

NEW ORLEANS

BY RAY COLLINS

Discovering New Orleans

“I’ve always wanted to go to New Orleans.”

And that’s how it began a few months before my wife’s birthday. I had gone there in a previous life when I was a TV news anchor—22 years earlier --to cover a college football championship game, but I didn’t see much beyond the Superdome’s parking lot. This time would be different.

Being from Florida where voters approved medical marijuana a few years ago, we did a double take when we heard we’d be staying in “the CBD.” Turns out New Orleans calls the downtown area the Central Business District!

We stayed at a fascinating hotel that sat vacant for 35 YEARS! When the New Orleans Public Service Inc. (or NOPSI) moved out in 1983—it wasn’t until 2016 when developers bought it and spent \$50 million dollars to convert it into a luxury hotel called—you guessed it, “NOPSI Hotel.” The building is now a hundred years old and is on the National Registry of Historic Places. (Talk about good advertising—manholes throughout the city still bear the NOPSI acronym!)

It has 217 rooms and seventy-four suites within nine floors. Up top is a rooftop swimming pool and popular bar called “Above the Grid,” which is a pun rooted in its public utilities past. There’s also a fitness room, meeting space, ballroom, a restaurant and two bars off the lobby. That lobby was restored to its 1920s glory with vaulted ceilings, arches, columns and terrazzo flooring. Designers researched old photos to determine original colors and fixtures.

We began with lunch in the hotel’s restaurant called “Public Service.” We nibbled on Roasted Brussels Sprouts and took advantage of the hotel’s free two daily drink passes. Erin had a bowl of Chicken & Sausage Gumbo, and I had a Sesame-Seared Ahi Salad. We sat at the bar and received some great advice on starting our 48-hours in The Big Easy. (By the way, that nickname came from a popular dance hall in the early-1900s.)

The hotel is only a few blocks from the most famous neighborhood in New Orleans, the French Quarter. It’s famous for colorful buildings, cast-iron balconies and plenty of activity on the streets. I must admit—I’m not a huge fan of jazz music, but I happily realized New Orleans jazz is different. Lots of horns, which I love. It dawned on me walking through this district—that New Orleans reminds me of a combination of Broadway Street in Nashville and Duval Street Key West. Fun, quirky—and tourist-friendly.



We walked through the Louis Armstrong Park, saw the musician's statue—and later read about his roots in New Orleans. We also walked by a modest looking yellow house on Dumaine Street with a plaque on the front: Playwright Tennessee Williams lived there. It's now a historical landmark.

After sightseeing for hours, we walked back to our perfectly located NPSI hotel and changed for dinner. The concierge suggested we try a popular place called "Superior Seafood & Oyster Bar." He showed us where to board a streetcar near the hotel and we took a pleasant open-air drive southwest of the city out beautiful St. Charles Avenue. It was nice to be away from the downtown core and experience this elegant area. Afterwards we took an Uber in to the French Quarter to enjoy a Led Zeppelin tribute band at the House of Blues. We walked back to the hotel from there. Fun way to end our first day.

We had breakfast each morning in "Public Service," off the lobby. Great omelets, hot coffee and a big bowl of fruit. We had a busy day ahead of us:

*We headed a few blocks south to the Mississippi River and rose thirty-three levels to the top of the Four Seasons Hotel to experience "Vue Orleans." Clever. We went through interactive exhibits, a short movie and then walked around the top, getting a 360-degree view of this interesting city.

*After that we returned to the earth to tour a whiskey museum called The Sazerac House—and yes, it had free samples. Another classic building full of exposed brick indoors.

*We had dinner at a fun place in the French Quarter called the Coterie Restaurant & Oyster Bar. Exposed brick with lots of TVs and a sports bar feel. They're known for crawfish etouffee, grilled redfish and alligator sausage po-boy! We met some other visitors who say they make a point to visit this restaurant each time they're in New Orleans.

*Afterwards we listened to great jazz music in The Carousel Bar & Lounge. I thought maybe I was enjoying myself too much when Erin explained it had a rotating bar—hence the name. We met some people relaxing near us who were from Clearwater. Small world.

Wrapping up our trip and heading back to the airport half an hour away, it dawned on me that New Orleans is famous for three things: Fun music, great food and interesting architecture. We can now cross New Orleans off our bucket list—and we were so happy to find out what all the fuss is about. Cool place.

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