

REPORT FROM NEW ORLEANS
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REPORT FROM NEW ORLEANS: I am still alive and made it down here to New Orleans, where I am in the midst of it all. This is my second time here and there is no doubt in my mind that New Orleans is the most different of all American cities, and probably my favorite as well.

From Grand Rapids we took a puddle-jumper across Lake Michigan to Chicago to make my connection to New Orleans. The plane for the New Orleans flight was one of those larger ones, with six seats across, three on each side. I noted with a sigh that my seat was in row 34, right next to the bathrooms at the rear of the plane...and with some 120 people ahead of me for deplaning. Now I have a little problem with deplaning. I don't exactly panic, but I am anxious to get off a plane once it lands. I am grateful I landed safely, but I want to get the hell out of there quickly. The idea of waiting while 120 people got their things and filed out was not a happy one, so I inquired whether they needed anyone for exit rows and so on. They did not, but they did have forward seats for a fee. I guess this is the new flying, charge for everything that you can. I read that one airline now charges to use the on-board toilet. Incredible! For \$30 they did have a window seat, with an empty seat next to it in row #1, the first economy row after First Class... and with no seats in front. I considered that a bargain and was happy to get it. I can sleep on planes, so I just pulled my little ski beanie over my eyes and before I knew it we were getting ready to land in New Orleans.

The shuttle from the airport to the hotel was a bit of a ride and the driver, who had no sound system and whom I was sitting directly behind, gave us an impromptu guide to the city as we rode along, shouting above the noise of road. I was already realizing: this is New Orleans! So, it was hurry up and get to the hotel, check in, and then what? Then just nothing. I had nothing to do but just sit around and wait to see who arrived. I am such an active person, and impatient too, but there is something in me that also likes to wait. Well, the fact is that I always find myself waiting for someone or something, so over the years I have learned not only to expect it, but to kind of enjoy it. The operative phrase is "kind of." People began to materialize and before I knew it I was saying hello to old friends, and also meeting some of my new Facebook friends for the first time. I am surprised how many of you here on Facebook were kind enough to come up and say Hello. Although we have never met, it seems like we are already old friends. I felt kind of conspicuous sitting there in the lobby for such a long time, but what am I supposed to do, sit in my room? The windows in my hotel room do not open, and I hate having no fresh air, so I will spend as little time there as I can. So there I sat, doing exactly nothing, feeling self-conscious, etc., but I eventually forgot about that and just got into the swing of things.

Before I knew it I was invited with a group of friends to take a car tour of the most devastated areas of New Orleans, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Our tour guide was well-known author Martha Ward, whose biography of voodoo priestess Marie Laveau is so popular. It was a bit of a drive as we passed through the upper Ninth Ward and crossed some imaginary line that I could not see into the lower Ninth Ward, one of the hardest hit areas. It was an eye-opener, for sure. There are great signs of recovery, but also many houses or bare foundations where nothing has yet been done other than clear away the debris. We drove through seeming endless neighborhoods. In many places you could see the high water mark and in others those marks

were clearly pointed out. And we are talking about small houses, not big homes. It was sobering to see what the forces of nature can do and that there is nothing we could do to stop it.

The signs of recovery were also strong, house after house newly built or completely redone, and the colors. These new houses were of all colors, one after another, bright and cheery. Life was returning, and I would imagine in an even more colorful way, literally. I was shocked to hear that in this entire part of the city, and I mean a large section, there is only one small grocery store, so getting food for folks who live here is a big problem. The grocery chain-stores have never rebuilt, so if you don't own a car, and most here don't, where is your food coming from? It is too far to walk and the sun and humidity here are formidable, something I realize every time I step out of the air-conditioned hotel. We also toured what are called the "Brad Pitt," houses, homes rebuilt after the hurricane by the Brad Pitt Foundation. These were all kind of built up in the air on stilts, and I am told that architects all over the world submitted designs. And each house was so different and, again, bright and even 'crazy' colors were the order of the day. And there were also empty lots with just stairs going nowhere, where no house has yet been built. These houses were located along where the levee gave way.

We drove through what is called the "New Orleans Musician's Village," an area of some 300 houses that were rebuilt, a section mostly inhabited by musicians, and these too were a rainbow of colors, with people on their porches, the sound of electric saws, and rebuilding everywhere you looked. And people all over New Orleans were out in the streets, living large. As night came, impromptu jazz bands, some of them just young high-school kids, sprung up on street corners, and the sidewalks were filled with people, and I mean all kinds of people. This is so different from the more 'sterile' use of streets up north where I live. I don't know why, maybe just the warmth of the sun and the South, but everyone was everywhere, and they seemed happy at that. I know I loved to see all of this being-together that was going on.

We ended the night eating at a small soul-food restaurant "The Praline Connection," where we foolishly-perhaps ordered three platters for the table. There were four of us. The huge platters of food that eventually came were almost too large to fit on the table, and included things like fresh shrimp, oysters, catfish strips, stuffed crab, all deep fried. And there was fried okra, fried dill pickle, corn bread, collard and mustard greens, fried chicken livers, fried chicken, and on and on. Also a whole platter of crawfish etouffee. You get the idea. It was wonderful, but not something I could eat every day. I would be dead from all the fried food. As it was, it took me about a day to recover from it, but friends, it was real good too.

By the time we got back to the hotel I was shot. I have been up since 3 AM, and it was about 10:30 PM by the time I got back to my room. And then I was too "out there" to sleep. There is more, but I will save that for another blog. Hope all my Facebook friends are still there. I am down here in this magic city. Wow! Photos thanks to astrologer Hal Bahr.



Rebuilt rainbow houses



One of the Brad Pitt Houses