

Leg 3 – New Orleans

Day 15 – Monday 3 January 2000

Up at 6am for early breakfast, checkout and shuttle to Albuquerque airport for New Orleans via Dallas (Texas) where we will need to change planes. While waiting in Dalls all sorts of thoughts went through our minds concerning our luggage given the stories by others who have travelled within the USA.

One good thing to come out of Robyn's misfortune is priority boarding, and since Southwest have no seating allocations, just priority boarding and the scramble for the remaining seats, we are able to board first with the pregnant women and the incapacitated and chose which ever seat we wanted.

Dallas airport provided free coffee, tea and donuts while waiting for the next flight; however one must remember to move ones watch forward on one hour as we have moved into the next time zone. The country from Albuquerque to Dallas is flat and arid with small pockets of rural communities dotted along dry river beds.

By now the plane is full of college football fans heading to New Orleans for the Sugar bowl final between Virginia Tech (Hokies) and Florida State University (Seminoles) on Tuesday night at the Superdome.

At the airport we were picked up by our limo and driven to Four Point Sheraton Hotel just 2 blocks from the mighty Mississippi River which is 12 feet higher than street level due to the huge levy banks. The weather in the "Big Easy" is much like the Sunshine Coast (Queensland), warm with some humidity so it didn't take long to get rid of the coats and jumpers since Albuquerque where it was 12 degrees Fahrenheit when we left. There are two bridges spanning the Mississippi River just like the Story Bridge but not quite so tall, but a striking resemblance.

On our arrival at our hotel which is currently being renovated, all parking spaces were taken and people lined up in the lobby trying to book in. Most were football fans and due to the construction work, a temporary booking office on the ground floor was stretched to capacity trying to handle the crowd.

Finally we got the keys to our room on the 18th floor and our entire luggage (nothing went missing) and the porter helped us to the room. By the way, he wouldn't leave until I gave him a tip, very rude I think but then that's America. Personally I think it would be demeaning to rely like a beggar on tips to live and its pure bribery having to pay for a service which should be part of the booking fee. We are customers, not benevolent funds charged to help Americans live and feed their families. Americans should learn to give a hand-up and not rely on a hand-out. The land of the free I don't think as I should be free to either give a tip for service above and beyond the norm, or to withhold a tip when a person is just doing what their job requires them to do.

Feeling hungry we headed down the street past Harrahs casino and the World Trade Centre to River Walk shopping centre that runs alongside the Mississippi River and would take days to explore all the shops. We had our late lunch in the food court before heading out to look at the riverboats and walk along Canal Street. Once again the shops are so many and varied selling everything from clothing to electrical goods, food, jewellery and art etc.

Having listened to Jane (our niece) who works in a casino in Brisbane, we decided to head into Harraha to see what goes on. Wow, what a huge complex and instead of pouring our coins down a slot machine we sat in the courtyard and listened to a jazz quartet. We stopped and watched people pour their money into the pokies (thousands of machines) roulette wheels, craps and poker, some with a minimum of \$25 and maximum of \$500 bets. I don't envy Jane at all as the work doesn't look very enjoyable and the passive smoking would drive me mad.

After walking several blocks we finally made our way back to the hotel for a quiet drink and a rest before our site seeing tour tomorrow. My first impressions are that this is the "Big Easy" with people walking around with large beer cups having fun in the French Quarter without restrictions and police patrols and maybe this is just because of the football; let's hope so as it isn't a good look.

Our room which has been recently renovated has a king size bed, large stereo television, fridge, bathroom and cupboard space to spare. It's raining outside, this might settle the dust and wash the streets for tomorrow.

Day 16 - Tuesday 4th January 2000

Heavy fog greeted the day as the temperature dropped making us feel though we were back in Albuquerque. Breakfast was at Wendy's, boy what a diet shock our systems are having, pancakes and coffee with bacon is not really that good first thing in the morning but the hotel has no eating facilities due to renovations.

We were heading toward the meeting place for our French Quarter walk when we were approached to have a look at an original French Quarter renovation tour that would take about 1 hour. The offer of the free tour coupons sounded too good to be true and soon we found ourselves subjected to a heavy sell in a time sharing opportunity in an apartment building in the French Quarter. Our salesman tried as hard as he could to sell us a \$16,000 USD timeshare and even called the manager. Robyn and I used some smooth talking about the tax differences between Australia and the USA and we would have to ring our accountant and compare it with other property investments before making a decision. I gave him my business card and suggested he send me information to us when we get back to Australia in February where I would show it to my accountant. I don't think he was very impressed, but hey, that's life and you know the saying, if it sounds too good to be true it is too good to be true.

The walk through the French Quarter was very interesting given our guide Mary must have been in her 70's and took off like a rocket stopping at points of interest and explaining the history on New Orleans.

Mary took us up and down these tiny streets flanked with buildings displaying French, Spanish, American and Mexican architecture. The sights and smells of the various cultural foods topped with jazz and football crowds is sure something to experience.

Old Ursuline Convent was the highlight of the walking tour. It was established in the 1700's when the whole area was infested swamp country as they attended to the soldiers, the natives and the various mixes of people during the war with the British. It was here the US troops finally defeated the British against all odds. The defeat is contributed to the prayers of the women that night in the convent. Jackson's Square is the feature to celebrate the victory in honour of their leader. Used by

the Ursulines for 90 years, the convent now functions as an archive for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, with documents dating back to 1718.

St. Mary's Church, adjoining the convent, was added in 1845. The original convent, school, and gardens covered several French Quarter blocks.

The French Quarter is divided into two parts, the higher class close to the Mississippi River where trading began with the Indians before the French, Spanish, English and Americans arrived and the lower class 4 streets back in Bourbon Street. This area is referred to as the sinners and as they came out of the pubs and brothels they were confronted with a statue of Christ in Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis King of France. At night the light shining on the statue made the figure of Christ much larger against the wall of the Cathedral leading many a sinner to repent, for a while any way.

By midafternoon supporters for both Virginia Tech and Florida State filled Bourbon Street and other streets getting ready for the Sugarbowl in the Louisiana Superdome later that evening and holds 80,000 people. I still can't get over how people can walk around the streets drinking beer out of large containers. In Australia they would be arrested for drinking in public. God bless America.

Louisiana was claimed for France in 1682, and two brothers of the surname Le Moyne, formally known as Sieur d'Iberville and Sieur de Bienville, founded New Orleans seventeen years later. *La Nouvelle Orléans* was named in honour of the Duke of Orleans, France's ruling regent until the young Louis XV could take the throne, but the French name was also chosen to encourage French settlers who would have balked at coming to a place with an Indian name like Biloxi or Natchitoches. Two French engineers laid out the first 66 squares of a walled village, what later would be known as the French Quarter or the *Vieux Carré* (Old City). Streets were named after lesser royalty in the Duke's court. Indian hunters, German farmers, and trappers traded their goods in a clearing where the French Market stands today.

On the way back to our hotel to rug up for the chilly night air we stopped in at **Café du Monde** to taste the coffee and beignets which are deep fried fritters a square piece of dough, fried and covered with powdered sugar. A weight watchers delight.

While in our hotel we could hear sirens and watched the police vehicles escorting the busses for both football teams to the Superdome. The lines of cars and busses seemed endless. At 6pm we headed out for dinner at Landry's Seafood House for a seafood platter which is very different to what you would order and expect in Australia. We didn't enjoy the catfish which tasted like Mississippi mud however the prawns and crab with the salad was delicious. One thing that caused a little concern with the waiters and kitchen is when we didn't start eating the salad that came out first. We sat and waited for the seafood but the kitchen was waiting for us to eat the salad. We explained the waiter that we were waiting for the seafood; everyone was amused at these aussies and their eating habits.

Our stroll back to the hotel in the cold wind was refreshing so we took a detour through a shopping centre in Canal Place which also houses a plush Whyndham Hotel from the 11th floor and above. A walk through the lobby of this hotel was very impressive and from this height, the view of the city lights was magnificent. It is expected to get cold again tomorrow and the wind chill factor will make the air a little crisp, bring it on.

Back in our room we watched the remainder of the football on the television and had problems trying to work out how 15 minutes of football takes 45 minutes, Robyn fell asleep. Too many time-outs and stoppages and funny rules, give me AFL any day. Finally Florida State won and while I am writing this the sirens started up again escorting the busses and cars back to their hotels. Crowds are streaming down the road making their way back into the French Quarter for a celebration drink or two, three ... fifty or to drown their sorrows if they support Virginia Tech. Our hotel said they expected around 250 people to check out in the morning and the note slipped under our door asked people to be patient. Thank goodness we don't check out until the following day.

Day 17 - Wednesday 5 January 2000

The day started with sunshine, cool weather but no wind which reduced the wind chill factor. Robyn and I left the hotel when all the football fans were trying to checkout and catch busses, taxis and cars. On the streets you could immediately see the reduced numbers; this means we had New Orleans to ourselves, well all most.

We had booked a table at the 'Two Sisters' a famous restaurant in the heart of the French Quarter. After a brief visit to the bank to cash a couple of traveller's cheques we walked through the near empty streets but this time at our pace, not the pace of Mary from the day before. The "Two Sisters" is in keeping with the Georgian architecture. We were seated in the dining room and Michael our waiter who was such a happy fellow explained how the buffet works with people being able to return for extra food 5 times (I wonder who keeps count and what would happen if you went to the table the 6th time).

Food was plentiful and varied but I had to ask Michael how do you eat crawfish which look like yabbies. To eat crayfish sir you twist off the head, squash it to release the juices and suck them out of the head. With the tail, peel off the first part of the shell, suck the juices out of the body before squeezing the end of the tail so the flesh releases from the shell then pull it out with your teeth. This process is called 'mud bugging'. A word of warning be aware of the hot spices used when cooking the crawfish because your lips (well mine anyway) start to burn after a while. The prawns are also cooked in hot spices and don't taste as good as fresh prawns back home.

Being an uncouth aussie it didn't faze me at all the grab my glass of ice water and dip my lips into the cold so as to put out the fire on my lips. I decided to do it differently to protect my lips but as I was peeling the shell away from the crawfish suddenly Michael appeared to remind me how to eat crawfish, bugger Michael, I'll do it my way thankyou and save my lips.

After three different servings which included desserts we left the "Two Sisters" restaurant by Emma and Bertha Camors and headed for the 'Steamboat Natchez' a real paddle steamer (only 6 left in the USA) for a cruise up the Mississippi River.

To let the people know the boat is ready to steam a person plays a steam calliope on the top deck and the tunes echo over the French Quarter. Our cruise down the second largest port in the world (in tonnage that is). As we cruised down the Mississippi River we passed Chalmette Battlefield where 2000 British troops and 71 US soldiers lost their lives and was the last battle between the British and US troops for the 'Battle of New Orleans' under Andrew Jackson and Jean Lafitte. As the river is higher than the surrounding land, the system of levee banks and locks hide some of the historical buildings and fields close by.

After the 2 hour cruise we headed for the tea in the Riverwalk complex but as both of us were still quite full from lunch, a light Chinese meal was welcome as I doubt we could have stomached any more spicy foods. We talked to one of the shop owners whose shop was destroyed when a wheat ship crashed into the wharf destroying many shops but fortunately minor injuries from the flying glass.

Tomorrow we head to Fort Lauderdale for the next leg of our holiday, so tonight we will relax our weary limbs from all the walking and simply watch some television and pack most of our clothes as have an early rise, checkout, and trip back to the airport for the 8:50am Southwest flight via Tampa Florida.