



8 **Travel** Saturday Guardian 15.11.08

The Big Trip

The show goes on

Three years after hurricane Katrina, New Orleans is mounting America's biggest-ever biennial of modern art. Teri Grenert reports on a project that is helping to restore tourism to a unique city

You may not buy into voodoo or make sense of the gris-gris Dr John sings about, but New Orleans exudes a special quality that charms people into coming back again and again. I've been a few times since my first visit in the early 1990s, and can't imagine a time when I won't feel the urge to experience the strange delights of The Ernie K-Doe Mother-in-Law Lounge (1500 N Claiborne Ave, k-doe.com), essentially a shrine to the man who penned Here Come The Girls and the 1961 hit which lends the bar its name. It's filled with memorabilia, photos, bejewelled stage clobber and other reminders of his fabulousness – don't be frightened by the crowned, life-size mannequin. His spirit demands to be listed as "manager" on the business card, and his widow Antoinette is your hostess, happy to recount stories while getting to know you. On this occasion, I even got to sample some of her leftover

homemade gumbo, and it was the best I've ever eaten.

Sitting in Ernie K-Doe's listening to soul blasting from the jukebox, it's easy to forget that just a few blocks away lie the ghost-town streets of abandoned homes, devastated when hurricane Katrina swept through the city three years ago. It's business as usual in this neighbourhood, and in the touristy French Quarter too. Visitors still pile into Acme Oyster House (724 Iberville Street, acmeoyster.com) to wolf down a pound of spicy boiled crawfish or plate of chargrilled oysters, or settle at Café Du Monde (1039 Decatur Street, cafedumonde.com) to enjoy chicory coffee and sugar-coated beignets as live jazz emanates from the street corner. The tacky bars of Bourbon Street still sell stomach-churning quantities of alcohol, while hurricanes proudly remain on cocktail lists.

The only thing missing is

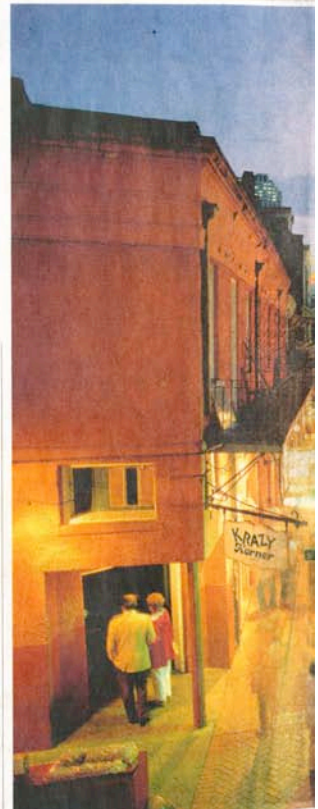
tourists. While numbers are creeping up, they are still below the pre-Katrina level of around 10 million per year. Fear of being insensitive, or simply uncertainty over what kind of state they might find the city in, are holding people back, but the city badly needs tourists and the money they bring.

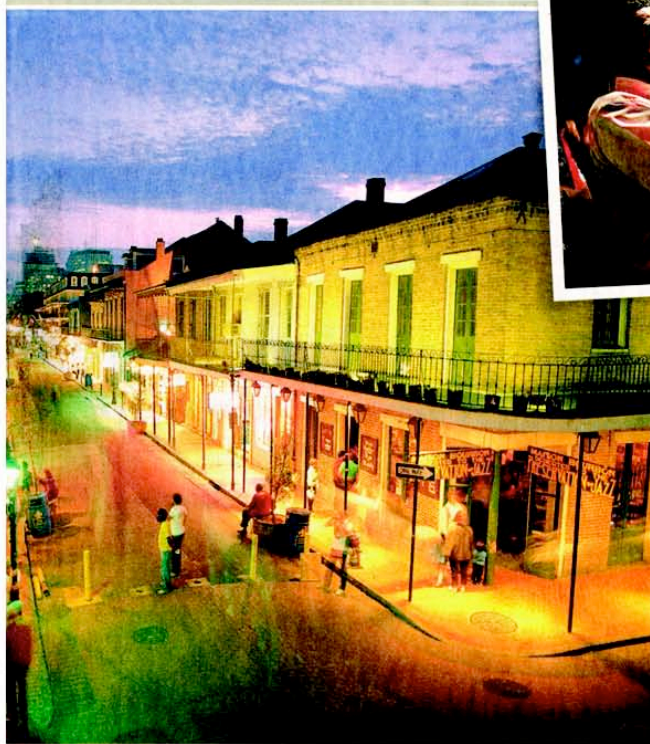
**Soul sister ...
Irma Thomas at
the New Orleans
jazz festival**



High-profile events such as the NBA All-Star Game have been held here to draw people back. But the latest project is the most ambitious yet. Prospect.1 New Orleans is the biggest biennial of contemporary art ever held in America, bringing together work by 81 international artists. Organised by Dan Cameron, director of visual arts at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, it is designed to appeal to regular art followers from around the world, while also showcasing and re-energising the local art scene, and is expected to bring in an estimated 50,000 out-of-towners. The show takes place all over the city until January 18, and visitors are being shuttled on complimentary buses between museums, galleries, public buildings, warehouses and makeshift exhibition spaces.

I was in New Orleans with my friends Chelsea and Aaron, who make frequent visits from their home in Austin to explore the Crescent City's music scene. Here – and only here – R&B still means rhythm and blues, and





Easy does it... (clockwise from left) Bourbon Street; the Preservation Hall Jazz Band; Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick at the L9 Centre; Mark Bradford's ark



many of the artists most associated with the city continue to play regularly, among them Irma Thomas, Eddie Bo, the ubiquitous Dr John and just occasionally the octogenarian Fats Domino, while the Preservation Hall Jazz Band keep the spirit of Dixieland alive. All of this comes together in the city's annual Jazzfest (nojazzfest.com) in April/May, a celebration of all New Orleans music, from jazz and R&B to cajun, zydeco, swamp pop and gospel.

Cameron himself became addicted to the city and its overwhelming, freewheeling atmosphere at 1987's Jazzfest, and made regular forays from New York to get his annual fix at the event, often encouraging fellow New Yorkers and Europeans to take part in the festivities. But when he returned in January 2006 for a panel discussion on post-Katrina art and the future of New Orleans culture at the Arthur Roger Gallery, he decided to use his curating experience to help the city rebuild itself culturally. "In a little way, Prospect.1 was about continuing what I'd been doing all along, trying to stimulate in other people at least a curiosity in New Orleans and get them here. I thought that once they experienced the city first-hand they would feel about it the same way I felt: they would want to get involved."

Chelsea, Aaron and I were crashing at a friend's cottage in the Tremé neighbourhood; another friend was staying at nearby bed and breakfast, the House on Bayou Road (2275 Bayou

These streets have inspired and moved many of the artists

Road, houseonbayouroad.com), a beautiful, late 18th-century Creole plantation house surrounded by a white picket fence and lush gardens. When the smell of something tasty came wafting through the lobby – they host cooking schools on Creole and Cajun cuisine – I was tempted to stay there myself.

But we had booked dinner at Lola's (3312 Esplanade Ave, 504 488 6946), a fantastic one-room establishment adorned with paintings by a local artist. We over-ordered from numerous tempting Mediterranean and Spanish dishes – garlic mushrooms and calamari with a spicy red pepper sauce, seafood soup, ajo blanco and paella – prepared in the behind-the-counter kitchen and washed down with their own sangria. Then, stomachs satisfied, we headed to the French Quarter for some musical entertainment.

At Mimi's in the Marigny, a bar with a tapas menu and a decent selection of wine and spirits, DJs and live performances attract a hipster crowd. We were lucky on the night to catch local rhythm & blues man Guitar Lightnin' Lee playing, and quickly got down to some unrestrained hip-shaking.

We weren't planning to take in any art until our visit to some of the biennial sites the following day, but as we walked down the road past David Baron's home-cum-gallery (Caribbean Arts Ltd, 720 Franklin Ave, 504 943 3858) we were invited in for an after-hours tour. David, an eccentric who seems more suited to the languid environs of New Orleans than his original home of New York, greeted us in silk robe, cravat and slippers, and happily showed us his collection of colourful Haitian art covering the walls from floor to ceiling. After this unplanned, late-night cultural experience, we headed off in search of one last cocktail.

The night took its predictable toll, and the next day I wasn't sure how I'd be affected by my first visit to the

flood-devastated Lower 9th Ward, where much of the site-specific work is on display. While only the most heartless person could fail to be moved by the state of the neighbourhood – evacuated homes sit empty with giant markings left by rescuers to indicate corpses, and sad, deserted stoops in overgrown lots are the only evidence of family homes – it's encouraging to see at least some residents have returned. These are the streets which have especially inspired and moved many of the artists taking part in the biennial. "Artists are working with the community, dealing with the neighbours," said Cameron. "Brad Pitt's thing [the Make It Right housing project] is just up the street – it's all an amazing arena for positive change – and to include art in that arena was important. A painting can take on a whole new dimension here."

The Lower 9th is where you'll find Robin Rhode's remembrance fountain in the urinal of an abandoned kids' playground, the only structure left from the school it belonged to, and Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford's enormous ark, made of debris plastered with fly posters, which stands at the same height the floodwaters reached on this side of Caffin Avenue. Chilean artist Sebastián Preece has relocated pieces from an archaeological excavation of three local sites to create his installation, and Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's work

resembles the bare bones of a house; it sits on the lot of an elderly Miss Sarah, whose rebuilding plans ceased when contractors went awol with her funds.

Mutu's work is located across the street from the L9 Centre for the Arts, opened last year by local photographers Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, whose images of this neighbourhood capture a 30-year span. "I think the struggle is to keep a light in the community, to show something positive and vibrant. I feel like L9 is the beginning," said Calhoun. His attitude must have struck a note with a couple of the artists who made regular visits to L9 while in town. Check out the back yard of the gallery and you'll see an unexpected collaboration: the patio Preece laid and the colourful fence Bradford helped piece together from found doors. Sobering stuff – quite literally in our hungover state – but inspiring rather than grim. And that's really the feeling we get from everything we see here, one of hope and indomitable spirit.

Tourists that we are, we troop back to the French Quarter for some traditional fine dining at the elegant Galatoire's (209 Bourbon Street, galatoires.com), followed by drinks at the surreal, circus-themed Carousel Bar at the Hotel Monteleone (214 Rue Royale, hotelmonteleone.com), a literary landmark thanks to former guests William Faulkner, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, who mentions it in the play *The Rose Tattoo*.

People often say New Orleans is unlike anywhere else in the US, and after a day which began with devastation and ends sitting drinking a cocktail alongside a rotating, ornate merry-go-round, that's a hard statement to deny.

● *Prospect.1 New Orleans* (prospectneworleans.org) runs until Jan 18 2009. *Lastminute.com* offers flights to New Orleans on Continental from £391 inc taxes. *Le Richelieu in the French Quarter* (001 504 529 2492, lerichelieuhotel.com), rooms from \$110 per night, plus tax.



Shuck it and see... the Acme Oyster Bar