

# 'Disaster Tourism' in Post-Katrina New Orleans

## Special

It's the train-wreck you cannot look away from, or the car accident that makes you slow down despite your better judgment telling you not to be that person. Except in New Orleans, post-Katrina, the event is more than a car accident: it's the entire city.



My partner and I traveled to the American South this past summer for three weeks. Through 14 American states we drove, trying like so many other travelers to visit attractions large and small off the beaten path, or eat in places that the guidebooks said the locals loved. In short, it was the same inauthentic search for 'authenticity' that so many people try in vain to experience in their own, personal travels. But we had an incredible time.

Our half way point was the city of New Orleans, Louisiana – the 41st poorest state in America. Neither of us had been to New Orleans before, and we were excited for the food, mostly. But we had heard that Bourbon St. and the French Quarter had their charm, the Garden District's large, swaying trees and grand white houses were a sight, and that – of course – the music was phenomenal. And all of that turned out to be true: that it was one of those historical American cities you could get lost in, and see everything or nothing, and still feel that by being there you had taken it in, as if through osmosis.

What we hadn't anticipated was the way in which the fabric of the city continues to be shaped by Hurricane Katrina, six years ago this past August.

And the continued implications of the storm in which 1,836 people lost their lives and \$81B in damages were caused goes beyond museum exhibits at the Louisiana State Museum at Jackson Square, or the still visible scars on the cityscape that we would later see – it seems to have permeated the way in which the city's inhabitants see themselves, and how others have come to think about New Orleans.

We found that almost everyone we met had a story about what happened to them during the storm: their decisions, the choices their friends made, and the impacts the storm had on them. Such divergent takes on the same storm give you the understanding that the shared experience of city residents would often be remarkably different than what an individual went through.

From the rug-maker with 15 cats in the French Quarter who lives above her shop and stayed during the storm to the battered houses and buildings of the Treme where evidence of the storm still sits unchanged from the storm, the results are everywhere – and they are right below the surface.



In one respect, the city has never recovered from Katrina, although the migration trend away from the city was already under way before the hurricane struck. Matthew Kahn, in *Climatopolis: How Our Cities Will Thrive in the Hotter Future*, notes that the population of New Orleans has been decreasing since the 1960s. From 627,000 inhabitants in 1960 to 485,000 in 2000: and by 2008, the city had shed another 174,000 people to a current population of roughly 311,000. And this despite an injection of \$120B in federal funds to rebuild the city, a figure Kahn compares to the \$13B the U.S. spent through the Marshall Plan to rebuild all of Europe post-World War Two.

Which might lead some to ask – have the rebuilding efforts succeeded? To a large extent they have, although perhaps in a way they might not have anticipated. While the act of "disaster tourism" is a relatively new concept, it has brought attention (and money) to hurricane-ravaged parts of New Orleans desperately in need in repair. But the act of visiting a disaster area solely for purposes of morbid curiosity, aside from conjuring up some troubling moral questions, more often than not hinders more than it helps the people affected.

Look up "disaster tourism" in Wikipedia and the first entry is on Hurricane Katrina.

Here is a brief excerpt:

“Disaster tourism took hold in the Greater New Orleans Area in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. There are now guided bus tours to neighborhoods that were severely damaged by storm-related flooding. Some local residents have criticized these tours as unethical, because the tour companies are profiting from the misery of their communities and families. The Army Corps of Engineers has noted that traffic from tour buses and other tourist vehicles have interfered with the movement of trucks and other cleanup equipment...For these reasons, organized disaster tours are now banned from two of the most severely damaged areas in the city, the Lower 9th and St. Bernard Parish near the Industrial Canal.”

While my partner and I would never have considered a guided bus tour to the worst affected regions of the city – we would have thought that not only tasteless, but unethical – we were unsettled by how complicit we were in the disaster tourism industry regardless. The trauma inflicted on the lives of ordinary human beings was somehow reduced to spectacle, and we were on the other side of the camera – the safe side.



And while it seems this is how the world is going, I won't attempt to minimize the part we played. We were curious: this was such a far cry from our comfortable lives that we had no reference point for what this kind of destruction and destitution would be like.

And I found when doing research for this article that, of course, we were not the only ones.

The phenomenon has gotten so out of hand that it has become pornographic. So the name "Disaster Porn" is apt, although it goes well beyond a morbid fascination with disaster. Cooking shows, for example, have come to glorify and fetishize food to the point that cooking show hosts can now be seen as purveyors of "Food Porn."

The more I think about our brief time wandering through the Treme the more I have come to regret it. I felt sheepish in the moment even walking around with my phone out to take pictures, let alone my partner wandering with a Digital SLR camera on her neck. I often found myself smiling awkwardly and putting my phone away when we would pass people – people who actually live there – as they looked at us as we passed. They must have known in an instant who we were, and why we were there. But they just smiled. It was a sense of shame I felt then, and it feels like shame now.

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