

TRAVEL

Louisiana's Northshore: Where the living is *easy*

New Orleanians have long been drawn to quick getaways across Lake Pontchartrain.



The waterfront park in Old Mandeville, La., is a relaxing spot for taking in views of Lake Pontchartrain. COURTESY OF ERIC LINDBERG

By Blake Guthrie | For the AJC

After a lifetime of visiting New Orleans and never venturing far beyond the core of the city, I began to feel like a regular in a restaurant always ordering the same thing. It was time to try something new. Every time I flew in and out of Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, I would see that 24-mile-long bridge across Lake Pontchartrain – the longest continuous bridge over water in the world – and my curiosity was piqued. Something special must be on the other side to have made people expend so much effort to build those twin parallel spans connecting the city to the Northshore.

A friend who grew up in New Orleans in the 1960s when the bridge was only a two-lane span said her family called visiting the Northshore “going to the country.” Before the bridge existed, steamships and schooners provided the getaway for New Orleanians who could afford a boat trip across the lake.

Lake Pontchartrain connects with the Gulf of Mexico, so it contains a mix of fresh and salt water and sees tidal action, giving the Northshore a coastal vibe. In the late 19th century people came from near and far to partake in the purported healing qualities of the springs found in the tiny hamlet of Abita Springs a few miles inland.

The only thing I knew about the Northshore before visiting was that it was home to Abita Brewing Co., a pioneer on the regional craft brewing scene established in 1986, when craft beers were still called microbrews. And I had seen pictures of the cottages over the water at Fontainebleau State Park – Louisiana’s most-visited state park.

The cottages were all



The Dew Drop Jazz and Social Hall in Old Mandeville, La., has a fascinating history and once again stages concerts during spring and fall. BLAKE GUTHRIE FOR THE AJC

booked months in advance, so I checked in to the Abita Springs Hotel, a five-room boutique in a restored 1890s house with private entrances on the large wraparound porch that overlooks a garden courtyard with a spring-fed fountain.

Springs are everywhere in Abita Springs. The original source spring still bubbles underneath a historic pavilion in the center of town. Abita Brewing still taps directly into the aquifer that feeds the springs to make its beer. During a brewery tour, the guide mentions that the purity of the water is the reason the company will never brew beer anywhere else.

Even Abita’s newly opened New Orleans location uses water transported across the lake from Abita Springs. As the group enters the taproom for free samples of beer at the end of the tour, a guy wearing a black leather vest with motorcycle gang insignia looks at me with a wide grin and proclaims, “It’s like a Willy Wonka factory for adults.”

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IFYOU GO

Attractions

■ **Dew Drop Jazz and Social Hall.** \$10, cash preferred, no advance tickets, kids free, 430 Lamarque St., Mandeville, Louisiana, dewdropjazzhall.com.
■ **Abita Brewing Co.** \$10 guided tour includes a pint of beer, under 21 free, 21084 Highway 26, Covington, Louisiana, 985-893-3143, abita.com.

■ **Louisiana Tours and Adventures.** \$130 and up, 119 Fairview Drive, Madisonville, Louisiana, 985-789-9602, louisianatoursandadventures.com.
■ **Brooks' Bike Shop.** Rentals \$15 and up, Tours \$50 and up. Multiple locations, 985-338-5933, brooks bikeshop.com.

Stay

■ **Fontainebleau State Park.** Cabins \$150+, 62883 Highway 1089, Mandeville, Louisiana, 888-677-3668, lastateparks.com/parks-preserves/fontainebleau-state-park.
■ **Abita Springs Hotel.** \$149 and up, 22088 Ann O'Brien Lane, Abita Springs, Louisiana, 985-951-4200, abitaspringshotel.com.

Eat

■ **LaLou.** \$10 and up, 200 Girod St., Mandeville, Louisiana, 985-231-7125, doyoualoumandeville.com.
■ **Rips on the Lake.** \$23 and up, 1917 Lakeshore Drive, Mandeville, Louisiana, 985-727-2829, ripsonthelakemandeville.com.

Visitor info

■ Visit the Northshore Visitor Center, 6809 Highway 59, Mandeville, Louisiana, 800-634-9443, visitthenorthshore.com.

TRAVEL



The beach at Fontainebleau State Park — Louisiana's most-visited state park — sits on the Northshore of Lake Pontchartrain. BLAKE GUTHRIE FOR THE A.J.C.

New Orleans

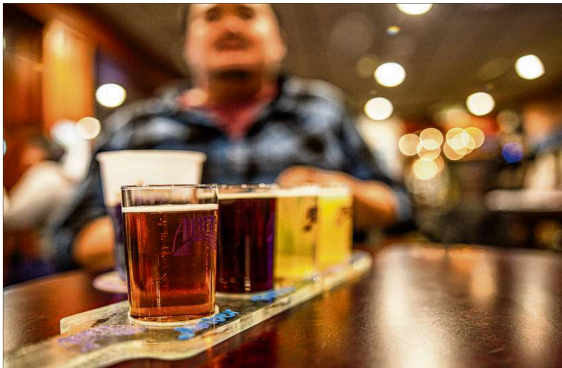
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Across the street from Abita Springs Hotel runs Tammany Trace, a 31-mile rail-to-trail pedestrian pathway — the state's first — connecting the St. Tammany Parish towns of Covington, Abita Springs, Mandeville, Lacombe and Slidell. The hotel's convenient location next to the Trace and downtown's stores, bars and restaurants makes it a popular place to stay for bicyclists.

Pedal cruisers are available to guests who don't bring their own bikes, good enough for exploring nearby but not for any serious distance cycling. Out front, there's a rack of bikes for rent from Brooks' Bike Shop, a local outfitter with locations in Covington, Mandeville and Slidell.

From the Mandeville location, I take the Old Mandeville Tour led by shop owner Patrick Brooks. Old Mandeville is the historic heart of Mandeville, with mansions overlooking the lake and a waterfront park shaded by centuries-old live oaks.

Behind Lakeshore Drive, the commercial and residential districts blend in seamlessly on neighborhood streets where most businesses operate out of renovated old houses, including LaLou, a casual café serving gourmet brunch fare along with traditional breakfast and lunch items, and Rips on the



Abita Brewing Co., a pioneer in the regional craft brewing scene, was founded in the tiny town of Abita Springs, La., in 1986 and uses spring water to brew its beers. COURTESY OF VISIT THE NORTHSHORE

Lake, a long-standing white-tablecloth seafood restaurant overlooking the water.

Pedaling through Northshore on a bike, the rider is surrounded by an affluent area with an authentic small-town feel. The vistas in Abita Springs, Old Mandeville and at Fontainebleau State Park are reminiscent of those one might see in South Carolina's Lowcountry but with bayous standing in for the tidal marshes.

As the bike tour winds

down, Brooks stops on Lamarque Street three blocks from the lake to point out the Dew Drop Jazz and Social Hall. The wooden hall was built as an event venue in 1895 by the Dew Drop Social and Benevolent Association. Benevolent associations were prevalent in the post-Reconstruction period to provide assistance to community members in a time of need when insurance companies wouldn't give coverage to African

Americans.

Around that same time, a unique new American musical art form called jazz was on the rise. Many early jazz pioneers performed regularly at the Dew Drop, including Louis Armstrong early in his career. After the need for benevolent associations dissipated in the 1940s, the hall was abandoned for decades until it was resurrected in the early 2000s and started presenting live music once again.

Because the 130-year-old

structure doesn't have air conditioning, the 100-seat hall only stages concerts in fall and spring. Its shutters are thrown open during performances so people who can't find a seat inside can set up lawn chairs outside to take in the music. No advance tickets are sold, and cash is preferred at the door. Meals of fried chicken and catfish are served by the Ladies of the First Free Mission Baptist Church next door.

No trip to the Northshore is complete until you get on a boat. Mine ended with a pontoon boat tour of the Tchefuncte River and its bayous guided by Capt. Mike of Louisiana Tours and Adventures. Capt. Mike grew up along the river, so he knows its history and wildlife well. At one point he stops the boat to pick a gar out of the water with his bare hands, to the amazement of everyone on board. After showing the Jurassic-looking fish with its alligator snout to the crew, he releases it back into the brackish water.

It's a sunset cruise, so Capt. Mike pushes the throttle to get us to the lake on time for a photo-op next to the Tchefuncte River Lighthouse, originally built in 1837. Sunsets are a big deal here — Abita Brewing even has a specialty brew called Northshore Sunset — so seeing one next to a lighthouse that predates jazz ranks high.



The Tchefuncte River Lighthouse is a popular spot on the Northshore for viewing the sunset. BLAKE GUTHRIE FOR THE A.J.C.