

Tour of the South  
Mississippi, Alabama and New Orleans  
January 1-8, 2007  
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### **Monday, January 1, 2007**

Happy New Year! We woke up at 4am, after getting to sleep at 10pm at Alf's place in Pomona, so the morning was a bit rough. Got to the airport in plenty of time and as I had our boarding passes printed out the day before and we cruised right on through.

The TSA stole Alf's toothpaste as it exceeded the 3.5 oz max capacity. Jelly explosives are carried by all Mexicans, right? I emptied my 0.5L water bottle and put it in vertically into my backpack and cruised through without detection -- it was empty, so I was prepared to argue. Filled it up at a water fountain and saved \$3. Not big bucks but big satisfaction. That's sad...

We had a half hour delay due to fog. No problem as we had a good safety window of time in Houston.

The announcement at Houston airport about, "You'll be arrested if you joke about bombs..." isn't exactly friendly. In fact, it's down right draconian. I'm glad there are plenty of unelected people running a bureaucracy so they're all accountable and can't be fired.

New Orleans airport security area is small, so don't wait until the last minute to get there. Picked up our Sebring convertible and headed over to New Orleans. We ate at Fish and Burger just down the street from the airport. Alf had an excellent catfish and I enjoyed a huge hunk of blackened fish - very tasty.

We were hoping not to get too worked on the food and for once, we didn't! I was happy for the \$13 food and drink. I couldn't even finish the meal, which was excellent.

Now it was time to decide where to go. We narrowed our choices to Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi pretty quick. The next question that faced us is which direction to drive.

Based on the AAA guidebook (book of knowledge), Mississippi is less likely to have a lot of material to miss and we didn't want to blow out of Alabama in a rush to find little in Mississippi (as it turned out, our assumption was wrong but the direction chosen turned out fine).

I love flying on a plane and not knowing where to go, read about the place on the way there and then having a good time on the trip doing it. We've achieved the arrival in location part and the vague plan on the fly, now finding the good time is the goal. Wonder if we chose the right places to visit. We'll find out.

We drove out of New Orleans to Natchez, Mississippi via Baton Rouge. We stopped off in Baton Rouge to purchase some gut expanding road snacks. Being two sort-of white guys, we quickly noticed we were the only white guys in the entire neighborhood. Welcome to a bit of culture shock. The girls at the gas station were very nice, so we hadn't stumbled into too rough of a neighborhood. We aren't in California any more, Toto.

We drove to Natchez, Mississippi and found a Day's in for \$55 with a AAA discount and here we are at 7:30pm. I could have used my AARP card, too. Yes, I have one due to a mailing error several years ago.

### **Tuesday, January 2, 2007**

We woke up to a cold morning at the Day's Inn in Natchez. I managed accidentally locked myself out of the room after getting ready and getting papers out of the car. Alf was taking a shower, so I just went to enjoy the good continental breakfast in the lobby. There were some nice people to chat with, so the time passed quickly and Alf showed up a little later.

I not present to defend the room meant that the over eager cleaning lady came in as Alf was finishing his shower, so he provided some early morning California trauma. Thankfully Alf had dressed a little before coming out so it wasn't a full Monte. I had a good laugh.

We didn't get rolling until 10:30am, way late for making a trip across the state. On leaving Natchez, we drove to see the historic house district with a good selection of antebellum and Greek revival style homes. We didn't take any tours of the homes, just some tourist shots, as most of the homes were closed today and it didn't matter anyway.

The first 70 miles on the Natchez Trace Parkway was pleasant with few cars passing in either direction. We saw the second biggest Indian burial mound in the country. The mound was truly enormous, about 20 feet tall and had a top area of nearly 8 acres. That was a lot of dirt to move with sticks and woven baskets.

Stopping to read most signs along the Natchez Trace, the new road following the old and ancient path from the Colonial and Indian eras is interesting. The original path is a road grooved nearly 30 feet into the soil in places. The driving road is slow going, so we arrived in Vicksburg around 3pm. We ate at Whataburger, with burgers prepared exactly as if it were home made, it was good but the fries were not hot. A medium drinks was a whopping 32 oz. Got love-handles?

We departed the Natchez Trace to run a country road over to Vicksburg and enjoyed seeing confederate flags under US flags. Many of the houses were surprisingly nice. There were a few shacks but they were the exception.

The battlefield of Vicksburg National Memorial is huge. The driving loop around it is 16 miles and took two hours to explore -- moving quickly. The USS Cairo, an original sunken U.S. river gunboat was closed, due to President Ford's death remembrance, but you didn't need an up close look to see how large the craft was. The visitor's center was also closed in remembrance of Ford. I need to get myself a government job.

Canons and overgrown trenches with exploded mine pits abound at the monument. There are countless stone monuments to the men who fought and died there. To read even a small portion of the signs and check out the visitors center requires a half day at least, to avoid being in a rush.

Sunset visited us as we were driving the I-20 into Jackson (Mississippi's state capitol).

The airbag warning light in our battle wagon kept beeping at us in our superior Chrysler Sebring convertible with the loudly whistling cloth top. After happening across an Enterprise rental car place, we learned that unless the car has developed a disabling mechanical problem, a different rental group in another state won't swap the car. We got the guy's card so we could defend a scream-fest later if need be. Alf asked me to remind him not to buy this car in the future -- I completely agree.

Alf had cranked his neck out before leaving California, so by this time the liver killing Advil wasn't helping him. Spotting a Hooters, we figured a little beer therapy would help. We enjoyed a mostly liquid supper, chatted for a while and headed off to find lodging at 10pm. Heading down the I-55, we spotted a Red Roof In, but it took several miles of confusing exits before we were able to get there. Finally sleep, sort of...

**Wednesday, January 3, 2007**

Was it the tractor trailer gunning its engine at 3am, or the car with the squealing belt at midnight? Perhaps it was the loud girls coming back from a night of drinking or the crappy pillows? Or, the coup de grace, the poltergeist room that kept going from what seemed like 90 degrees to 60 and back every half hour.

We headed over to the Waffle House to enjoy some plain food, as I had a beer morning stomach. I had a tasty pecan waffle while Alf punished his stomach with greasy hash browns and a breakfast burrito. Eat the food from the place; don't eat your home food away. It was all good for me except for the smoking in half the place.

We headed back to the Natchez Trace Parkway from Jackson to continue heading up the state of Mississippi. This is a beautiful, rural drive, fully isolated from the neighboring cities and highways, giving you a modern taste of colonial travel, stopping every few miles with historic markers, Indian burial mounds, section of the old trace (road) stomped 30 feet into the earth, old ferry crossings and so on.

Our first stop was the Ross Barnett Reservoir. I wandered around shooting while Alf drove back a few miles, desperately seeking a restroom it seemed the breakfast burrito was not up to par. The air had a cool, Southern winter bite, enough to see your breath but not cold enough to make your hands numb.

Miles north, our first Cypress swamp at mile marker 122 appeared on the right side of the road. As the sky had hazed over a bit, the light rays danced through the strange looking stand of cypress, surrounded by placid waters coated with a bright green layer of plant life. Other than an occasional car passing, the swamp was deathly silent, with not one bird chirping.

Leaving our cheery little swamp, we found some Indian mounds near Yockanookany for a dose of 1,000 year old history. The mound itself isn't remarkable in the landscape, other than looking like an out of place goose bump in the thin, leafy forest. A recorded talking box invited the press of a button, rewarding the visitor with a narrative of the history of the mound. The speech was loud enough to fill the quiet air, allowing me to walk around the mound with an unpaid tour guide accompanying me the whole time, echoing off the trees. This particular mound is actually made up of two or three individual mounds, slowly merged over time.

As you can imagine at this rate, our average speed heading north was a crawling 20mph even though we were driving 50mph. We covered a paltry 150 miles in eight hours. This is not a place to drive fast through.

There are virtual beavers living along the Natchez Trace at Myrick Creek, mile 145. An entire stop is dedicated to the beavers with a 10 minute walking path, information kiosk and the right landscape for beavers. Just not one beaver, chewed tree stomp with a conical top to say beavers actually lived in the area. Mildly dejected, for my hopes of seeing a beaver were dashed, we continued our way.

The information center at Kosciusko at mile 160 was cloned like everything else along the way, out of season. There was an Egyptian-American cotton bail weighing 500 pounds sitting on the porch, defending the door. Watching the strongest man competition last night where huge guys carried 500 pounds in anvils made me imagine how impossible it would be for me to move such a monster of fluff. The bail measured 5' x 3' x 2'. Cotton farmers cut production and they moved to other crops, as cotton is \$0.60 a pound and yet a nice cotton shirt costs \$100. Maybe Pima cotton ruined it all?

Stopping at a gas station in Jeff Busby, we talked with a nice young lady with the prettiest Mississippian accent you've ever heard. Diligently working on her home schooling, she only took a moment to chat, ring up our purchase, be completely courteous the whole time and get back to work.

Past the gas station, we drove on into the afternoon, toward Tupelo, the birthplace of Elvis Aaron Presley. As we came into town, we had to make a departure from the Natchez Trace Parkway. On entering town, we fueled up at a Texaco and I got directions to Elvis's birth home from a nice old guy.

Junior (the station attendant) told me of how the town's people of Tupelo treated Elvis "real bad like" because Elvis hung out with the blacks in town, learning to sing and dance from them. When Elvis tried to sing on the town radio station after he "got good, Mr. Henry, the station manager, told Elvis you better get your guitar and yourself and get out of here right quick."

Junior, with nearly a full set of crafted gold front teeth, shared how he drove the cars to be given away, when Elvis returned to Tupelo after he became the King of Rock and Roll, as prizes for the show Elvis put on. Junior was in the stylized poster from those series of concerts, too. Much to Junior's unbelievably friendly but never the less smug satisfaction, Elvis also let everyone how the station manager had treated him so many years before.

The battlefield of Tupelo isn't much to see: a little grass, two cannons, a memorial marker and a battle narrative. Unless you are a Civil War junkie, don't bother. You'll park in a Prudential Realty parking lot to visit.

The birthplace of Elvis Presley is on the edge of town, just past the new city hall. The museum was being renovated, opening on January 8th for Presley's birthday -- a fitting date. At \$6 each to get into the house, it's a bit steep but since we've come this far, it would be dumb not to.

Eloise, the docent inside the two room house, who has five kids, nine grandkids and eight great-grand kids was a font of information. She taught us about chitlins (good with beer although she never had any), something I have yet to figure out. It's something from the back of a pig and later found out that they are pig skins (or chicharones).

We learned how the Presley family lost that house and how Elvis bought it back when he returned. How Elvis and his still born brother were both born in the corner where the bed is and how people at that time used to have "...one pair of shoes bought by their grand dad once a year and how you'd be barefoot if you didn't take good care of them."

Eloise gave us the great suggestion of eating at BBQ by Jim, an excellent friendly place to get food. As usual, we didn't quite have the directions down proper so we had to wander the earth. If you head back toward town and turn right at the new city hall, just go pass the bus terminal labeled "BUS". A nice lady and her son with mounted Elk on the walls will direct you to choose the meat plate with beans, so slather on the BBQ sauce, provided on their square tables, and stuff yourself silly. Pork and friendly company with a southern Mississippi drawl was never better.

We caught the highway back to the Natchez Trace Parkway and finally found the main visitors center. Amazingly, it was open, a rare thing in our short experience. After viewing the short video of the history and construction of the 444 mile road, we learned what a special thing we had been traveling on for the past two days.

Completed in 2005, this baby new road encompasses thousands of years of history and trade, the link between Nashville and Natchez, leading to New Orleans. Now, after seeing some of the things we were going to miss, as the sun was going down, we had to cut across to Alabama. We both developed a much greater appreciation for the road we traveled, as it is designed to give you a taste of how it once was without the inconveniences of horses and murderous bandits.

As we headed up the Natchez Trace Parkway, we enjoyed the full moon rising, partially shrouded by Cirrus clouds cast pink by the setting sun behind us, almost making us depressed to leave the

Parkway. We had planned to visit Florence to see a Frank Lloyd Wright house but it was already dark and we had 2.5 hours to drive to Huntsville.

As we entered Huntsville, we searched down the visitor's center, all without map or directions mind you, only to find the place closed. We passed the Huntsville Rocket and Science Center at the NASA Marshall Flight Center. The Saturn V rocket is huge. It is wild to see at night. I can't wait to see it tomorrow.

We found a motel 6 in Madison, just west of Huntsville off the I-565 and went over to a Chinese place to get some vegetables in the diet. The young lady server originally from Hong Kong was going to the University of Huntsville for a mechanical engineering degree. She was told by her classmates that the big cities in America demanded great attention and people spoke fast. We assured her that big city folk don't have small town people for lunch.

Finally, sleep arrived after this adventurous day.

### **Thursday, January 4, 2007**

We headed over to Waffle King this time for pecan waffles smothered in strawberries and whipped cream. Not too shabby! Alf learned his lesson and chose the pecan waffle this time. We cruised over to the Space and Rocket Center. Out front, the SR-71 Blackbird sits for visitors to get a close up and personal look. That aircraft has some strange lines.

The museum was \$20 and unfortunately the IMAX was out of service. But, it was just as well since we spent past noon there, much longer than we had planned. Seeing, touching and feeling the Saturn V, it's massive F-1 and J-2 assist engines as well as the shuttle engine was well worth it. It was also neat because the shell of the cone is made out of packed tubes instead of a hard shell, maybe only an inch thick liquid hydrogen is then piped through those tubes to keep the 5,000 degree temperatures at bay -- wow!

We spent some time walking around the Saturn V laying along the ground, the Redstone and Spacelab (huge!) and the Shuttle Pathfinder. The history of American rockets developed right here and we got to touch and look at those powerful machines.

Alf and I failed the piloting the shuttle simulation and crashed every time. It's great to have an ego and have it stomped every so often. Alf's shoulder and neck was bothering him only a little, so he had the misfortune of being ballast on the Slingshot ride which shoots you up into the sky. He was doing okay before that, but then it was pain all over again.

Driving down the I-65 to Birmingham wasn't very exciting. Rain was threatening but held off, so we took advantage and drove up to the famous Vulcan statue, a 50 foot iron statue of the Roman god Vulcan at the top of a 170 foot stone tower. We almost made it up 1/3 of the tower stairs before being called out by the docents...apparently you have to pay. We toured the museum of Birmingham, the industrial Pittsburg of the South. Alf didn't like walking on the open grating on top of the tower, looking straight down 150 feet to the ground. It'll give you sweaty palms if you hate heights. It was a great view of Birmingham, though.

Being short on time, we tore over to the Civil Rights Institute on the north side of the tracks. Things were a little poorer on that side of town.

With the student ID, we saved good enough money to enjoy visiting the Civil Rights Institute and tour around the exhibits, photos, sculptures and displays. It is well worth seeing, just to get an idea of how recent all these events were, just on the cusp of our lifetime. It is a good but sad reminder.

During the 60's, Birmingham became known as Bombingham, due to all the (now terrorist) bomb attacks on people, including one specific Baptist church.

Alf thought he saw that church when we entered the city, so we tore across town to find it. Unfortunately it was the wrong church. A call to the Birmingham visitors center taught use to observe our surroundings more. The famous church was right across the street from the Civil Rights Institute -- oops. We drove all the way back across the city and photographed the building under heavy renovation in hazy mist (a storm was headed our way).

Needing to eat before we did the 1.5 hour drive down to Montgomery. Alf searched the book of knowledge (AAA tour book of Alabama) and found a listing for Dreamland BBQ, a restaurant suggested to us by several people. We ordered a full rack of ribs to split, five beers, followed with coleslaw and topped it off with a serving of banana pudding. The ribs were a tad too done for our taste but the sauce was scrumptious. We received an appetizer of white bread and BBQ sauce. Apparently that was the standard deal, so I enjoyed shoving it.

The drive to Montgomery was uneventful. We did stop to air up the back right hand tire as it looked a little low. It was so low that the pressure gauge didn't even register how low the tire was, maybe 12-15 PSI -- nothing liking driving on the highway at off-road tire pressure for 650 miles thus far.

We rolled into Montgomery under occasional rain, found a Quality Inn off the US-80 for \$52 with AAA discount and hit bed.

### **Friday, January 5, 2007**

"What is that alarm?" Alf said.

"The fire alarm - crap", I replied.

"No, there's no alarm in this room."

"Oh, wait...that's a tornado siren!"

We were woken up to the wail of the tornado warning sirens. People opened their doors to look out and listen, as it was still quite dark. Disappointed by the lack of rumble other than lightning, we turned on the television and saw that Montgomery was under a tornado warning, based on the 50 mile per hour storms moving through. Heck, of a wake up call. The warning passed and thankfully nothing happened.

We had to get going with that little tornado delay, so we grabbed McDonald's breakfast to go and drove into greater Montgomery. After wandering a bit, we found the historic housing district of the city and took a few shots in a steady, slow rain. The air was rather humid compared to what I am used to and I suspect that during summers, this would be the sauna special edition of hell. I'll risk the rain.

The capitol building is pretty enough and has markers commemorating the Civil Rights movement, the "war between the states" and other historic events of the city. We found the Confederate White House and went in for a tour.

Each bedroom was neatly made with era pieces, sporting a fireplace in Mr. and Mrs. Davis's separate bedrooms. I took a few shots in the mixed yellow tungsten and cool blue cloudy daylight pouring through the laced curtains. The house needs some repair on the wall paint, banister as well as where the actual wall plaster has chipped off. A smattering of wall paper was damaged as well.

The Rosa Parks Museum and Library was an educational visit. Located on the Troy college campus, the building is architecturally beautiful and everything was spotless inside, a testament to maintenance and newness. The most unusual piece of the museum collection was a full size

bus with video images projected into the windows and audio played, portraying the accounts of how the now famous Rosa Parks Montgomery bus incident in front of Empire Theater happened that fateful December 1, 1955, day.

It was a dramatically bold step and so Rosa Parks' became the battle cry for forcing the city to relent its inhumane treatment of three quarters of its bus riders.

We talked to Ruth at the gift shop and she told us about the tornado that blew through November 15, 2006 in Montgomery. She found a large amusement park trampoline laying just beside her undamaged car. The trampoline had swirled around the house, completely cut down some shrubs and bushes and made a general mess. She had lost her roof and has finally rebuilt her home and life. We shared our California calamity stories, telling her that not all is sunshine in the Golden State.

The day was wearing into the afternoon and we had to be down on the Alabama coast to tour Mobile and see the USS Alabama (BB-60) Battleship Memorial Park. On the three hour drive down, we stopped by a gas station to reload and I saw a nice elderly gentleman sporting a vanilla ice cream cone. Not having left the ripe old age of five, I now had to have one. After mentioning it to Alf, we were shortly both munching down vanilla soft serve ice cream cones. I love the power of suggestion.

Coming down the I-16, we had a perfect sky after the big storm rolled through. Things were going well for us thus far. Without any trouble, we found our way to the battleship Alabama museum for an afternoon tour of the location.

One of the gun turrets has been cut open inside, allowing tourists to view the shell loading and storage system, something unique in the world. Every piece of steel was unforgiving on the head and the stairways were only tilted ladders. It was scary to see how exposed the deck gunner positions were. You can easily consume the better part of a day touring the ship on the three prescribed routes. We just didn't have a full day to do it.

We headed over to the USS Hull, a World War II era diesel submarine. It was interesting to crawl around the inside and see what life might have been like living in a metal tube. It was uncomfortable, humid and smelled of grease. And we weren't being hunted, so there is nothing to simulate the fear. On the way out, we walked around the huge railed off aircraft exhibit.

As we left the submarine and looked over a set of very battered planes, a gentleman asked us if we have any questions, what came next was a detailed account by the museum's curator. I learned more about US jets from Mike, the curator of the collection, a former military man obviously, in the 45 minutes he tolerated mine and Alf's ignorance than I had in years of learning around them. We learned the Blackbird (SR-71 / YF-12) does not seal up when it flies - it continues to leak fuel. Its engines eat up 10,000 cubic feet of air per second. The YF-17, precursor to the F/A-18, developed the cobra and tumble maneuvers, attributed to the Russian MIG-25. It was also the first jet able to super-cruise, meaning flying above Mach 1 without afterburners.

Mike asked us who Allen Sheppard was and I told him but I didn't see what it had to do with the missile we were talking about sitting next to the F-105. It looked like a super-sized Nike missile. "That is the same series and size of rockets that put Allen Sheppard into space." I was flabbergasted how tiny it was compared to the Redstone and certainly to the Saturn V. The rocket was 60 feet tops, by Alf's estimation -- tiny!

All of his aircraft were damaged, though. The 18 foot water swell that came with hurricane Katrina caused the smaller planes to float around and crash into each other. The roof of the hanger came off. He has millions of dollars of parts to repair the aircraft, he merely needs the time. He has the

knowledge, motivation and connections. His exhibit will be great once he gets them all fixed back up.

By this time we have done 1100 miles. We had supper at Captain's Table Restaurant at the hotel next to the Alabama museum. We enjoyed a most tasty gumbo. The shrimp etouffee was okay and Alf enjoyed an excellent jambalaya. The service was great and the prices reasonable.

Now it was dark and time to find lodging. Not content to just sit in a room and watch television, we found Alf some beer therapy for his shoulder and neck at Hooters next to a Motel 6 off the I-10. Alf hung out for a while with some Southerners marveling at his height. One of the guys sported a true, stereotypical set of missing teeth. They sure were nice, though.

Our server gave us some good ideas for places to hit up on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. We finally completed Alf's "shoulder" therapy, broke away from Hooters, headed over to the Motel 6, grabbed the last available room and crashed out for the night at 11pm.

### **Saturday, January 6, 2007**

We headed over to the Waffle house for breakfast. Alf pounded down a pecan waffle and I finally got my Southern, fluffy, butter and salt coated grits. We traveled over to downtown Mobile and hunted down the Richard's DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) house to get a tour of a southern gentry's home. Navigating downtown Mobile was tough because few buildings have street numbers, our maps are not totally accurate much to Alf's chagrin and trees cover up street sign names.

We ended up having Southern spiced tea, cheese straws, home made grapefruit candies and other tasty things. We ended up spending 1.5 hours there, much longer than we anticipated. The DAR ladies were courteous enough to make it work the stay, though. As with this whole trip, we have needed one or two more hours of daylight than January allows. Then again, we would have filled up that time and asked for more.

A few blocks away are the Mobile history museum and Fort Conde, an old French fort located near the waterfront and downtown, built back during the French and Indian Wars. The history museum has an excellent collection of silver, model homes and a history of Mobile. They display original Indian canoes, pieces from the War Between the States (Civil War), Civil Rights movement and everything in between.

It was getting late, and we wanted to have a good southern seafood lunch, so we headed over to the Original Oyster shack, two miles past the USS Alabama (BB-60) Battleship Memorial Park. We enjoyed a huge meal, pie and learned how to make our own cocktail sauce mix with ketchup and fresh horse radish. Julie, our server, told us how to eat the different things and she shared stories about the first Original Oyster shack and how it was destroyed. The crew was all out of work for two months, so the workers went to New Orleans to help people out. We also found out that tornadoes had touched down in Montgomery and Jackson, both places we had just been – wow!

By now, we had worn into the early afternoon, much later than we wanted, so we made for the I-10 and headed west toward Mississippi and Louisiana. On heading through Mississippi again, we drove into Biloxi and Gulfport to see what was left, since the AAA book of knowledge said that all the historic locations had been damaged or destroyed during hurricane Katrina in 2005. There really was nothing left right along the coast. Most of the foundations of the houses had been destroyed, too. The water had run all the way up to the railroad tracks, up to a half mile away from the beach. The Jefferson Davis house looked pretty torn up, though the armed security guard who was there told us that there wasn't a lot of damage inside, surprisingly. The guy was really nice, just making sure no one looted the place.

Gulfport looked just like Biloxi, with only some new hotels, casinos and some homes that had been rebuilt. Even concrete buildings, large hotels, were destroyed. The devastation was truly absolute. It was rather depressing, though it was good to see couples sitting on the beach, watching the sunset through stratus clouds, turning gold and pink.

We drove into New Orleans under cover of darkness. There was the threat of rain but nothing came down. It was a serious challenge to navigate through the French Quarter. I was pilot and Alf was navigator and without street signs and one-way streets, it was entertaining. Our map was okay but Alf and I have 4 cups of tea at lunch and a bottle on the way. My palms were sweating at this point. Finally, we found the street to the Pelham Hotel. We parked across the street, by sheer luck, and ran inside, doing the dance after that much tea and 1.5 hours of driving.

"Sorry, we don't seem to have a reservation for Alfonso Limon."

"Oh? I have a printed copy of the reservation right here."

"Well, we have a room with a single king bed. Will that work?"

"No."

After a good long while of discussions, the lady set us up with the St. James hotel around the corner with plenty of available rooms and it's owned by the same company so no money was to be changed. St. James provided us with a roof loft suite with open beam vaulted ceilings. Not bad for \$70, two blocks from the French Quarter in New Orleans.

Bourbon Street was the most alive place in this city that seems to be on life support. There are so many places closed near the downtown, though everything seems to be alive in the French Quarter. However, we got the sense that there was something missing. Talking to people here, they say that the area just outside of downtown is fairly dangerous, with a high incidence of thefts, car jacking and even murders. Outside of the dirty glitz of downtown, New Orleans is not healthy. We stayed in the Canal and Bourbon Street areas for the night, not bold enough to wander off the beaten track. There are plenty of panhandlers running around and unlike most places we had visited people in the city did not always make eye contact.

We had dinner at the Oyster house. I had an average gumbo and Alf had excellent crawfish bisque. A few beers and watching a football game with everyone rooting for "Anyone but the Cowboys," it was fun. It was very late, so we trundled over to the room, cleaned up and got to sleep at 1am. Good thing Alf had to be up at 7am for the courses at the Joint Mathematical Meeting -- sounds like a lot of fun!

### **Sunday, January 7, 2007**

Wake up time came too early. Alf's shoulder was now radiating pain, so it was time for him to get going. Not feeling motivated, and my throat was a little scratchy (no, no, not again...I just got over this thing), so I chomped a Sucrets and went back to sleep for two hours.

I finally got my laziness up, got cleaned up and met up with Alf for a little touring. We walked over to Jackson Square and Cafe du Monde for some beignets and chocolate milk along with everyone else in the city. The scene looked like it was right out of a Travel Channel show. People chatting, food moving around, birds flapping outside and a little threatening rain complete the scene, with a couple of jazz players outside adding the final cherry to the experience – it was great.

The rain held off, so we wandered through Jackson Square and over to the St. Louis Cathedral and saw mass was going on, so we opted to move one building over to the New Orleans Museum. The clerk said we could have our ticket signed so we might visit again later if we rain out of time today.

The museum had a nice selection of pieces but the best part was the collection of large format prints of the four month aftermath of hurricane Katrina. It was good, powerful and telling. The shallow depth of field added great depth to the images, making them really stand out. The video playing in a corner was chilling with personal accounts of the people that survived the storm.

As Alf was running short on time, we hit the street. On the way toward the Sheraton on Canal Street, we passed a photo gallery with wet sidewalks, grabbing my attention. I took my leave of Alf, interesting in seeing some of the pieces at the Joshua Mann Paillet photography gallery ([www.agallery.com](http://www.agallery.com)). He had the best collection for sale I've seen since I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico a couple of years ago. Adams, Stieglitz and others were featured with a top price well over \$75,000. Contrast this to the photo gallery down the street with a bunch of superimposed moon pictures. There are all pretty but quite fake and costing lots of money. I'm perhaps in the wrong approach to selling my images.

Returning to the hotel, I grabbed a tiny map from the lobby so I could reconstruct the AAA book of knowledge walking tour of the French Quarter. It was easy, as the major sites were in an easy to follow path. It lead me along Decatur to Jackson Square, the starting part of the for the pleasant stroll through the French Quarter.

The walking tour wends its way all throughout the French Quarter, stopping at many historical buildings, including the Ursulines Convent on Ursulines Avenue, the oldest building in the Mississippi River valley. You walk the old Laffite Blacksmith shop and along the streets with iron work homes that could have been pulled right out of the Latin Quarter of Paris.

The walking tour conspicuously avoids taking you down large parts of Bourbon Street, as the whole street is laden with bars, tourist shops and cabaret shows, not the point of the walk. I'm sure the people at AAA figure visitors will find their own way on Bourbon Street. The side streets had much more for the sight seeing and history types. Bourbon Street is for drinking and people watching.

Alf called just as I was finishing up the walking tour and wanted to meet me for supper. We met up in the front of the Sheraton on Canal Street and headed over to Mother's, a famous po-boy sandwich location. We had the debris sandwich, a fried oyster sandwich, jambalaya and bisque soups and two drinks to the tune of \$44 -- owch (from the reviews I've read after returning home, our experience is the same and people say to skip it...I agree). It should have only cost \$24. Notoriety has its advantage if you are a business owner in New Orleans. I couldn't imagine eating out very much in New Orleans. A cold wind blowing from the passing storm make the walk from Mother's on Poydras street to the St. James hotel on Magazine Street a little uncomfortable, matching our dining experience.

We rested for a while, recharged our 33 year old man batteries before heading out to enjoy our last night in the South, carousing Bourbon Street. We heard zydeco pouring out of the Tropical Bar, beckoning us in. Alf soothed his still pinched nerve with beer while I damaged my brain with a hand grenade, a strong New Orleans drink. Wow, it was truly strong and for a mixed drink, I was not disappointed -- finally, good delivery for the money in this city where everything is 50% more expensive than every where else we have visited in the South.

Having outlasting out zydeco players, we headed on to the Maison Bourbon to enjoy a set of jazz. The playing was very enjoyable, as the band mixed up energetic music blended with an ending of a soulful rendition of a song. It was a perfect ending to our evening on Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

We strode back to hotel in a chilly breeze and clocked out for the night.

**Monday, January 8, 2007**

Not having consumed great deals of alcohol last night made it easier to get up for me, but Alf begrudgingly rose out of bed, as his shoulder continued to punish him. We split up some of the Christmas banana bread for breakfast and he headed off for the last part of his conference. I geared up and prepared to escape later in the morning.

I walked through the cold, post storm winds of the Mississippi River bank. A brisk walk toward Jackson Square helped keep the chill at bay, though having a short haircut made the dome a little uncomfortable. Across from Cafe du Monde is Cafe Beignet, a suggested place where I hoped to enjoy a sampler of French pastries in the French Quarter.

Sadly, there was not one French pastry to be had, so I chewed down a mildly satisfying sticky baklava. I wished I'd had it warmed up, as I sat by myself basking in the sun of the cafe's only street side window, watching New Orleans wake up to a business Monday. The city looked more alive now from this perspective than the whole time we've been here. I ran over to the praline shop in the French Market and chomped on a huge pile of free samples to console myself.

Now that the sky was a pleasant, deep azure blue rather than leaden gray, several photo ops were to be had this short day. I visited the inside of St. Louis Cathedral, sitting for several moments listening to the mournful chants played throughout America's oldest cathedral. That plaque was a neat find.

An oft photographed wrought iron railing is located on Royal and St. Peter streets. I had the off chance to be reading a book with the location actually printed on it, so I got the last shots I wanted. Alf's class ended about this time, so I walked back across the city to meet with him at the hotel and get the show rolling.

It cost as much to have the car valet parked for two days as it did for a night's stay in the hotel. But, we didn't have to worry and fight with it, so it was worth it. Checking out, we drove over to the Superdome. That is the biggest above-ground egg ever. It was difficult to imagine the chaos that surrounded this place a year and a half ago.

We drove north into the neighborhoods toward Lake Pontchartrain to get a taste of the area away from the French Quarter. It didn't take too long before we found neighborhoods with unintelligible codes spray painted onto the homes, with markings like "No dogs, 5 cats". The neighborhoods were mostly still intact, though you can see that this is a place just finding its feet. Many buildings still not inhabited and many more still being gutted.

We found a New York bagel shop in the Bardmoor district, an artsy part of the city -- an ironic ending to our tour of the South. Alf asked a young lady how to get back to the I-10. Funny thing of how people react to you here. In San Diego, if Alf, who is six foot four inches, went up to an early 20's something woman and asked directions how to get somewhere, she might be vaguely courteous. However in New Orleans, the young woman that Alf addressed, smiled and then looked up and said "Yes?" to Alf's inquiry of, "Excuse me miss." It was interesting to watch this from the side, as an outside observer. Whether it was fake or honest, I could not tell, but the sequence and pleasantness was different than what I normally find living in San Diego.

We almost forgot to refuel our battle wagon sporting the random air-bag warning. A pilot error (yours truly) ended up driving on a grass median and corner because he couldn't figure out how to make the same left turn -- twice. We filled it up just enough to pass muster, dropped it at the Enterprise location and caught a ride to the airport. With one paltry "security" entrance, don't arrive late to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport.

We're now in Houston, enjoying Papa John's pizza, recounting our final experiences, joys and disappointments. The thing that we both noted is that we did not find a lot of food with zing and stunning flavor in New Orleans. We agreed that Mobile had the best food hands down, with plenty

of spice and variety for the cost. New Orleans was very expensive and still had a huge amount of clean up to do even after a year and a half after the storm.

It was a good trip and we agree the experience far exceeded our expectations. Alf looks forward to exploring more of the South with Sarah, his girlfriend, in the future. Driving around the South was a pleasant experience and I can see why people like to live here. Except for the stifling humidity, tornados and people who stop on freeway onramps, Mississippi and back woods Alabama had some of the friendliest and finest people I've bet in America in a long time.

We drove 1,500 miles in total.

--End of Report--

Some of Alf's interesting stats:

The Natchez Trace stopped being used after the Civil War due to Mississippi paddle wheelers. The first research on renovation was in 1907 and the final road construction was completed in 2005.

The space shuttle generates the equivalent of 26 Hoover dams on launch, about 37 million horsepower. The exhaust temperature is 6,000 degrees. One of three pumps on each engine can move 1,000 gallons per second; this means that one engine could drain my pool in my house in about 2.3 seconds.

The front landing gear of Mike's F-14 actually broke when the plane floated around the hangar, a plane that lands like a controlled crash broke its landing gear. The Blackbird engine compresses the air/fuel mixture to 1400 PSI. The maximum apparent airspeed of the body is only about 500 knots, but the stall speed is just below that (not much room for mistakes). The Blackbird carries 16,000 gallons of fuel in the skin, without a fuel bladder, which is why it leaks, and can only fly for two hours and 45 minutes -- if you are easy on the throttle. When the plane taxis, it has to wait 12 minutes before taking off, as the tires get so hot from taxing up the to runway due to the weight of the aircraft -- having a greater ground pressure than the C-5. At full power, the Blackbird generates 40-50 MPH winds at 100 degrees, 1,000 feet away. The CIA 1960's version of the plane could see a car fob a couple miles away.