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Jul/Aug 2010 Issue

Best of the South 2010

AAA Southern Traveler readers weigh in on the best places to visit, eat, shop and more.

By Editorial Staff

Blue skies and sunshine draw visitors to the white sand beaches of Mississippi's Gulf Coast midway between New Orleans and Mobile. New hotels and condos glory in their excess, while family-owned motels, restaurants and shops still welcome vacationers to the shore. If the sounds of waves lapping the beach coupled with diverse entertainment and attractions sound good to you, follow us to the coast for a late summer vacation.

This story started last spring as editors kicked around an idea for the late summer issue. It can be tough to engage readers during July and August as many of you may be vacationing or have already taken the summer trip. What could we offer you while you sip sweet tea in the air conditioning? We decided to throw a "best of" story out there and see how readers would respond. After tabulating well over 1,300 ballots, it's safe to say you blew us away.

Nominees were named and the top three in 20 categories were tabulated in March. The finalists were listed in the May/June issue. We gained some insight, not only about this wonderfully rich and diverse region but also how to improve the voting system for next year. We thank all who took the time to let us know what makes the South a great part of our country.

As you read the story and find out what cities, towns, shops, restaurants and people have been selected as the best, you'll probably applaud some of the picks and be disappointed by others. Be assured that you'll get your chance to have your say again next year as we devise some new categories and bring back a few favorites. We also encourage you to experience some of these places for yourself, whether it's for the first time or a return visit to enjoy the best the South has to offer.

Best large city for a weekend getaway: **New Orleans**

Any frequent visitor to the Crescent City will tell you New Orleans isn't anything like the rest of the South. There is simply no mistaking its peculiarity among other Southern cities, with its robust Afro-Caribbean flavor perfectly blended with European style and panache.

It's because New Orleans feels so different—is so different—that our readers selected the Big Easy as their favorite weekend getaway city. From its famed celebrations like Mardi Gras and the Jazz and Heritage Festival to sporting events (horse racing, NFL World Champion Saints, NBA Hornets, AAA baseball Zephyrs) to great attractions such as The National World War II Museum, New Orleans keeps drawing people back for more.

The city is perhaps best known for its world-class cuisine found at any number of AAA four Diamond restaurants and even some not-so-well-known corner cafes and bistros. Great art galleries and shopping venues also help to make New Orleans a destination unlike anywhere else. Information: New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, (800) 672-6124, www.neworleanscvb.com

Second place: Baton Rouge, La., (800) LA-ROUGE (527-6843), www.visitbatonrouge.com

Third place: Shreveport, La., (888) 45-VISIT (458-4748), www.shreveport-bossier.org

Best small city for a weekend getaway: **Lafayette**

The gateway to Louisiana Cajun country mixes the warmth of a grandma's welcome with urbane offerings, a great combination for a quick vacation.

"In my opinion, it is the 'crown jewel' of Louisiana," said Gretchen Stewart, who has lived in Lafayette for about 25 years.

History and culture that's been flavored by France, Spain and the Caribbean are honored here. Learn more at the Acadian Memorial in nearby St. Martinville. Two events in July and August remember the tragic 18th-century exile of Acadians from Nova Scotia.

Speaking of flavors, some of the best food in Louisiana can be found in and around Lafayette. Through Aug. 15, EatLafayette is a dining event that offers discounts and special menus at select restaurants so guests can understand what makes Acadiana culture so appetizing. Get your fill of shrimp Aug. 19-22 at the annual Delcambre Shrimp Festival. Information: Lafayette Convention and Visitors Center, (800) 346-1958, www.lafayettettravel.com

Second place: Natchez, Miss., (800) 647-6724 or www.visitnatchez.org

Third place: Natchitoches, La., (800) 259-1714 or www.historicnatchitoches.com

Best B&B: **Aaah! T'freres**

Since 1993, this bed and breakfast in Lafayette, La., has offered guests its brand of Cajun hospitality and amazing "ooh la la" breakfasts. Owners Pat and Maugie Pastor bring 35 of years restaurant business experience to the table, so guests can expect to be wowed. There are eight themed breakfasts, each with an international flair, but every one starts with a salad and finishes with a divine dessert. In between, guests may enjoy cheese-stuffed crepes topped with homemade strawberry and blueberry syrup or Bananas Foster, eggs, homemade biscuits, ham and grilled tomatoes.

"We call it the 'skip a lunch' breakfast," Maugie Pastor says.

In the evening, guests enjoy her T'Julep (spiked tea) and crab canapés.

There are eight rooms available for overnight stays, including two in the garconniere in back of the main home. Built for the young men of the house, this was the place for all-night dances and card games. The main house dates to the 1880s and has a splendid front porch that's a popular gathering spot. The house reportedly also has a spirit, that of a young woman named Amelie, who will turn lights on and off or rattle kitchen pots. The ghost story was featured on the Travel Channel, and the Pastors were given a video clip, which is made available to curious guests.

"It saves me a lot of words," Pastor says.

T'Freres, which is French for little brother, is located at 1905 Verot School Road in Lafayette. Information: (337) 984-9347

Second place: Monmouth Plantation (AAA four Diamond hotel), Natchez, Miss., (601) 442-5852

Third place: Dunleith Historic Inn, Natchez, Miss., (800) 433-2445

Best large hotel: **Hotel Monteleone**

Luxury and history combine for a memorable stay at this venerable French Quarter hotel. Recipient of AAA's Four Diamond Award, Hotel Monteleone offers guests 600 newly renovated rooms and suites. Enjoy a cocktail at the Carousel Bar, a favorite of celebrities and writers, including Eudora Welty, who wrote part of her short story, "The Purple Hat," here. The recent short film based on her story debuted at the hotel this spring.

Reserve a room then wave to adoring fans (real or imagined) as you walk into the opulent lobby, because here, all guests receive the star treatment. The hotel is at 214 Royal St. Information: (504) 523-3341



Hotel Monteleone's opulent Eudora Welty suite illustrates Southern

*sophistication. Hotel Monteleone
photo*

Second place: Windsor Court (AAA four Diamond hotel), New Orleans, (504) 523-6000

Third place: The Roosevelt, New Orleans, (504) 648-1200

Best small hotel: **The Juliet**

With 20 rooms, an outdoor pool and hot tub, free wireless and fitness center, The Juliet Hotel in Lafayette is an elegant property for business or leisure travelers. Guests also enjoy a free continental breakfast and a location close to popular attractions, such as Vermilionville, a Cajun/Creole heritage and folk life park.

The Juliet is an Ascend Collection hotel, the Choice Hotel boutique brand. The hotel is at 800 Jefferson St. Information: (337) 261-2225

Second place: Natchez Eola Hotel, Natchez, Miss., (601) 445-6000

Third place: The Alluvian Hotel, Greenwood, Miss., (662) 453-2114

Best summer family destination: **Destin, Fla.**

Families seem to be naturally drawn to beaches when it's time to plan the summer vacation, and our readers loved our two finalists, but Destin in northwestern Florida came out as the favored family getaway. Its 24 miles of white sand beaches and emerald water have drawn vacationers to these shores for generations.

Plenty of beach activities are offered, as are adventures on local rivers. Small history and heritage museums give background to the area, and dozens of great restaurants offering fresh seafood are here to enjoy. Accommodations are varied and range from camping to seaside cottages. Destin—like many gulf coast destinations—monitors any possible impact the recent oil rig disaster may have on its beaches, and at press time issued statements through its Web site that everything is open to welcome tourists to the beach. Information: www.destin-fwb.com, (850) 423-4894 option 8



Second place: Alabama Gulf Coast, www.gulfshores.com, (800) 745-7263

Third place: Louisiana Cajun Country, www.lafayettetravel.com, (800) 346-1958

Best golf course: **Augusta National**

Since 1934, this has been home to The Masters® tournament. The club was founded in 1931 by golf legend Bobby Jones and businessman Clifford Roberts on the site of a former indigo plantation. Jones copied each hole from one of his favorites worldwide to create the course of his dreams.

Membership to this exclusive golf club is by invitation only, and the only time non-members can visit the course is during The Masters® and then one must have a practice round ticket or series badge.

However, the Augusta Convention and Visitors Bureau (www.augustaga.org) lists nine additional courses in Georgia's second-oldest city available for play.

Second place: Wetlands Golf Course, Lafayette, La., (337) 291-7151, www.wetlandsgc.com

Third place: Sandestin Golf & Beach Resort, Destin, Fla., (850) 267-8000, www.sandestin.com

Best state park: **Lake Fausse Pointe**

Whether visitors enjoy Lake Fausse Pointe State Park in St. Martinville, La., for a day or a week, almost everything is here to make that stay enjoyable. Accommodations include cabins and 55 campsites. Rent boats, canoes or kayaks to get out on the lake. There's a seven-mile canoe trail and three nature trails within the park to put you close to the outdoors. Information: www.crt.state.la.us/parks, (337) 229-4764

Second place: Percy Quin State Park, McComb, Miss., (601) 684-3938, www.stateparks.com/percy_quin.html

Third place: DeGray Lake Resort State Park, Bismarck, Ark., (501) 865-2811, www.degray.com