



## Bayou Bliss

# An idyll in a land moving to its own

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

**T**here are places one visits where the land seems to have no memory. Miami, for me, is like that. Then there are places like backwater Louisiana, where memory seems as heavy as the bayou's wet air.

Until relatively recently, getting to the bayou was an ordeal, but now superhighways span the swamps and have made Lafayette, Louisiana, the heart of the backwaters, just about a two hours' drive from New Orleans. So close but so very far away. For unlike the Big Easy, the small towns of this area, isolated for so long, remain remarkably unself-conscious.

I would see friends in Lafayette, but first I was making my way to the Atchafalaya River basin just beyond and a houseboat that was to be my home for the weekend. I was hungry for things wet and wild. For once, I wasn't in a hurry. My route out of New Orleans took me near Great River Road and some of the more celebrated of the antebellum mansions. *Interview With the Vampire* had been shot at Oak Alley Plantation, and despite the Disney-esque tour, the house, with its lavender and rose and peach rooms and boulevard

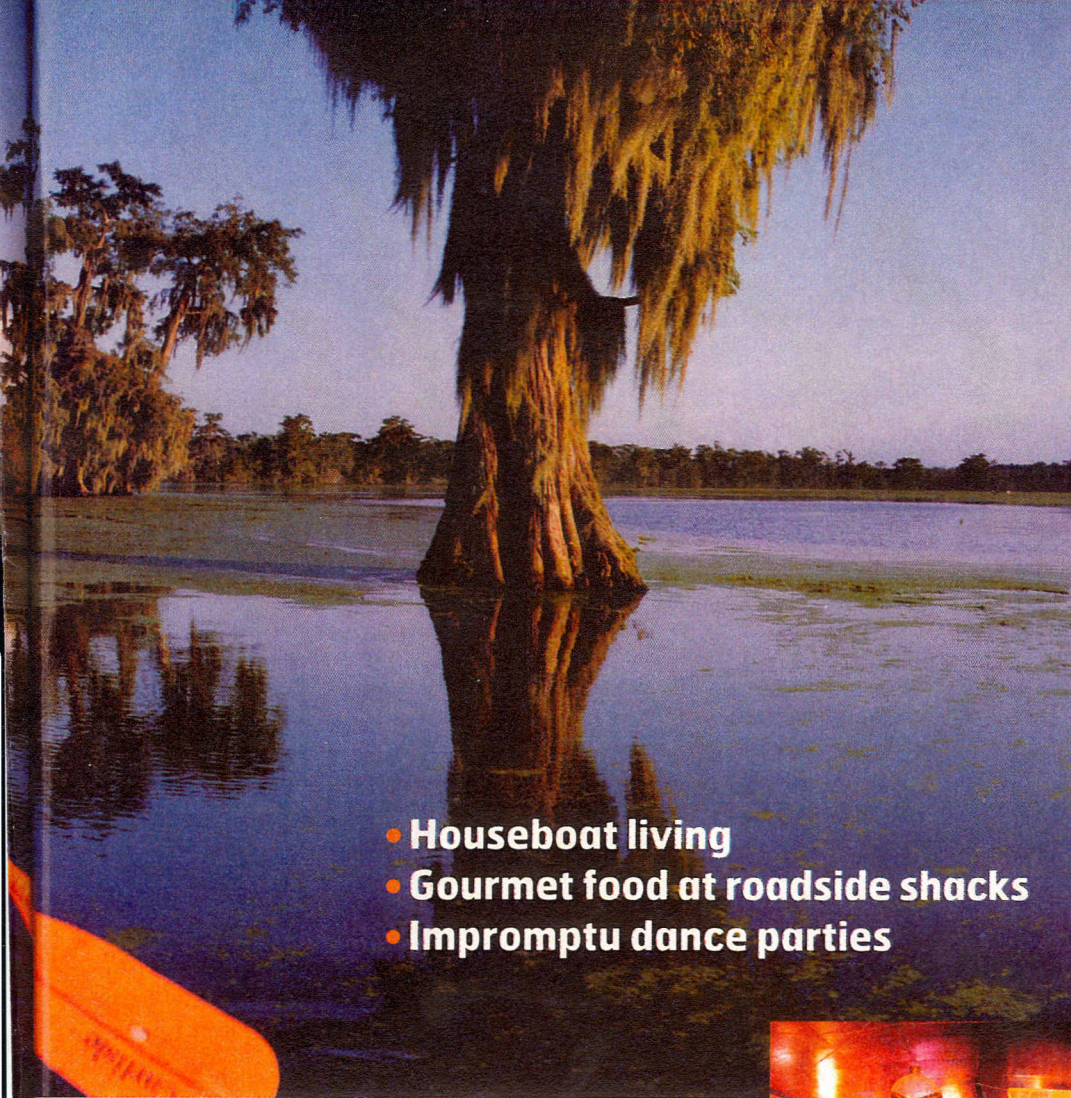
canopied by 300-year-old oaks, was moody enough to do justice to Anne Rice's Gothic soap. Close by I found Lafitte's Landing Restaurant, one of the best Creole/Cajun restaurants anywhere. I wasn't disappointed. (Neither was I disappointed with boudin, bayou fast food: Cajun rice and pork sausage.)

The food has its buttery roots in the cooking of the French Acadians (Cajuns), who first settled the bayou. As the area welcomed more and different peoples, the area's cuisine, like its culture, became even thicker, sassafras-thick, more pungent, too—a gumbo. Today, the overriding problem on the bayou is not where to eat but how to make room for more.

When I reached my houseboat, it was dusk and still steamy. There I sat, watching ibis and cranes swoop and spin. I got about 15 minutes of sleep that first night, unable to bring myself in from the porch. The swamp may be fairly quiet by day, but at night it's a percussive wonder.

Over the next three days, I did some exploring with naturalist Jim Whelan. Although a number of companies offer "swamp tours," Pack & Paddle, where Whelan works, is





- Houseboat living
- Gourmet food at roadside shacks
- Impromptu dance parties

**Tip** A conventional backpack may be fine for paddling labyrinthine cypress groves or hiking serpentine trails, but getting to either typically requires traversing treacherous airport concourses and endless parking lots. For that, you will need the Eagle Creek Cargo Switchback Plus Convertible (shown at left). This backpack-on-wheels does everything an ordinary pack does in the wilds. But when civilization is part of the itinerary, the straps stow away, a hidden handle extends, and the wheels take over, transforming you from beast of burden to self-sufficient traveler. (Cargo Switchback Plus Convertible, \$260 for the regular size; \$290 for the larger version; for dealer information, call 800-874-9925.)

## timeless rhythms.

the most ecologically sensitive. We canoed past all manner of birds; we paddled past alligators with crooked grins skulking in fields of hyacinths and water lilies.

Doug Sabatier, who owns Houseboat Adventures, mapped out the backwaters leading to places like Hidden Lake, where the water is clear and safe for swimming. One morning his teenage son took me fishing out in the middle of the cypress groves, draped in Spanish moss, that rear right out of the water. The landscape can conjure up every feeling you've had about the dawn of creation.

After two days, friends came to call: Did I or did I not want to dance to those bayou rhythms? Such escapades can start early. On Saturday mornings at Fred's Lounge, folks begin arriving around 8 A.M. for the live Cajun radio show that has aired every week for 50 years. The musicians are old-timers. Lots of the dancers are, too.

"I don't know how," I told the sweet fellow who asked me to take a spin. "Well, I'm about to show you, *chère*." One long step, two short ones. The Cajun waltz. This is country music, heavy on the twang. But it's not sentimental. Zydeco music takes Cajun melodies and turns up the



beat. What results is heartbreakingly sweet funk—with dancing to match. Everything is moist, moonlit, rustling with rhythm. The bayou remembers it all.

ELIZABETH HANLY is writing a book about Cuba, *Body as Soul: On Prayer and Mambo*, due out next year from HarperCollins.

### The Basics

Bayou Boudin & Cracklin cabins in Breaux

Bridge: 318-332-6158; \$50 per night

Fred's Lounge in Mamou: 318-468-5411

Harry's (318-332-9515) and

Mulate's (318-332-4648) in Breaux Bridge  
Houseboat Adventures in Henderson:

318-821-7519; \$145

Lafitte's Landing Restaurant, on Great River  
Road: 504-473-1232

McGee's Landing in Henderson: 318-228-2384

Pack & Paddle: 800-458-4560

Richard's Club (318-543-6596) and Slim's  
(318-942-9980) in Opelousas