The Land Where Legends Live

Winter vacationists traditionally fall into two main categories: snowbirds and sun worshippers. But for woodsmen lovers and lake fanciers, the Cajun Country of Louisiana can be a surprising change of pace.

Step behind the Spanish moss curtain, only about an hour's drive south of jazzy New Orleans, and voilà! You're in the colorful back-country, where serpentine bayous wind their watery way around moss-veiled oaks, antebellum plantations, and quaint villages.

"Cajun" is a time—and dialect-distorted version of "Acadian." Two centuries ago the French-speaking settlers of Acadia—which we now call Nova Scotia—were exiled by the English. They made the long trek south and found refuge in Louisiana and other Southern states. Thus, still today, the region is a jambalaya of French patois, country music with Gallic 17th-century undertones. Old World folklore starring the werewolf, Loup Garou, Acadian-Creole cuisine (Oh, that crawfish étouffée!), romantic legends (Spanish moss originated from the tears of a lovelorn Indian maiden), Saturday all-night fais-do-do dances, testrabs for shrimp and sucking pig.

For us, Cajun Country begins at Cut Off in Bayou Lafourche, my husband's hometown. From here, we drive hundreds of miles deeper into the soul of Cajun Country. Hospitality Cajun style decrees that my husband must stay at the homes of childhood friends, no matter when he returns to Cut Off.

Cajun Country is a land of legends, and I have followed one to St. Martinville, about 15 miles south of Lafayette. The oldest Acadian community on big Bayou Teche, St. Martinville, still retains the old tradition of tacking printed funeral notices on street posts. Here in the churchyard lies Evangeline, the heroine, immortalized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem.

Evangeline—one of the banished Acadians (Continued on page 25)
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was separated from her lover Gabriel, on the trek south. When she fin-
nally reached St. Martinville, then an Attalasian Indian trading post, Evang-
eline caught up with Gabriel. Then came the moment of truth under an
oak tree. Gabriel confided he had married another girl. The ancient oak
heavily veiled with moss as though in mourning, has been christened the
Evangeline Oak.

The haunting legend leads to Evang-
eline-Evangeline Memorial State Park, a scenic 175-acre tract of land
for picnicking, camping, or swim-
ing. Here lived the real Gabriel,
Levi Arnaud, in what is now the
Acadian House Museum. And, of
course, there is a Gabriel Oak in the
park, Gabriel definitely carried some-
one else over that threshold as his
bride. His daughter, Cécile Arnaud, is buried in Lafayette’s St. John
Cathedral cemetery.

After the sentimental journey to
St. Martinville, we like a change of
pace and stop in Breaux Bridge, a
picturesque town on the banks of the
Teche, where crawfish is king and
served royally. The pace quickens in
the nearby small town of Happy
Landing, where the community has a
public fete-de-la-danse dance. Old dancers,
young dancers all call out in French,
“La en es bann temps roons!” which
means “Let the good times roll!!”

For visitors who prefer big-city
comforts but want their Cajun Coun-
ty too, it’s a good idea to stay in
Lafayette, an excellent base for
drives to off-the-beaten path Cajun
communities. A swinging city, com-
plete with airport, Lafayette Derrick
cottages, and Cajun customs have become
enriched with sophistication. But Caju
cooking in the restaurants is
simply delicious! Some of the special-
calities or gumbo (thick seafood or chicken stew) with the distinctive
flavor of powdered sassafras root), the crawfish etouffee (craw-
fish, vegetables and seasonings heated
in a rich gravy and served over
Louisiana rice), jambalaya (a won-
derful mixture of anything—seafood,
hams, vegetables, rice).

From Lafayette, good roads lead
to strongly Cajun Opelousas with its
Jim Bowie Museum; Crowley and
the famous rice fields; and Eunice
and the Acadian Heritage Museum
(a recreated village replicating the
Cajun past).

About 25 miles south of Lafay-
ette, there’s a whole new scene in
New Iberia, “Queen City of the
Teche.” New Iberia can truly be
called “hot stuff”—this is the hot
pepper sauce center of America. At
nearby Avery Island (which is not
an island at all), the McIlhenny
family of Tabasco fame welcome
visitors to their plant and Jungle
Gardens.

Unfortunately, local color is fade-
ing fast. The soufreire, a Cajun
community social event when hogs
are butchered is going out of style.
But who will make the chowder,
chaudins, and groves? There are not
so many authentic Cajun weddings,
which lasted for days. There are fewer hunters, trappers, and fisher-
men. The patio area has lost some
of its French party. But the new
French Heritage Committee has
strived to preserve the essence of the old tra-
ditions, and the natural beauty of the bayou will never change, nor
the Beautiful People of Cajun coun-
try, who greet guests with “Bien-
venue.”

—FLORENCE LEMKOWITZ