

NEW ORLEANS PARADOX

By WTT Tour Leader Karin Sokel

The center aisle of the floor in New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral is so striking—you can't help but notice the black and white checkerboard pattern leading to the altar. In the months prior to this tour it just so happened I had been researching the ancient symbolism behind the checkerboard design. After three days and nights of French Quarter fun and whirlwind activity with my fellow WTT travelers, I found myself sitting alone in a wooden pew in that spectacular 18th century cathedral named after the famous French king contemplating what I was feeling. A roller coaster of emotions surfaced in me sitting in the stillness of the cathedral—elation, compassion, inspiration and even sadness. What was all of this emotion about?

The center of New Orleans is The French Quarter. The middle of the French Quarter is Jackson Square and in the center of this magnificent square is St. Louis Cathedral. Sitting in the very core of New Orleans staring at the checkerboard floor, I suddenly “got” what I was feeling and why. I had learned the checkerboard design represents “paradox”—shadow and light, good and bad, happy and sad—the polar opposites that are a true and natural part of living a rich human life. Understanding this universal law of opposites is a key to understanding change and transformation. New Orleans itself, I realized, is a stunning paradox.

On the very day we 13 women arrived and embarked on our own carnival of fun and exploration, President Obama flew into New Orleans to tour the Gulf oil spill on day 20—something of the unfolding tragedy. Though the city was teeming with tourist and locals enjoying Memorial Day weekend, hearts were also heavy with questions and unknowns about the future of a community that had already suffered so much loss because of Hurricane Katrina.

The breathtaking paradox of New Orleans is that it is one of the most alive cities in the world and at the same time one of the saddest. It expresses its heart and soul through dynamic rhythm and music, rich history, art, unique cuisine, street performers, eccentricity, multi-culturalism, warmth,

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Enjoying beignets at the famous Café du Monde.



The checkerboard aisle in St. Louis Cathedral.

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and the generosity of its people. It is a city of elaborate raised graveyards for the dead and ecstatic music halls for the living. This paradoxical mystery is what makes New Orleans so intriguing: its defiant wildness and its extremes of decadence and simplicity, joy and suffering.

We saw and felt the paradox everywhere, from the uninhibited, 24-hour carnival scene of Bourbon Street where bars and restaurant doors are flung wide open luring patrons into the party to the sophistication, art and elegance of Royal Street, just one block over—it's like night and day. I'll never forget the angry protesters opposed to offshore drilling, momentarily stop to applaud the gorgeous bride and groom dancing down the street in their full-blown New Orleans wedding procession, complete with jazz band, lacy umbrellas and loved ones trailing behind. For one moment everyone on the street embraced the couple's love, beamed with joy for them, and felt their elation—all in the middle of a crisis.

Even five years after Katrina, New Orleans's suffering was still so evident during our tour into the city's Ninth Ward. Block after block, we saw the paradox of a city desperately trying to rebuild itself. Here a brand new house with solar power—here and there a portion of the city finally coming back to life. Then next to it, an abandoned home with Hurricane Katrina's water



Hurricane Katrina memorial in the Ninth Ward representing the rising waters. One of the new homes in the Ninth Ward featuring solar power can be seen just beyond it.



Sharing a laugh in the French Quarter.



Exploring one of New Orleans' famous cemeteries.

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mark reaching the roof with a sign on the front door signifying two people had been found dead inside. I'll never forget the stillness on that bus and in my heart. As we took it all in, our three hour bus tour that morning felt like some kind of sacred pilgrimage.

At the same time, there was so much we experienced that was life-affirming in New Orleans: our plantation and swamp tours; our spectacular dinner and jazz cruise down the Mississippi River; and eating everything that is N'awlins from Cajun and Creole to gumbo and prawns, po'boys to sweet, powdery beignets at the famous Café du Monde.

Sunday morning I once again entered Jackson Square seeing several tarot card readers, psychics and voodoo priestesses in front of the St. Louis Cathedral offering their services. Nearby, others were reading out loud from their Bibles calling for humanity to repent. The scene was rich and fascinating, illustrating the paradox of belief and faith that is the very heart and soul of the city.

On the 20-something day of the Gulf Oil Spill, we 13 women did it all and felt it all on during that profound 2010 Memorial Day weekend. I will always remember the fun with my fellow travelers, our deep laughter and our tears of compassion for the people and land, the water and sea life.

Shadow and light, good and bad, joy and suffering. It's all there in the checkerboard of our human lives. Through its own precious example, New Orleans taught me how to live life more fully, to allow and honor the wisdom of paradox. Strange how my favorite memories of New Orleans on this trip revealed an important lesson that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. What a gift to have been present in this extraordinary place at this historic time. ❖



New Orleans from a paddle boat on the Mississippi River.

Bittersweet New Orleans Memory

Editor's Note: WTT Tour Leader Karin Sokel was not the only woman profoundly moved during our May 2010 New Orleans trip. We received this email from a traveler on the trip.

Hi!

I should have written you earlier about my trip to New Orleans this year. I have always enjoyed my trips with WTT and look forward to taking more in the future. However, this year was especially meaningful to me as well as enjoyable.

I love jazz as did my husband. Somehow we never made a trip to New Orleans while he was alive. So it was one of the trips I had on my bucket list of things I wanted to do.

Everything was great. I wish I could have another serving of beignets now. I want to protect the swamp from the oil and am so grateful that I saw it before it was destroyed. The French Quarter was better than I imagined. The bus tour that took us through the Ninth Ward was nearly overwhelming. I enjoyed the voyage on the paddle boat with the band. Then the next day, we wandered about and found several street bands including one that had a couple dancing and a singer. One member of the band even played the zydeco-style wash board. Cool.

After the last night dinner, we started on a ghost tour. However, several of us slipped away with Karin's blessing and went to Preservation Hall to visit the shrine of Dixieland and jazz music. The music was so wonderful. To intensify the experience, I closed my eyes to shut out distractions and suddenly my husband was there with me. He was sitting there, like me, enthralled with the music and fighting the tears he would shed when highly moved. I opened my eyes and saw a couple dancing in the little available space. I closed my eyes again, and suddenly I was dancing with my husband. I could actually feel him holding me close. Shades of *Ghost*, the movie with Patrick Swayze. It was a wonderful experience. I felt closer to my husband than I had been since before he became ill.

It doesn't matter whether I was visited by his ghost or if I conjured up memories of him. All I can say is that was the highlight of my trip to New Orleans. One that I never would have experienced had I not gone with WTT and the group of fantastic ladies.

Thank you.