

Travel and Adventure: The American home of Mardi Gras is really Mobile

by Kathryn Lemmon

MOBILE, Ala. - You're in the Deep South when you can order sweet tea and the server knows exactly what you mean.

A HOTEL WITH HISTORY - The newly restored Battle House Hotel in downtown Mobile, Ala., once again exudes its lost elegance. CNS Photo courtesy of Mobile Convention & Visitors Bureau. **MOBILE MARDI GRAS** - Riders toss 'throws' from a Mardi Gras float. Most people are surprised to learn that Mobile is the American home of this festival, rather than New Orleans. CNS Photo courtesy of Mobile Convention & Visitors Bureau. **HOLDING THE FORT** - A blacksmith plies his trade at Fort Gaines, Ala. Here, Adm. David Farragut quoted his famous command, 'Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!' CNS Photo by Mike Henderson. **SEAFOOD SCENE** - There are two things people love from the Deep South, and in Mobile, there is no shortage of them - sweet tea and seafood. CNS Photo courtesy of Mobile Convention & Visitors Bureau. When properly made, sweet tea is as sugary as soda pop and glides down fast, maybe too fast. For me, a tall glass can vanish in record time. The key, as I learned in Mobile, is preparing a simple syrup first of boiling water combined with an extravagant amount of sugar. That way the sugar can completely dissolve. The secret is out!

Mobile is well acquainted with two things people love, sweet tea and seafood. This region will tempt all your senses, not just taste.

A REBIRTH IN GRAND STYLE

There was a day when hotels were majestic, making every guest feel special. Rather like the old TV show "Queen for a Day."

The experience was far more than simply having a place to lay your head.

The restored Battle House Hotel in downtown Mobile brings back a long-lost elegance and gentility. The original Battle House opened in 1852 and dominated the social scene for more than a century. Fine hotels abound, but older structures filled with character are rare birds. Even the location is significant, since this spot was once a military headquarters set up by Andrew Jackson during the War of 1812.

Mobile residents couldn't be more pleased about the renovation. After three decades as a derelict structure, most had long since given up hope of ever seeing the Battle House restored. Locals say: "As goes the Battle House, so goes Mobile." That sums it up well.

Not that this project came easy, no such luck. Tropical storms and hurricanes impeded the five-year rebuilding process. Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 added a full year to the effort. Yet perhaps the adversity makes the final product all the sweeter.

The project represents a faithful re-creation of the original hotel, done in the Beaux Arts style. A breath-catching 5,600-square-foot lobby features a dome and stained glass windows. Builders even found a skylight that had been hidden by three ceilings. For the restorers, the Battle House must have been a joy.

Hotel staff we encountered took great pride in their work - an ownership of sorts. All seemed to feel they were personally part of the miracle.

MARDI GRAS: THE ORIGINAL

Some, especially Yankees, might be surprised to learn Mobile is the true birthplace of Mardi Gras, rather than New Orleans.

The Mobile celebration has always been more family friendly. They don't mind one bit if the Big Easy gets most of the attention. Mobile can stay focused on following their time-honored traditions, without too much distraction. Their first recorded celebration was in 1703.

For three weeks every February, Mobile bursts with pageantry. Floats, masked riders and "throws" keep the spectators coming. Besides the ever-present beads, Moon Pies are a favorite item whizzing through the air. The city has more than 50 parading and non-parading organizations.

I was eager to visit their Mardi Gras Museum, in particular the costumes and fantastic regalia. Each year the groups attempt to out-do each other for most elaborate robes. The museum has dozens on display. Just when you think they couldn't get any more lavish, you enter another room to find more jewels, more beads, more color.

I salute their creativity, which knows no bounds. The decorated trains account for hundreds of hours of hand stitching.

As you'll learn at the museum, there are actually two faces of Mardi Gras, one regal and one raucous.

BELLINGRATH: THE HOUSE THAT COKE BUILT

In the vicinity of Mobile is a popular place I think of as the House that Coke Built. I crave a Coke once in a while, just like sweet tea. There's no question Coca-Cola has left its mark on our world. However, calling Bellingrath a house is an understatement. The term grand garden estate is a better fit.

Mr. Bellingrath worked for Coca-Cola in the early days. Apparently he was a workaholic before that term was coined. His physician suggested he find some rest and relaxation away from the company, or his health would suffer. Thus Bellingrath began life as a rustic fishing camp, gradually evolving into the elaborate property we see today.

Make time for a guided house tour, offered several times a day. Bessie Bellingrath spent several decades filling the house with fine china, porcelains, antiques, silver and crystal.

FORT GAINES

Since we were south of Mobile, we continued on to Fort Gaines, located on Dauphin Island. This spit of land suffered during Katrina, but the rental cottages appeared to be back to normal. The homes rest on stilts, which look peculiar at first, though not unlike the platforms seen out in the gulf producing oil and natural gas.

The fort has a significant claim to fame, a bold statement well known in the world of quotes. Here Adm. Farragut uttered his command, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"

Fort Gaines is quieter now with no recent battles other than perhaps the battle for tax dollars to keep it open. Boy Scout troops race around and more leisurely tourists peruse the sign boards. A gentle breeze off the water reminds us why this fort existed in the first place.

By 1864, Mobile was the only open port on the Gulf of Mexico with both water and rail connections to the Confederate interior. The Battle of Mobile Bay took place in August 1864, resulting in a Union victory.

Tours of the fort are self-guided, so pick up a detailed brochure at the entrance.

Afterward we took the Mobile Bay toll ferry across and drove on to Gulf Shores. Karma was smiling on us - we got a dolphin show for the cost of our fare. We circled north back to Mobile, with a stop for a late lunch along the way.

Once home, I tried my hand at sweet tea made the Southern way. It was fine, but I'd rather go back to Mobile.

IF YOU GO

Web sites: www.mobilebay.org; www.bellingrath.org; www.dauphinisland.org;
www.mobilecarnivalmuseum.com.

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