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NEW ORLEANS---Over the years there has been no more familiar home for me on the road than the Olivier House. The meandering French Quarter mansion was built in 1839 by Madam Marie Anne Bienvenu Olivier, a wealthy plantation owner.

There are 42 rooms at the Olivier House, 828 Toulouse. I have stayed in 28 of them.

Every room is different and each one carries a unique memory. The intimate Creole Greek nature of the Olivier House celebrates the spirit of wanderlust. And I've spent a lot of my time wandering around the place lost in lust.

I discovered "The Olivier," as we regulars call it, while covering Super Bowl '86 for the Chicago Sun-Times. I had been dispatched to New Orleans to sell hot dogs as a Lucky Dog vendor, hang around Pat O'Brien's and shadow punky QB Jim McMahon. This was back in the day when the Olivier had a small farm of exotic birds in the back courtyard that would cackle very early in the morning.

There were two macaws and an African Gray, among others. The birds were removed because guests complained of the morning noise. I have since stayed at the Olivier at least on an annual basis for the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, with the exception of the one year a girlfriend talked me into the Lafitte Guest House, 1003 Bourbon St. (which went out of business after Hurricane Katrina but since reopened). Unlike me and my girlfriend, the Olivier weathered the storm.



Some don't think it's cool to stay in the French Quarter, but the Olivier is within walking distance of the Dungeon biker bar, Cafe Du Monde and Jackson Square. What more can you ask for?

The Olivier found a room for me in mid-December when I rode Arlo Guthrie's City of New Orleans Amtrak benefit into the Crescent City. The place was packed with FEMA residents. Maid service was only once a week. A couple of dogs were barking down the hall. The Olivier typically created another memory.

The Olivier is far enough from Bourbon Street that it is generally quiet, plus I was in town when a 2 a.m. curfew was being enforced. I still had trouble sleeping. At 3 in the morning, the guys next door were laughing and screaming about Howard Stern's impending move to Sirius radio. I called the front desk about the noise. They were on it. They had previous complaints from other FEMA residents, but they said there was nothing they could do because the two men were deaf.

Now I couldn't get to sleep wondering how deaf guys listen to the radio.

Hotel manager Bobby Danner understood my needs. His family has owned the Olivier, which includes a small swimming pool, since 1970. Any Olivier veteran knows that sometimes you have to wing it at this beloved hotel. Even the hotel brochure points out "We are not the ordinary run-of-the-mill hotel."

After Hurricane Katrina, Danner's parents, Jim and Kathryn, temporarily relocated to their native Blackwater, Mo. (pop. 199), and Danner was running the hotel during my stay. "The building hasn't changed too much since 1970," Danner said during a conversation in the hotel's spacious downstairs community living room. "The building was converted to an apartment house in the 1960s and that's when most of the changes took place."

Jim and Kathryn Danner visited New Orleans for their honeymoon. They loved the city so much they decided to buy the Olivier. The Danners transformed the building from apartments to the hotel where no two rooms are alike. During jazz fest, visiting jazz musicians from Finland and Holland hold impromptu jam sessions in the community living room or in the courtyard, which is framed by tropical foliage.

The Olivier was one of the few New Orleans hotels to ride it out during Hurricane Katrina. "We tried to get all our guests to leave," said Danner, 38. "A couple days before the storm we had about 20 rooms of guests. There were

several who stayed, who didn't have a car or the means to get out. Of course, everyone thought it was just going to be a storm and the next day things would be back to normal. So we stocked up. But after the floods a lot of hotels started closing. People were trying to get to evacuation points. We ended up taking in quite a few people who didn't have anywhere else to go." Within a few after Katrina hit, Danner began helping arrange transportation for guests to get to Baton Rouge.

The Olivier stayed open for a week after the floods and then closed. The hotel reopened Sept. 23. The grand old dame only sustained wind damage and plaster skin broke off an upstairs wall. "When we reopened, there was no one in town," Danner said. "It was strange to see the city pitch dark. You'd walk out into the courtyard at night and see stars everywhere. We were one of the first small hotels to reopen. It was impossible to find anybody to work here." The Olivier typically has a full-time staff of 12.

The FEMA program has been extended to March 1 and residents still are living at the hotel while their homes are being repaired -- at least those who still have homes. FEMA reported that members of more than 20,000 households forced to flee Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are still living in hotels and motels across America. About half of the Olivier currently consists of FEMA residents. By Mardi Gras the number will drop to a third.

Many New Orleans hotels elected not to participate in the FEMA relocation program, which began in mid-October. Some hotels were fearful about damage to rooms; others took the time to close and renovate their property.

According to the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau, 27,000 of the 39,000 hotel rooms in New Orleans are back in service and 7,000 are still occupied by FEMA residents. The post-flood residents have provided ample colorful stories at the Olivier.

"A couple of animal rescue women from Boston were staying here," Danner said. "Separately a guy staying here had a tarot card reading table at Jackson Square. He was the mystic type and always proud to tell people about his private group of angels. At 6 in the morning one day he and the animal rescue girls crossed paths. They were down here having coffee. The women were having trouble with this one house where they were trying to get this one particular dog. The tarot card guy said he would enlist supernatural help for them. So next thing I know, I look in the [living] room and he has his tarot cards and candles and they are having a seance."

The women never found the dog.

I wish I could have found the tarot guy, though. He could have calmed down my wacky Olivier neighbors. Still, the Olivier will see me again for Jazz Fest at the New Orleans Fairgrounds.

Unlike the President, I will not forget New Orleans. This year's jazz festival will take place on its traditional last weekend in April and first weekend in May. The festival will be held on Friday-Sunday each weekend. Missing this year is the Thursday date of the second weekend. Fats Domino has been announced as a headliner, and rumors of a U2 appearance have filtered around New Orleans for the past month. More talent will be announced before Mardi Gras. Jazz Fest tickets are \$30 in advance and \$40 at the gate. (Check out those 2006 prices!!!)

"Jazz Fest is a reflection of normality," Danner said during my abnormal stay. "So many people depend on the visitors: people who wait tables, desk clerks, housekeeping, tour operators, maintenance people. If the city is ever going to get back on its feet economically, it has to have jobs. And most of our jobs are in the tourism industry."