The holiday spirit has a variety of venues in the South's most festive city

By Mary Foster
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S
o what makes Christmas New Orleans Style different from Christmas anywhere else? For openers, Christmas carols come out kickin' to that crazy New Orleans back beat, and spirits get to jumpin' with holiday joy at the nightly concerts in St. Louis Cathedral.

"The cathedral is such a beautiful setting and the music sends your soul soaring," said Tom Johnson, who wandered into a concert on his way home from work. "The Christmas concerts were inspiring," said Gil Huber, vice president of corporate communications for a local bank. "People were laughing and clapping and singing, they were obviously moved."

Lots of Christmas revelers in New Orleans shout Hallelujah! not only in churches, but in restaurants too, because a New Orleans Reveillon dinner can make even the shyest person irrepressibly jolly. Of course, New Orleans cooking can turn anybody into an epicure any day of the week, and twice on Friday.

The French Quarter is decorated like never before, which is saying a lot for a town that loves exhibitionism. "This is like walking into a picture book on Christmas," Jennifer Johnson, a visitor from New York, said as she looked up at the wrought iron balconies along St. Ann Street, all draped in lights, ribbons and wreaths. "It's really been a special trip for our family. We'll never forget this Christmas."

There's so much history in the Place d'Armes, which is the original name for Jackson Square, that you might even come across the likes of Edgar Degas, the Baroness de Pontalba or maybe Andrew Jackson.

Christmas carolers fill Jackson Square adjacent to the St. Louis Cathedral.

Submitted Photo

himself, taking an afternoon stroll there. If you do happen to run into the General, ask him if his bayou warriors at the Battle of New Orleans really did put a cannonball in a gator's mouth and powder its behind.

So if you don't mind moss on the trees instead of snow, and wearing short sleeves instead of ski-suits, then come and visit New Orleans any time between Dec. 5 and Dec. 26, because that's when the fun takes on a special Christmas feeling in the city where music, food and excitement are a way of life.

And bring the whole family with you. New Orleans, which has long been a favorite destination of the Mardi Gras-loving, Bourbon Street-parading party goers, is now being discovered by more and more families, especially during the Christmas season. "People who think of New Orleans in terms of Bourbon Street alone are shortchanging themselves," says Gary Esolein of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation. "There are many unique attractions in our city and our Christmas celebration is certainly one of them."

Christmas New Orleans Style has expanded many of the traditional events that local residents have long enjoyed. The four weeks preceding Christmas, called Advent in the Catholic religion, was formerly a time of fasting, as was Christmas Eve itself. "Traditionally, Reveillon was the meal Creole families ate after Midnight Mass," said Ted Brennan of Brennan's Restaurant. "It was really a feast because families had been fasting before Mass."

"Reveillon" is a name that comes from the French word for "awakening" because it was eaten in the early morning. Now, however, you don't have to fast, or stay up all night, to enjoy it. It is a four-course prix fixe feast served at about 30 restaurants. The many dinners offer such delicacies as turtle and alligator soup, roast goose or bayou oysters with Herbsaint creme sauce, and desserts including sweet potato flan with praline sauce and white chocolate bread pudding. "It's a chance for our chef to really do some wonderful traditional dishes that are a big part of the season for many families," Brennan said.

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