuy), Cottonport (Habay), Marksville (St. Hubert) and Manaura (Geuzy).

The visitors were provided with a generous sample of Cajun cuisine and culture, including parties, church services (in French and English) and music.

Now, a group from Eunice is planning to visit Belgium in May while a larger group of residents from other Acadiana cities is planning to go in July.

The Eunice departure is set for May 25, with a return on June 4. The group will stay in La Roche for five nights and will then take a three-day trip to Paris and Brussels.

Joubert, city council members and some host families are making the journey as the cultural enrichment continues.

"Not a month goes by without people from Belgium in our city the same happens in reverse," Joubert said. "We find the exchange a heart-warming experience."

A larger group of Acadiana residents is planning to depart on July 24 and return on Aug. 3, according to James Domingue of Belzire's Restaurant in Crowley.

Cajun's sister city, Vaux Sur Sure, is located in the province of Luxembourg and is near the German border.

Residents of Vaux Sur Sure visited Acadiana in April 1989 and again last year. Crowley made a visit to its sister city in July 1989.

The dialect of French in Vaux Sur Sure is similar to that of Crowley. Domingue said, making communication fairly easy. Also, families are matched by shared hobbies and professions.

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Residents from Crowley, Rayne, Gueydan, Ville Platte, Lafayette and possibly others are expecting to visit their twin cities in Belgium this summer.

The group is planning to fly into Brussels and then go to their respective twin cities where they will stay either with host families or in hotels.

There will be trips to Paris, Brussels and Normandy. Also, there will be an agricultural fair in Libramont featuring Cajun music, food and other products.