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OFF THE BEATEN TRACK | JUNE 24, 2010

Lafayette, La.

By [JOEL MILLMAN](#)

Reporter Joel Millman on what to do and hear, where to eat and where to stay in Lafayette, in Louisiana's Cajun-Creole heartland.

Visiting Lafayette



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Brandon Thibodeaux

Malian Bassekou Kouyate, right, performs with a band member at the Festival International de Louisiane.

What to do: The capital of "Acadiana," or francophone Louisiana, this delightful city sits midway between New Orleans and the Texas state line. It is hot and sticky in summer, but always lively. Besides, how can you not love a city where a downtown parking meter gives you 20 minutes for a nickel?

Lafayette boasts a rich cultural blend—not just of Louisiana cuisine, but of music and performing arts, too. The annual Festival International de Louisiane (www.festivalinternationale.com; 337-232-8086) is a French-language Woodstock, a weekend of free music on five stages scattered along downtown's Jefferson St. It has been held since 1986 and attracts thousands of revelers, crafts vendors and artists. This year's event—held April 22-26—featured such international sensations as reggae's Steel Pulse, Africa's Sierra Leone Refugee All-Stars and Brooklyn's Sharon Jones and the

Dap Kings. Cajun reels, zydeco-swing, hip-hop, bluegrass and gypsy jazz all blared through the event, as they do much of the rest of the year in local bars and nightclubs. Next year, on its 25th anniversary, the festival will run April 27 through May 1.

For the scholarly, there's the sprawling campus of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, whose 16,000 students provide patronage for a lively downtown arts scene. Artwalk is held on the second Saturday of every month, when a dozen galleries throw open their doors to the public.

Check out Cité des Arts on Vine Street (337-291-1122), a mixed-use space for performing arts and independent film.

Lafayette and its environs serve as a magnet for tourists interested in Cajun culture, the French lifestyle brought by Acadian refugees who fled Canada in 1755. There are Acadian museums and replica villages and historic sites across the region. Visit the St. Martinville Cultural Heritage Center (www.acadianmemorial.org; 337-394-2258), about 15 miles south of Lafayette. It combines the Museum of the Acadian Memorial with African American Museum. Both treat creatively the diasporas of two separate peoples—African and French—and explain how both combined to create such American icons as gumbo, gospel music and jazz.

Where to eat: Much of what is on menus in Lafayette isn't affected by the oil leak in the Gulf because many dishes

are prepared from freshwater species, some of them farmed. Shrimp may be harder to come by, but crawfish, catfish, alligator and others are unaffected.

Everyone will send you to Prejean's (www.prejeans.com; 337-896-3247) out on I-49 and they're not wrong. The place is a tourist trap, complete with a gift shop and a 14-foot-long stuffed alligator ("Big Al") in the main dining room. But the fare is excellent. Fried-oyster salad with feta cheese and pork-crackling-cruised frogs legs are two nods to "fusion" cuisine. Trust me, here you want to eat Cajun. The alligator-crawfish "cheesecake" sausage made with gouda cheese is a great appetizer. I went with the alligator fillet folded over spicy rice stuffing.

Another de rigueur spot is Don's Seafood (downtown; 337-235-3551). Alligator and Atchafalaya Catfish are both available as appetizers. Enormous entrées, however, make it wise to skip a starter.

Nash's restaurant, on the other side of town (www.Nashsrestaurant.com; 337-839-9333) is another good choice. It is in an old colonial mansion and serves the best Italian food around. Traditional Louisiana fare such as veal Orleans (topped with lump crabmeat) is very good. So is the seafood pasta—just in case you can't imagine a meal without crawfish.

Where to stay: The Juliet downtown on Jefferson Street (www.juliethotel.com; 337-261-2225) is a boutique hotel with 20 rooms. It has few amenities, but its location is unmatched for festival weekend, with one performance stage literally behind the hotel. Weekend rates start at \$129 per night, plus tax.

All major chains have properties in the area. The Hilton Lafayette and Towers (337-235-6111) looks like the best for location and condition. Rooms start at \$89 per night. There is also the Comfort Inn (337-232-9000) on Evangeline Parkway near the airport. Rooms there start at \$69 a night.

Write to Joel Millman at joel.millman@wsj.com

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