A rollicking three-day drive through Louisiana's Cajun Country will tantalize your taste buds and enrich your soul with food, music, dancing and culture galore.

BY JAMES T. YENCKEL

SATURDAY MORNINGS AT MARC Savoy's accordion shop in Eunice, La., begin with a jam session. Besides the two dozen or so musicians, the crowd is often littered with locals clanging triangles and at least one small girl keeping rhythm with a pair of spoons. Traveling to Louisiana should require a passport. Just hours outside major suburban cities like Atlanta and Houston, the state has its own unique language, spicy cuisine and unmatched culture.

This three-day, 500-mile drive through Cajun Country begins and ends in New Orleans. It takes you through a lush landscape of woods, swamps and fields of rice and sugar cane that make up 22 southwestern Louisiana parishes. But it's much more than simply sightseeing—it's a journey into the culture of the friendly, fun-loving (and also somewhat shy) descendants of the Acadians, a French-speaking, Roman Catholic people brutally expelled by the British from their Nova Scotia farms in 1755.

The best part: it's also a land where everything seems to cost less than at home. A room at a good chain motel goes for less than $50 a night for two. A shrimp dinner at Mulate's, a famous Cajun family restaurant and dance hall in Breaux Bridge, is just $12.95.

With the shrimp, you get jambalaya, coleslaw, French fries, garlic bread and a night of Cajun song and dance. At Mulate's, or any other family dance hall, the youngsters start to dance before their feet touch the floor. When my wife and I first came here, we saw a dad scoop up his infant daughter while the mom picked up their son; the entire family joined in a fancy two-step to a five-piece band. Around the crowded floor they twirled, the youngsters beaming in their parents' arms.

Getting to Cajun Country is easy. New Orleans is served by most major airlines, including discounters such as Southwest, JetBlue, AirTran, America West and Frontier. Festivals with food, music and a fais do-do (street dance) happen almost daily somewhere in Cajun Country. The Lafayette
Follow the signs to the Sunshine Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River. After crossing it, take Route 1 north to White Castle, where you should stop for a tour of Nottoway Plantation (225-545-2730; adults, $10). The 64-room Nottoway is one of the largest plantation homes in the South. It isn't Cajun, but it would be a shame to pass it by. In the Greek Revival and Italianate style—long balconies and lots of columns—the house was built just before the Civil War by a sugar planter from Virginia. As the story goes, a Northern gunboat officer who had been a guest there before the war saved it from destruction.

Continue on Route 1, and then take Route 77 north to I-10, picking up the interstate again as it angles west. Rising up on tall stilts, the highway tiptoes across the 595,000-acre Atchafalaya River Basin, America's largest swamp wilderness. Moss-covered oak and cypress trees stretch into the distance. Two hundred species of birds and an abundance of other wildlife are found here, drawing fishing enthusiasts, nature photographers and boaters. Stop in at the Bayou Teche Visitors Center (337-332-8500) for information about swamp tours, which cost $12 to $25 per person.

Day One
Tune in to a Cajun radio station as you head north from New Orleans on I-10 west. The music bounces, and the announcer will probably switch back and forth between French and English. Keep an eye open for signs along the road: TRIPÉ, BEANS & PORK, advertised one café; FRESH RACCOON MEAT, read another for what looked to be a tidy farmhouse set back among moss-draped oaks.

Either from the city or the airport, the drive skirts the southwestern edge of massive Lake Pontchartrain and then skims across a swamp, an eerie blend of beauty and decay.

Soon enough, though, you'll leave the interstate for State Route 22/70, a back road winding past sugar-cane fields and murky bayous, the local name for a sluggish stream. The region is poor; many residences appear to be (at least from the outside) little more than weatherworn shanties.

Day Two
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Save Mulate’s for evening and head into neighboring Lafayette, the capital of Cajun Country. You can get a basic course in Cajun life at the Acadian Cultural Center, part of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve (no fee). The museum houses examples of early Cajun farm implements, clothing and housing styles. When my wife picked up a pair of musical spoons in the gift shop, ranger David Domengeaux promptly showed her how to play them, slapping them against his thigh with a fine, rhythmic beat. “I was born doing this,” says Domengeaux, who plays in a band in his free time.

Up the road is the Vermilionville museum and village ($8), where Cajun structures (some historic, others reconstructed) create a typical village of the 18th and 19th centuries. Visit the school, the church, a four-room home and the barn. Talk to the blacksmith, catch a ride on the muscle-powered, rope-pulled ferry, and step into the bakery for a “pig’s ear” ($1), a crisp Cajun pastry dripping with honey-like cane sugar.

End the day back at Mulate’s (325 West Mills Avenue, 337-332-4648), on the western edge of the basin, about a five-mile drive. Ignore the seedy appearance—it serves authentic Cajun food and music to Cajun families and tourists alike. The seafood gumbo (grande bol, $8.95) is legendary.

Day Two

Keep your room in Lafayette, because today’s drive goes north and loops back into town. Saturday is the best day to enjoy live Cajun music morning to night, but on other days join a Breaux Bridge swamp tour in the morning and drive the loop afterward. The watery areas beside the road are rice fields; some double as crayfish farms.

From Lafayette, take I-49 north to Opelousas and U.S. 190 west to Eunice connecting to Route 13 north to Mamou. The town calls itself the Cajun-music capital of the world. On Saturdays (9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.), Fred’s becomes a Cajun dance hall—adults only—with a live radio broadcast on KVPI-AM 1050. (Tune in on your way.) The place looks like a dive, but it’s one of the allowed halls of Cajun music, packed with locals two-stepping on the tiny dance floor. A bar drink is the price of admission; we bought Bloody Marys for $3 apiece.

Double back to Eunice and check out a trio of attractions (no fee at any): the Cajun Music Hall of Fame and Museum, the Eunice Museum (to learn about Mardi Gras) and the Prairie Acadian Cultural Center, another unit of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park.

North of the swamplands, the prairie spawned Cajun cowboys called “vachers,” whose story is told at the cultural center. On Saturdays at 3 p.m. the center stages an hourlong Cajun-music concert, and volunteers teach dances like the basic two-step. After a late lunch at Mama’s Fried Chicken (fried catfish plate, $7), catch the live “Cajun Radio & TV Show” ($5), broadcast from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Eunice’s Liberty Theater (South Second and Park Avenue, 337-457-7389).

Return to Lafayette via Route 13 south and I-10 east. If all this hasn’t sated your desire for Cajun music, check out Bubba Frey’s on Saturday nights, six miles south of Eu-
Day Three
Take U.S. 90 south from Lafayette, connecting to Route 96 east to St. Martinville. The main street of this pretty village looks as if it might have been plucked from New Orleans's French Quarter. But this is the "Land of Evangeline," made famous in an 1847 poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Evangeline, the poem's tragic heroine, arrived in St. Martinville in futile search for her long-lost love, Gabriel. Pick up a copy in one of the town's shops and read it while sitting beneath the Evangeline Oak. The much-photographed old tree stands beside the town wharf where Evangeline presumably first stepped ashore.

Nearby on the Bayou Teche, the Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site ($2) occupies a lovely park filled with moss-heavy oaks. There's an 18th-century Cajun cabin and a 19th-century Acadian farmstead, Maison Olivier, which includes a family home, outdoor kitchen, barn and slave quarters.

If you like it spicy, take Route 329 to Avery Island and the Tabasco factory (no fee). Jungle Garden ($6), located on the salt island rising above the surrounding marshes where the peppers for the sauce are grown, earns its name with azaleas, camellias and lots of exotic trees.

Return to U.S. 90 and proceed past Morgan City to near Houma, connecting to Route 20 north to Thibodaux. The final stop is the Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center (no fee), a third part of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park. The center recalls the life of the Acadians who settled in the swamplands. Among the items on display are fishing skiffs and a bit of dried Spanish moss. The ubiquitous moss was put to good use as mattress stuffing, wadding for early firearms, protective cover for seeds and even toilet tissue.

Follow Route 1 east to U.S. 90 to New Orleans. At Boutte, take I-310 north to I-10 east to the airport to catch a late-afternoon flight home. A trip like this proves that if you spend all your time on New Orleans's raucous Bourbon Street, you're missing out on the real party.