

Time for Cajun April, 2006

The Lone Star BMW Club out of Plano, TX was organizing a ride to Natchitoches for the weekend of March 31-April 2 and - by golly! - I was going. More than one ride to Natchitoches has been penciled in on my riding calendar over the last few years, but due to work and other inconveniences, I'd never been able to go. This time, however, nothing was going to get in the way of my going to the annual Jazz & Blues Festival in this quaint little Louisiana town.

A phone call to the contact person for the Plano club confirmed that the ride was still on and I let him know there'd be two of us out of the Houston BMW club. Mike Murphy and I planned our route and departure time to arrive around 4:00 PM at the Ramada Inn that would be our home base for the next couple of days.

The dogwood, azalea, and wisteria are in full bloom this time of year, so we chose a route into the Big Thicket to SR-87 where we knew the flower-sniffing would be spectacular, and then north through towns with names like Trout Creek and Mayflower to SR-21 and Toledo Bend Reservoir. From there it was straight to Natchitoches on LA SR-6.

While the Ramada was unremarkable, the azaleas out front were really putting on a show. After checking in, we moved our motorcycles to in front of this giant mass of bright pink and red for a photograph. Minutes after our arrival, the first two riders from Plano showed up, the father riding an LT hack and son on a fine-looking, nicely restored airhead.

The next day the group made an early departure for the 110-mile ride down to Fred's Lounge in Mamou. We wanted to get there before the doors opened and ahead of the inevitable Harley crowd. We would stay there a bit, go in search of breakfast, and then mosey back up to Natchitoches in time to catch some of the bands at the music festival. The group of eight motorcycles quickly strung out on I-49 as we headed south, the front group of three RS's and one RT stepping out well ahead of us. Mike and I were sandwiched between the father and son pair, and that old airhead in front of me was holding its own at a respectable 80 mph. We caught up with the others after exiting the interstate, and the group rode into Mamou well before 9:00 AM.

I don't make it a habit of walking into smoky bars at 9:00 in the morning, but Tante Sue's friendly greeting at the door and the intimate atmosphere of the tiny dance floor made me feel right at home. The band started up and two older couples stepped out and performed a graceful Cajun two-step. I'm not sure which was more entertaining, the band or the dancing. One of the band members, a balding backwoods fellow with fewer teeth than a barnyard hen, was clearly enjoying himself, and the youthful fiddler had a skillful bow and an excellent plainsong-style singing voice. After the band warmed up, the radio station went live and the DJ banter between songs was equally as entertaining. I relied on my very rusty French to recognize the occasional word, and we could clearly recognize the names of familiar products sprinkled in among the Cajun French during the live commercials.

Within 30 minutes the tiny building was packed, yet Mike pulled me onto the dance floor and executed a skillful waltz, expertly leading me between the other couples as we worked our way around the horseshoe-shaped space that surrounded the band.

Afterward, we ate breakfast across the street at Frenchie's: pecan waffles and Community coffee. Mike and I left the group to head north again towards the Cane River historical district. As interesting as Fred's Lounge was, the real entertainment lay ahead of us that day. A slow meander along both sides of the

Cane River Lake led Mike and I across little bridges and past several old plantation homes including the finely restored Melrose Plantation and the work-in-progress Oakland Plantation, now being restored and managed by the National Park Service. The roads eventually brought us into Natchitoches, site of the Jazz & Blues festival on the banks of the Cane River Lake and the high point of the trip.

This quaint little town is just dripping with charm and history, being the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase territory. Our entry into the historic downtown area was across a pretty bridge that gave us an excellent view of the historic buildings lined up along the riverfront. Mike's unerring instinct for good local restaurants led us directly to Lasyone's Meat Pie Kitchen on 2nd Street. We tucked the bikes against the curb and had a terrific lunch of fried meat pie, and red beans and rice.

Afterward, we wandered over to the riverfront and enjoyed some of the music, including the soul sounds from a group out of Baton Rouge, calling themselves The Bluebirds. They were playing some fine toe-tapping music amidst a setting and weather that were idyllic. Sitting down later in the day to enjoy an ice cream cone, Mike and I were joined by a fellow who'd met with a small accident and now had his foot in a cast. He was with a merry group who were tailgating out of the back of their SUV, and he sat down and chatted with us for a bit. We learned from him that the town of Natchitoches comes alive at Christmastime, with lights and parades, and fireworks over the river. Natchitoches Christmas Festival will be a good reason to return to this delightful town.