



New Orleans Sustainable Tourism Task Force

A Culture Misunderstood

New Orleans tourism marketing has created a runaway myth that is fueling relentless waves of raucous party seekers

More than 200 years after Napoleon sold the French colony to the US, in many ways New Orleans remains part of the Créole-Caribbean cultural zone. And the habits of its denizens continue to intrigue outsiders.

Créole culture has always valued the poetry of living over prosaic practicality. And the syncopated rhythms of daily life in New Orleans, like the music and cuisine, are infused with African ingredients in equal proportion to the French. Carnival is an entire season, with manifestations throughout every segment of society and intricacies few outsiders could hope to fathom.

The people are at once deeply spiritual, wildly creative and irrepressibly celebratory. The city's skyline is crowded with church spires, even as the shadows of those spires fall across the doorsteps of equally crowded bars. Whether by sacramental wine or Sazerac cocktail, redemption is poured generously.

By any measure it's a nuanced, richly intriguing, artistically fertile culture.

But nuance and complexity don't make for good sound bites. So when business people wanted to promote tourism to New Orleans, they did what every ambitious destination does: they blew up certain aspects of the culture into oversize cartoon proportions to make them easy to sell at high volume to visitors. And it worked. Far better than anyone could have foreseen.

Promoting New Orleans for the past few decades as Party Town USA—one big, raucous, drunken bash—has proved a successful strategy to put heads in (low to moderately-priced) hotel room beds. The problem: New Orleans has never been one big, raucous, drunken bash. Not even on Mardi Gras Day (largely a family affair throughout most of the city).

Now millions of party seekers descend on New Orleans expecting it to be a raucous scene—and making it so, running roughshod through one of the most treasured historic residential neighborhoods in the world and spilling out into the surrounding faubourgs ... which has alienated most locals from their own historic center.

Following a meeting in August 2018 with Task Force founders, the leading advertising and media relations executives in the city's tourism marketing organizations, along with their New York public relations firm, sprang into action immediately and have reportedly taken a 180-degree turn in new messaging, shifting the target from party seekers to culture seekers.

But the Party Town myth is not easily dispelled. The branding is so deeply ingrained that the first impulse of most filmmakers, journalists, television producers and hordes of Instagrammers is to head to Bourbon Street, grab a Big Ass Beer, don some Mardi Gras beads (most often out of season)—and help perpetuate the fiction.

New Orleans Sustainable Tourism Task Force

An independent collective of concerned New Orleans citizens launched in 2018 to work alongside city and tourism leaders to redirect the flow of New Orleans tourism toward a sustainable course, abate the destructive effects of unmanaged mass tourism and advocate for systemic changes to maintain a growth path in which success is measured in terms of community uplift.