Southern Louisiana—

The Acadians’ Promised Land

It was wild country, this Louisiana of 200 years ago, infested with snakes, alligators, and hostile Indians, and only lightly populated by a few—mainly French—settlers. But the Acadians, early French immigrants to Nova Scotia who left that land after it became British, were attracted by Louisiana’s minimum of government and the prevalence of the French language. To them, this was the “promised land.” The story of their migration is told vividly, although not too accurately, in Longfellow’s classic poem Evangeline.

Descended from hardy French peasant stock, the Acadians, or “Cajuns,” as they are popularly known, had been farmers and fishermen for generations, and they had no intention of breaking with tradition when they moved to Louisiana. (Most of the famous plantation mansions in the area were built by Anglo-Saxon settlers in the 19th century.) Many of the Cajuns settled in villages beside Bayou Teche and Bayou La Fourche. This bayous country is now Louisiana’s most densely populated rural area (more than 300,000 people have descended from the approximately 2,000 Acadians who came here). It is also probably the most beautiful region of the state. Roads line the bayous, and the drive along 120-mile-long Bayou La Fourche is one of the most scenically rewarding routes to be found in the South. Residents of the area often call La Fourche “the longest village street in the world.”

The Mythica, set in a grove of oaks near St. Francisville, is one of several old plantation homes that are open to the public in the area north of Baton Rouge. Another mansion is Oakley Plantation House, where John James Audubon painted his famous bird pictures. Oakley is now part of Audubon Memorial State Park.

Cruiser ship Maré-Touche, a replica of an old-time Mississippi sternwheeler, offers relaxation and a change of pace for visitors by taking them on a two-hour, round-trip excursion up the Mississippi from New Orleans and into colorful Baton Rouge Bay, once the boiling place of Jean Lafitte and his band of smugglers and pirates.
The contrasts of French New Orleans

Southern Louisiana is not all Cajun country. To many people, the region is New Orleans—and New Orleans, although French in flavor, is not at all Arab in its life. The city has a cosmopolitan atmosphere—world-famous restaurants, the charm of old French-Spanish buildings, the excitement of Mardi Gras, and hot jazz rattling the roots of cranes of tiny bistros.

Although New Orleans combines these diverse attractions, it offers much more. The upper contour of the Crescent City have been expanded northeast from the shore of the Mississippi River to another waterfront boundary at Lake Ponchartrain. The 40-by-25-mile lake is an important shipping center, and is connected to the city by railroad and canal. Freeways ladder New Orleans and link it with the 24-mile-long Lake Ponchartrain Causeway, the world’s longest motorway bridge. Built 10 feet above normal lake level (with higher spans to allow passage of ocean traffic), the bridge gives the traveler the feeling of driving over the sea—he is out of sight of land for about eight miles.

The metropolitan area of New Orleans is one of the fastest-growing urban centers in the nation. Its population recently passed the 1,000,000 mark. The city has a large shipbuilding industry and is the country’s second largest seaport. It is also a marketing center for vast quantities of oil, sulphur, and agricultural products.

The original French Quarter—built partly by the Spaniards—is only a small portion of metropolitan New Orleans today. Canal Street, which runs through the comparatively newer sections of the city, is one of the widest business thoroughfares in the U.S., and St. Charles Avenue is an attractive seven-mile drive past magnificent mansions and estates.

Although many Acadians came to New Orleans, few stayed in the city. Having rural interests, they followed the waterways west and south to the bayous country, although some of the farmers among them moved into the delta country to the north. It is here that the world’s’ tobacco for pipe smoking is grown; most of it is consumed by pipe smokers in Europe. The other important crops are sugar cane and rice. Three-quarters of the country’s sugar cane is grown in Louisiana, and the area’s raw production amounts to around $25 million annually.

Although most Cajun farmers have electricity and use tractors, many modern conveniences have come but freely to the bayous country. An occasional house-drawn buggy may still be seen, and the century-old prairie, a canoe carved from a single cedar log, is in everyday use. However, despite its secluded life, the bayou dweller is friendly to visitors, and a cup of jet-black coffee is always on hand for guests.