

# Where the living is Easy...

The cuisine, music and nightlife of New Orleans move to the rhythm of a city that really never sleeps, writes Eamon Donoghue

**N**ew Orleans's famed cuisine, music and nightlife stirs, soothes and fizzles to the rhythm of a city that really never sleeps. Go for a week and your senses will be enriched, but your body won't be thanking you.

But is it possible to enjoy a week of New Orleans's finest, while striking a reasonably healthy balance?

The city's traditional downtown and uptown – or the classic French quarters and modern American quarters – meet on Canal Street, which is just a five-minute stroll from the Ace Hotel. It's the perfect location from which to walk to anywhere in the city.

Greeting me on arrival was a delicious chocolate chip cookie, served warm with a hint of sea salt. I'm usually very disciplined when it comes to sweet snacks, but this became a twice-daily treat during my stay. You can even get them brought up to the heated pool and bar on the rooftop, to accompany the stunning views of the city.

That's where our first evening began, before moving on to the famous Bourbon Street. This place is a hive of activity every night of the week, with live bands in every bar, and children on the neon-lit streets bucket-drumming (more for practice than payment in this music-mad city) as onlookers enjoy the atmosphere in the warm air under the French quarter-style balconies.

Down side streets you'll find bars like the Alibi, serving food and drink 24/7. Even in the early hours you'll easily get your hands on some traditional New Orleans dishes such as gumbo and jambalaya. Both are

combinations of meats, rice and vegetables, but add some Creole magic and they taste far too good to be healthy.

On day two we visited Cochon in the warehouse district, a cajun-southern-style restaurant named after the French word for pig, with its own butcher next door. The pork produce is all locally sourced and tastes incredible. But there's great variety to their menu and along with the fried boudin sausage with pickled peppers, my two standout dishes were the fried alligator and the wood-fired oysters.

Matthew Ghabrial and his staff in Cochon sent me on my way with a list of recommendations for food and fun in the city. The people in New Orleans are always looking to help you out; they're warm, chatty, and they listen. After flying in via New York, it hits you pretty early on that this is an American city like no other, "The city that care forgot". And they're damn proud to be different.

The locals are also a lot of fun, and at the heart of that fun is their music. To counter two days of finger-licking food, washed down by the classic New Orleans Sazerac cocktails, I headed for a dancing workout with the "Move ya Brass" crew. Founded by singer Robin Barnes, when she was forced to reevaluate her lifestyle after suffering a serious kidney infection, the class teaches New Orleans bounce moves in an aerobics format.

Dancing along the Mississippi river, with the sun going down over the city's skyline in the backdrop, you'll smile and laugh your way through an hour of good cardio, realis-



ing that nothing makes this unique city tick like music and a sense of community.

The healthy buzz continued the following day, when, rather than exploring the New Orleans swamps on an airboat, I did so on a kayak. The New Orleans Kayak Swamp Tours provided transportation to the Manchac swamp, which is a little over an hour's drive from the city. The waters



“

The waters are also home to a lot of alligators. Our guide assured us they're only small and more afraid of us than we should be of them

here are calm and ideal for beginners – though after 2½ hours you'll feel a few aches.

There's an array of wildlife to see along the way; I caught a glimpse of an eagle and a vulture. The waters are also home to a lot of alligators. Our guide assured us they're only small and more afraid of us than we should be of them; I didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved that we didn't get to test his theory.

With energy levels waning after an active morning, some sugary goodness in Café Du Monde was well timed. Their beignets – a donut-like pastry – are world famous. A scenic jaunt from here is Frenchman Street, where for the price of a drink you can stop in anywhere and hear the most talented musicians. This is where all the locals hang out. For all of the energy of Bourbon Street, this is authentic New Orleans and makes for a really unique night out.

The next morning I went for a run. New Orleans City Park is 50 per cent bigger than Central Park in New York, and contains a 400m running track – perfect for some interval runs, which I prefer to long distance while on my travels.

Dinner that evening was served at the Seaworthy restaurant, next door to the Ace Hotel. Here, the waitress explains, they serve "wild-caught seafood with a southern spin". Tell anyone around the city that you're having dinner here and they'll rave about the oysters; they do not disappoint. But it was the octopus, served in eggplant salsa, pumpkin seed and chipotle sherry