

# Remembering New Orleans

## A Crescent City love story

By Candace Karu

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**My formative years as an Army brat** created a deep and abiding wanderlust in me that grows stronger as I get older. Travel is my hobby. I collect new cities and foreign places like others collect stamps or Civil War memorabilia.

Given my passion for travel, I can't imagine how I made it to mid-life without visiting New Orleans. Laden with a rich and textured history, the Big Easy was a central character in some of my favorite books, plays and films. A simple call from Gary Gomez to the *Running Times* offices announced the opportunity I'd been waiting for. Gary, the elite athlete coordinator and unofficial goodwill ambassador of the Crescent City Classic 10K, was inviting an RT staffer to cover the first CCC of the new millennium, to be held on Easter weekend. I begged, pleaded and whined until I finally snagged the plum assignment. At long last I was on my way to New Orleans.

Arriving in town late on a Friday night to cover Saturday's race, I checked into my hotel, stowed my luggage, and went off to explore the historic streets of the Vieux Carre. Everything about this decidedly American city felt oddly foreign, from the sultry night air, to the ornate and artfully decaying buildings, to the sounds emanating from bars and restaurants. The cobblestone streets and gas lamps lent an air of romance and mystery to my wanderings. Along Bourbon Street an ever-changing barrage of music and laughter poured from windows and doors flung open to the warm night air. The smell of po-boys and gumbo, whiskey and cigarettes, perfume and the Mississippi mingled into a fragrant mélange unique to the streets of the French Quarter. The people I passed that night were drinking and partying like it was their job. Several men of questionable sobriety cheerfully and hopefully asked me to show them my, um, assets in exchange for shiny plastic beads. Declining their invitations, I wandered back to my hotel to prepare for the next day's race.

The flat, fast course of the Crescent City Classic practically begs runners to break records. To quote race statistics: "Of the 10 fastest times ever run on the roads by men, six were at the Classic. Of the 10 fastest times ever run on the roads by women, four were at the Classic. The Classic has seen more Olympians and faster times than any other 10,000-meter road race in the world." Riding the press truck on Saturday was thrilling. Some of the world's fastest runners battled for supremacy on streets of exquisite beauty. More than 17,000 less gifted but equally enthusiastic participants gathered behind them, a surprising number in costumes of admirable invention, eager to be part of this glorious spectacle. The course started in historic Jackson Square in the French Quarter and wound through lovely residential streets, finishing in City Park.

The post-race Festival, held in Tad Gormley Stadium, lived up to all expectations. Music, food, dancing: it was a party of epic proportions that did the city proud. The jambalaya at the Festival rivaled any I've ever tasted, before or since.

Runners get to see a city in a way no other tourists can. While French Quarter revelers were sleeping off the effects of the city's late-night charms the day after the race, I was about to have a less dramatic, more soulful experience. Easter Sunday dawned hot and damp, humidity muffling sounds and amplifying the scents that are uniquely New Orleans. The sound of church bells broke the early morning silence. On my run, the sidewalks of the Garden District proved challenging, broken as they were by the roots of huge trees that lined the streets. The exotic and varied architecture of the mansions—ornate Victorian, Greek Revival, and Italianate—and the lush and manicured gardens made the precarious footing worthwhile. I passed author Anne Rice's house, and took in the haunting beauty of Lafayette Cemetery, known as the City of the Dead.

Finishing my run and returning to the French Quarter, I was just in time to witness an Easter Parade that could only happen in New Orleans. Drag queens, dressed in outrageous Easter finery, tossed candy from horse-drawn carriages to the gathering crowds. I spent the rest of the day with another visiting runner, wandering the relatively quiet streets, sitting by the river eating beignets, exploring twisting cobblestone alleys, visiting galleries on Magazine Street, and having my fortune told by a voodoo priestess. We ended the day with another short run past the Creole cottages in Faubourg Marigny, filled with gratitude for everything we had seen and done.

Overnight, Hurricane Katrina changed the city of New Orleans forever. It's too early to tell what the fate of the Crescent City Classic might be. As I write this, there is still no way to contact anyone in the hurricane ravaged Gulf Coast. When the situation in this inimitable city becomes less critical and the rebuilding process begins, I hope that I can be involved. We can all contribute money or donate our time, but as runners we should really try to go the extra mile. Among other things, we can donate to the RRCA's special fund to help running clubs affected by the storm. I, for one, can't wait to return to run the streets of the city. In spite of the massive physical devastation, much of the Big Easy's charm and appeal resides in her people and their love of this magical place. I have no doubt that New Orleans will survive, stronger, prouder, and more beautiful, because of all that she has endured and the unwavering love of the people that live there.

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