

TRAVEL

CAJUN COUNTRY

BY PHIL TRIPP



L-R: L'ACADIE INN AND LAKEVIEW BOOTH ; CAJUN MUSIC MUSEUM ; STEVE RILEY AND THE MAMOU PLAYBOYS STIRRING THE TWO STEP GUMBO

If you've followed my travel pieces for *Rhythms*, they've mainly been about where to find great music and food plus accommodations in major cities—New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago, Nashville, Honolulu, Los Angeles and others. You'll find them being added to the *Rhythms* hot new website at rhythms.com.au. But I thought with many people planning to go to Jazz Fest or French Quarter Fest in New Orleans, South by Southwest in Austin or other Southern spots, I'd shine the alligator spotlight on Cajun Country about two or so hours West of Nawlins, six hours out of Austin and another world of musical and culinary culture.

First let's get the question of Cajun versus zydeco out of the way. They both have their roots in French cultures with the Cajuns (short for Acadians also known as Coonasses) being white settlers driven from Canada by the British into the swamps, while the Creoles were black slaves who mated with French lovers and created a mulatto culture. Both music genres feature accordion, fiddles and guitars while zydeco adds a metal vest washboard, or frottoir, played by stroking spoons for rhythm. The difference in their food styles is that Creole cook-

ing uses tomatoes while Cajun use – ahem – more “exotic” meats from the bayous and fields with lots of spice to mask the flavour.

It's not all swamps, gators, pirogue canoes and airboats. There are two Acadian regions—the relatively flat Cajun Prairies in the middle of Louisiana and the bayous of the boot where canals are carved out of rivers, cypress and floating islands of moss. I've made a point of driving from Austin to the Prairies four times after SXSW, mainly to the towns of Opelousas, Eunice, Breaux Bridge, Lafayette and surrounds where the flatlands are dotted with towns and music seems to spring out of every bar. Another favourite is Houma, just below New Orleans, which can be reached by a two-hour scenic drive on the River Road along the Mississippi from there, or a three-hour jaunt along equally gorgeous bayou terrain from the Cajun Prairie.

Music and food festivals abound in this part of Louisiana, but the time I love is the week after SXSW ends when the fourth Sunday of March is the free **Crawfish Etouffee World Championship Cookoff** in Eunice. Over 100 teams craft this dish of smothered yabbies in a gravy like sauce which

has the Holy Trinity of black pepper, white pepper and cayenne pepper as well as the Cajun vegetable stew of onions, garlic, celery and capsicums.

Beginning at 10 am, booths open with samples for the judges, which you can buy as the first band heats up on stage in an array of local and superstar Coonass status. Wild dancing ensues as the Cajun Two Step takes over until 4 pm. 2013 is the 28th year of this event and the awards are announced at 2pm in Amateur Cooking, Club Organisation and Professional divisions.

Consistent winners of the latter division are Lance and Kelly Pitre, who both vie for the top placing, but who also operate Eunice's two hippest accommodations. **L'Acadie Inn**, close to town, is a converted motel with basic rooms as well as apartments and kitchenettes in the Inn building (www.hotboudin.com). **Lakeview Park**, three kilometres away, features cabins as well as recreational vehicles but is best known for its 700 square metre barn which turns into a hot dancehall on Saturday nights (www.lvpark.com). I fondly remember having to drive around an alligator on the road between Airstream trailers,

There are over 600 festivals in New Orleans (see www.louisianatravel.com/festivals) but here are the better Cajun music ones.

Best of the Bayou – Houma late September, www.bestofthebayou.org

Blues Week – Baton Rouge, April 13, www.batonrougebluesfestival.org

Cajun Music Festival – Mamou, mid-August www.mamoucajunmusicfestival.com

Festivals Acadiens Et Creoles – Lafayette, mid-October, www.festivalsacadiens.com

Festival International de Louisiane – Lafayette, April 22-24, www.festivalinternational.com

Swamp Stomp March – Thibadoux, March 22-24, www.nicholls.edu/swamp-stomp

Voice of the Wetlands – Houma, mid-October, www.voiceofthewetlands.org

Zydeco Festival – Plaisance, September, www.zydeco.org

