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Taking the Train to New Orleans

TIFTON – A gentle rain soaked the green countryside as the rhythmic sound of the rails provided perfect harmony to my inner being. It was contentment personified on a recent spring afternoon when my family took the train from Atlanta for a weekend in New Orleans.

Add one more link on your bucket list. Ride the Amtrak Crescent. For some passengers, the journey began at New York’s Penn Station and wound its way through Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Charlotte, N.C., Atlanta, and Birmingham before reaching New Orleans.

For our party of five, the trek began at 9 a.m. on a Thursday in Atlanta and ended at 8 p.m. in New Orleans. The ride on the Crescent was just one leg of our five-day trip. My wife, Kris, and I love to travel and have written many times about our Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College trips to Italy, England, Croatia, Turkey, Ireland, Scotland, Canada, New York, Hawaii, and Alaska.

Diane Kilgore directs the ABAC travel program and has some terrific trips lined up this fall to the Smokies, South Africa, Boston, Britain and Ireland, New England, Rome and the
Here’s a day-by-day account of our recent journey:

DAY 1: In the springtime, there is no better beauty spot in Georgia than Callaway Gardens. My brother, Tim, and his wife, Lynne, launched our excursion with a blue-sky afternoon tour of the Gardens including the Azalea Bowl and the Sibley Center.

Tim (ABAC Class of ’79) is the executive vice president at Callaway and should really work for free just for the opportunity to admire God’s creation in such a magnificent setting every day. We hit the azaleas at their peak, and the wow factor was off the charts. Everywhere we turned, it was a picture post card.

Definitely put Callaway Gardens on your stay-and-see Georgia tour. It’s awesome.

DAY 2: My brother, Mitchell, joined us for a pre-dawn trip to Atlanta from Callaway. We hunkered down on our very comfortable seats on the Crescent while coaxing the conductor to do his famous “all aboard”.

As it turned out, we had an entire car to ourselves for the Atlanta to Birmingham leg. Each seat had plenty of leg room and even a pull out section like your dad’s recliner. Our conductor said he worked four days on and five days off. He was on the train when it left New York at 2:15 p.m. the previous day. Our one-way ticket from Atlanta to New Orleans was only $58.

Our train had two diesel engines, two sleeper cars, two dining cars, one luggage car, and four coaches. I’m definitely trying the sleeper on a future trip. The Crescent has a top speed of
79 miles an hour. We stopped in Anniston, Birmingham and Tuscaloosa in Alabama, Meridian, Laurel, Hattiesburg and Picayune in Mississippi, and Slidell, La.

It’s fascinating to watch the little towns roll by and to see sites such as the used car lot where each car was totally yellow from the pollen, a hillside cemetery which sloped toward a lake like looking at a drive-in movie, and a farm supply business with a horse and cow on top of the building.

We waved to the workers at a mass transit bus factory as they reclined on metal picnic tables while eating their lunches. We celebrated Tim’s birthday with party hats and had the conductor snap our picture.

I watched two movies on the iPad, took a long nap, read a book, and ate a sandwich in the dining car. This has to be the most relaxing form of travel known to man.

We crossed Lake Pontchartrain at sunset and rolled into New Orleans where the Superdome and the New Orleans Arena were all lit up.

A quick check-in at the Maison Dupuy hotel in the French Quarter and then we were off to a late night dinner of gumbo, shrimp po-boys, and jambalaya. And of course, our first stroll down Bourbon Street.

Bourbon Street is unlike any other street I have ever visited in the world. Raucous. Bawdy. People having fun. All of the above…and a whole lot more.

DAY 3: Up early for the short walk to the Café Du Monde for beignets and coffee. Definitely a must when you go to New Orleans. Get that powdered sugar all over you. It’s great.
The French Quarter Festival was in full swing while we were there, and the area around Jackson Square a block off the Mississippi River was hopping. This was my first visit to New Orleans so I expected a parade. I got one at mid-morning complete with jazz bands, parasols galore, and bead-tossing at its best. A classic moment.

We took the trolley down St. Charles Street past the campus of Tulane and had lunch at The Camellia Grill. Sat on stools at the old time lunch counter and devoured fabulous hamburgers. The afternoon meant people-watching along “Old Man River” including a man walking his pig.

We took supper at the Acme Oyster House. My brother ate a dozen raw while I opted for the fried shrimp. Excellent. Get there early.

Nobody has to go to the movies on Friday night in New Orleans because the show is on Bourbon Street. Music. People. Police on horseback. It’s all there.

DAY 4: Breakfast on the second floor veranda afforded me a chance to watch actual street sweepers with brooms and dust pans pick up a lot of the leftovers (no people, just their souvenirs) from the night before. Then along came a water truck that wet down both sides of the narrow street.

Found a bench at Jackson Square to watch the artists set up and the palm readers ply their trade. At least 50 times, one black-bearded early bird near my bench said, “first reading free. If I’m wrong, it’s on the house. Start with your past and work to your future.”

Lots of people carrying coffee or Bloody Marys. Guy dressed in his Bart Simpson costume right in front of me on the street corner as another gentleman outfitted completely in
pink feathers walked by. Street musicians abound, each with a cardboard box so you could reward them with some folding money.

All the while, jazz music acts as the background sound and the cry of the steam whistle from the authentic paddle-wheeler on the Mississippi adds to the cacophony of noise which assails the senses in a good way.

My wife attends a Cajun cooking school while I converse freely with a genuine Cajun on my bench. He describes the horror of Hurricane Katrina. Our city tour guide later in the day says 300,000 people left New Orleans after Katrina. Many of them never came back.

We saw the Ninth Ward which our guide said became the bottom of a pond when Katrina dumped 22 feet of water on a place that was already eight feet below sea level. The houses are small, some of them still marked with the day they were inspected post-Katrina.

In another section of town with very nice houses, a huge hole is still in the roof of one house where the owner hacked his way out to sit and wait for the helicopters to rescue him and his family. He never fixed it because he never returned.

Some porches have baby blue ceilings to keep away mosquitoes and wasps because the insects think the ceiling is the sky. Many houses are made of cypress because as the guide says, “we live in the water, not on the water.”

The cemeteries are all above ground where as many as five families share a single tomb. A scene in the movie, “Double Jeopardy” was filmed here as were scenes from “Easy Rider”, “Live and Let Die”, and “Ghost Rider.”
The tour takes us down Magazine Street which is jam-packed with antique shops. In another area, we see the home of vampire author Anne Rice. We stop at a wonderful park and eat more beignets. Our guide tells us that the Haitians brought voodoo to the city, and that the Germans planted live oak trees.

At night, we dine in style at Brennan’s, a longtime New Orleans landmark. The steak is superb, and the show that the waiter puts on for the trademark bananas foster dessert is fantastic.

DAY 5: A monsoon-like downpour wet blankets us every step of the way on our drive to the airport. Twelve hours on the train to New Orleans turns into a 56-minute plane ride on the way back to Atlanta.

From the splendor of Callaway to the swing and sway of “The Big Easy”, we made some wonderful memories. How about you? Grab an ABAC trip and go somewhere today.

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