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Even After the Storm, New Orleans Visitors Can't Stay Away

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Disaster Tours Pass Ninth Ward And Fats Domino's House; 'It's Just Human Nature'

By CHRISTOPHER COOPER

NEW ORLEANS—On a guided tour of this historic city, John and Karen O'Brien came to the storm-wrecked Ninth Ward neighborhood. There, they gazed at one of New Orleans's latest attractions: a big steel barge that had come to rest on top of a yellow school bus.



Isabelle Cossart

The massive red craft, which spun through a levee breach following Hurricane Katrina, sits in a wasteland of buckled concrete, downed trees and rusted appliances, all of it covered with a fine patina of river mud. As Mr. O'Brien, a chef in Montreal, aimed his digital camera, he shared the view with camera-toting church volunteers from Oklahoma and two painters who stood at their easels, rendering splintered rooflines and upended automobiles in shades of brown and gray.

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This famously hospitable city has a grim new business: disaster tourism. One of the players is the O'Briens' guide, 52-year-old Isabelle Cossart. After 30 years leading tours, Hurricane Katrina forced her to lay off her 22 employees, liquidate 10 of her 12 vans and revamp her enterprise to offer an "Open City Disaster Tour." She has given about 30 such tours since October, to visitors ranging from Japanese engineers interested in the technical aspects of the destruction, to the visiting wives of federal disaster workers, to tourists like the O'Briens who keep trickling into the city despite a shortage of fine restaurants and taxicabs.

A former schoolteacher, originally from France, Ms. Cossart obliges the visitors as she always has, picking them up at their hotels in her white "Tours by Isabelle.com" van and spicing her lectures with plenty of historical references. Her opening observation attempts to answer why anyone in his right mind would live in a subsea city between two angry lakes and a raging river. The answer: New Orleans was founded as a commercial outpost and it's even wetter downriver.

One must-see landmark on her disaster tour is the sprawling, ruined white brick home of famous rhythm-and-blues pianist Fats Domino. Rolling past the manse on a block littered with moldy church pews and a ruined upright piano, Ms. Cossart pointed out the red graffiti a fan had painted on the side of the structure, stating, "RIP Fats."

But it's mistaken. Mr. Domino, 77, got away by boat. "It's a happy story," says Ms. Cossart, whose own West Bank property suffered some damage when two trees fell in her yard, crushing her canary-yellow Corvette. She has worked the fate of her car into the spiel on the \$49-a-head tour.

At disaster sites elsewhere, frank attempts to cash in on tragedy so soon would prompt outrage. After the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the city welcomed tourists to the Twin Towers site but not the vendors who followed them. In those early weeks, it wasn't uncommon to see hucksters being run off by bellowing police and firefighters. Four years later, things are more relaxed in New York.

But New Orleans is almost completely reliant on feting visitors and only a few weeks went by before operators began to exploit the storm. Now, Katrina is viewed by many as another big event with commercial possibilities, like Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest. Along Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, shops bristle with clever and bawdy T-shirts that make light of the disaster that killed more than 1,000 people, and the ensuing looting. "I stayed in New Orleans for Christmas."

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Isabelle Cossart, left, leads tourists through storm-wrecked areas of New Orleans.

New Orleans Sees a New Business

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Orleans for Katrina and all I got was this lousy T-shirt, a new Cadillac and a plasma TV," says one.

Meanwhile, Johnny White's Sports Bar on Bourbon, which stayed open throughout the storm and its aftermath, dispenses "Category 5" hurricane drinks from a white plastic bucket near the beer taps.

The New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau says that it hopes the commerce remains tasteful. The disaster tours in particular "make everyone a little uncomfortable," says President and Chief Executive Steven Perry, who admits to taking a few impromptu trips around the disaster zone himself. "Some are going to perceive it as gawking, but, frankly, with everything that's been going on here, it seems absolutely normal," he says.

Mr. O'Brien confessed to a bit of embarrassment as he boarded Ms. Cossart's bus outside the Royal Sonesta hotel on Bourbon Street. "You hate to want to do something like this, but I guess it's just human nature," he said. On weekends, the ruined streets around the city's two main levee breaches are clogged by a slow procession of cars, many with Louisiana plates, full of people seeking a glimpse of the destruction. "This is an icon," said Bill Porche, a resident of nearby Metairie, as he gazed at the most famous of the city's levee breaches, at the 17th Street Canal. He figured it was his fifth visit.

In a sign that the market may be expanding, the locally owned franchise of tour giant Gray Line World Wide says it plans its own disaster tour offering next month. Gray Line, which laid off 59 of its 65 employees in New Orleans, will charge \$35 per adult, \$3 of which will be donated to a local relief charity.

Many callers to a local talk-radio station said they were opposed to the idea.

Jim Fewell, Gray Line's operations manager, says there's a way to offer a tour with taste, and perhaps help the city out as well.

Like Ms. Cossart, Gray Line operators will provide plenty of historical subtext, as well as "a local chronology" of the storm's passage. Mr. Fewell said the tour will not go through the Ninth Ward but will visit a single middle-class neighborhood that was destroyed in the flood. He said the route has not yet been worked out.

"I equate it to a jazz funeral—you'll be crying on the way up and dancing on the way back," says Mr. Fewell.

Ms. Cossart bars photographing residents sorting through the flood-soaked contents of their homes. She dislikes stopping, and the O'Briens had to talk her into pausing at the red barge site. "I just get so emotional when I see all the ruined houses," she says. "I'm dying to get back to the plantation tours."

The Isabelle disaster tour is in constant flux. A detour down a different street in Gentilly finds a purple speedboat standing on its bow that will be included in future tours. But a trip past the miles-long, 30-foot-high pile of storm trash that locals dubbed "the Alps" reveals that it has shrunk to a relative foothill, making it an unlikely candidate for future sojourns.

Ms. Cossart is serene about competition from Gray Line, noting it will use bigger vans to stage its tour. That isn't an advantage in post-storm New Orleans. Piloting her white van down Esplanade Avenue, Ms. Cossart comes upon a flagman and a backhoe, lifting a big oak stump and an even larger pile of construction debris. "Gray Line always copies me, but will they be able to do this?" she says, whipping the van down a narrow side street into one of the city's many historic neighborhoods.

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Isabelle Cossart
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