



Photo provided by Southwest Louisiana/Lake Charles CVB.

Exploring

# Louisiana's Outback — The Creole Nature Trail

JEN REEDER

When my husband Bryan and I decided to head to **southwest Louisiana** to drive the Creole Nature Trail, I thought I knew exactly what to expect: marshes, wildlife, beaches and plenty of gators. After all, the **Creole Nature Trail**, honored as an All-American Road as well as a National Scenic Byway, is a 180-mile road that passes through three national wildlife refuges and along the coastline of the **“Cajun Riviera.”**

What I didn't anticipate turned out to be the best part. The Creole Nature Trail offers a way to explore rural Louisiana communities that preserve the longstanding traditions — and cuisines — of southwest Louisiana. And fresh Gulf seafood is an integral part of this culture in "Louisiana's Outback."

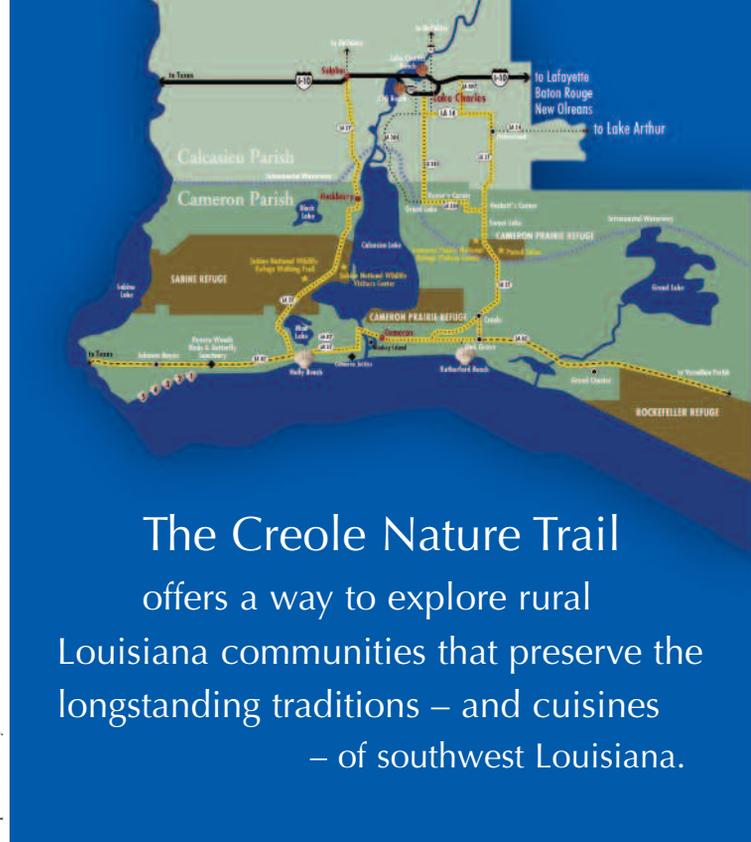
The jumping-off point for the most popular route of the trail is the town of Sulphur, where we arrived one Friday night. We ate at the legendary [Cajun Charlie's Seafood Restaurant & Gift Shop](#), which is famous for its gigantic Cajun all-you-can-eat buffet. Charlie's offers a cornucopia of Cajun classics like fried okra, hush puppies, jambalaya, fried alligator, fried shrimp, blackened catfish and stuffed crab. More than 150 gallons of gumbo are made every week. And a side order of fried pickles is worth the extra few cents.

The décor is also a draw — a pirogue hangs from the ceiling, a stuffed alligator stands in a corner and murals of Cajun life adorn the walls.

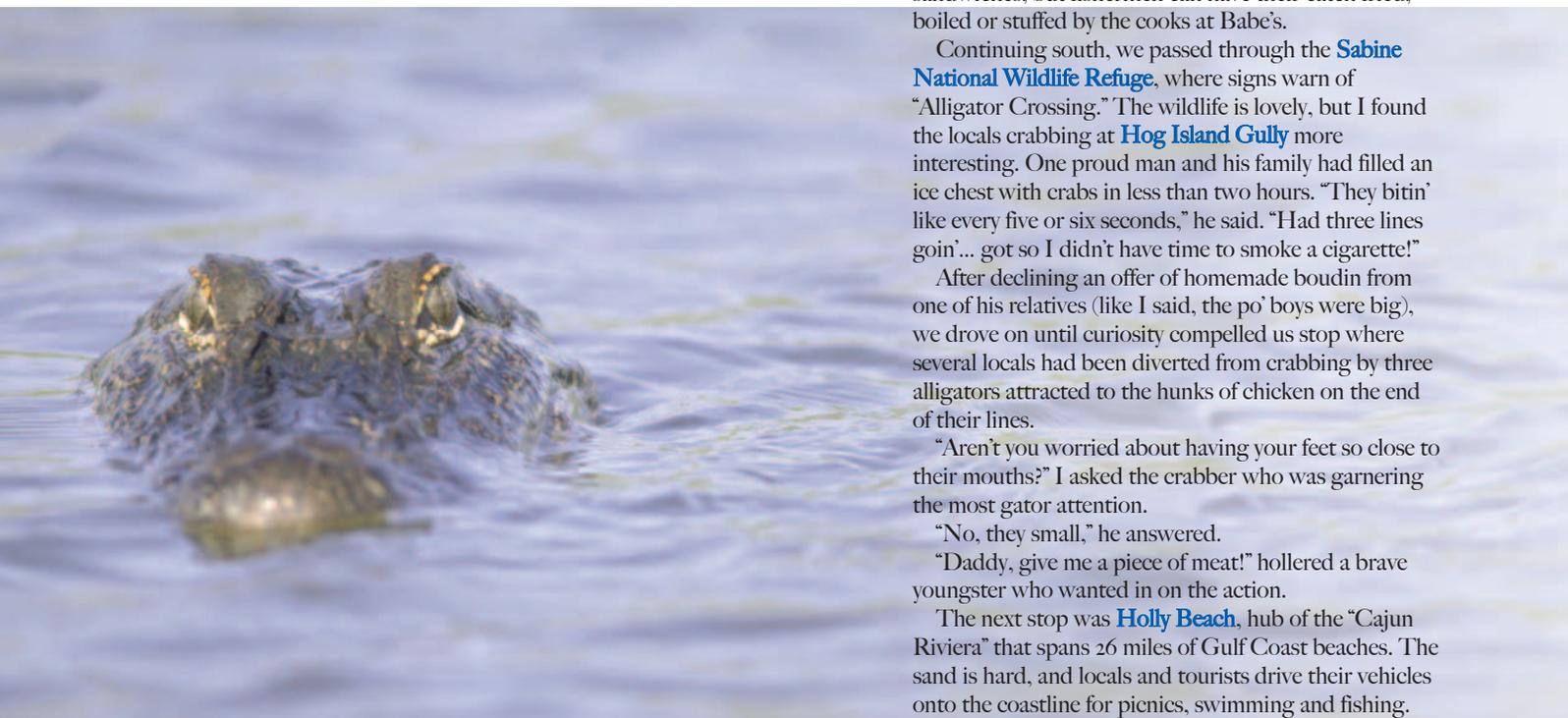
"I had an interior decorator out of Houston wanting to know who decorated this place," said owner Clinton Charlie. "They were surprised when I said, 'Me and my wife did it!'"

Saturday we drove south to Hackberry on the Creole Nature Trail. This is the least scenic portion of the drive; as the driving-tour CD from the Southwest Louisiana Visitors Center points out, there is "a thriving petrochemical industry." But there are also cattle grazing and simple farms on the 17-mile drive, which offers the reward of a meal at [Babe's Cajun Motel and Grill](#).

Map Provided by Southwest Louisiana Convention & Visitors Bureau



The Creole Nature Trail offers a way to explore rural Louisiana communities that preserve the longstanding traditions — and cuisines — of southwest Louisiana.



Photographed by Toby Armstrong.

Babe's is a no-frills joint with folding tables, a pool table, concrete floor and a jukebox with virtually every volume of "Swamp Gold," a collection of Louisiana Swamp Pop hits. We ate overstuffed po' boy sandwiches, but fishermen can have their catch fried, boiled or stuffed by the cooks at Babe's.

Continuing south, we passed through the [Sabine National Wildlife Refuge](#), where signs warn of "Alligator Crossing." The wildlife is lovely, but I found the locals crabbing at [Hog Island Gully](#) more interesting. One proud man and his family had filled an ice chest with crabs in less than two hours. "They bitin' like every five or six seconds," he said. "Had three lines goin'... got so I didn't have time to smoke a cigarette!"

After declining an offer of homemade boudin from one of his relatives (like I said, the po' boys were big), we drove on until curiosity compelled us stop where several locals had been diverted from crabbing by three alligators attracted to the hunks of chicken on the end of their lines.

"Aren't you worried about having your feet so close to their mouths?" I asked the crabber who was garnering the most gator attention.

"No, they small," he answered.

"Daddy, give me a piece of meat!" hollered a brave youngster who wanted in on the action.

The next stop was [Holly Beach](#), hub of the "Cajun Riviera" that spans 26 miles of Gulf Coast beaches. The sand is hard, and locals and tourists drive their vehicles onto the coastline for picnics, swimming and fishing. Cheniers, sandy ridges topped with trees that bend north because of sea wind and mist, provide not only a beautiful backdrop, but also a sanctuary for birds and butterflies.



Photo provided by Southwest Louisiana/Lake Charles CVB.

## Waterways

packed with shrimp boats and quiet marshes populated only by birds and butterflies dot the trail leading to the town of Creole, *the* place for fresh crab rolls (“crab cakes” everywhere else in the state).

Heading east to the shrimping community of Cameron, we took a ferry across the Calcasieu Ship Channel, where shrimp boats vie for space among freighters and oil tankers in the well-used waterway. A few miles past Cameron is the town of Creole, where we decided the salt air had made us hungry for a snack at the down-home **Creole Food Mart**.

Like Babe’s, the focus at the Creole Food Mart was the food rather than the décor; rolls of paper towels stood up in large vegetable cans, and we were told to help ourselves to the beer from the windowed refrigerators that lined the wall. This is *the* place for fresh crab rolls (“crab cakes” elsewhere in the state) and an ice-cold beer.

The roughly 37 miles north to finish the loop passes through Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge. Maybe it was the beer, but I loved the three-mile spur of Pintail Drive, which led us through marshes (swamps without trees, as far as I can tell). It was a pleasant burst of nature before re-entering society at the Creole Nature Trail’s end in Lake Charles.

Lake Charles is a vibrant city on its eponymous lake, which is home to several riverboat casinos that draw an influx of visitors from nearby Texas. But instead of gambling, Bryan and I treated ourselves to a fine dining experience at **La Truffe Sauvage**, **The Wild Truffle**. After all, we’d been “roughing it” in the outback.



Photo provided by Southwest Louisiana/Lake Charles CVB.

# Holly Beach,

hub of the “Cajun Riviera,” which spans 26 miles, is a hard sand beach. Locals and tourists drive along the sand in search of the perfect spot to fish, picnic or swim.

La Truffe Sauvage serves contemporary Louisiana cuisine with international influences. Everything was fabulous. Bryan feasted on Crabmeat Mary Louise, which is crabmeat tossed in a champagne cream sauce with chives, served in a crisp puff-pastry shell and topped with grilled asparagus. I couldn't resist the organic mushroom risotto, which had four kinds of mushrooms, truffle oil, asparagus tips and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. It was well worth the splurge.

Sadly, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast a few weeks after our visit to the Creole Nature Trail. The area around the trail was physically unaffected by the storm, though demand for tourist dollars is greater than ever. This makes a trip to the trail particularly rewarding, since it is a way for money to flow back into the Louisiana economy. Megan Monsour of the Southwest Louisiana Convention and Visitors Bureau said that many destinations need guests to come and enjoy their attractions. “One way that visitors can show their love for Louisiana is by visiting us!” she said.

But no matter why people choose to travel on the Creole Nature Trail, the bottom line is that they will encounter delicious food and friendly people in a unique corner of our beloved Louisiana. 

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**Jen Reeder** developed an addiction to fried pickles while researching this story.

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Photo provided by Southwest Louisiana/Lake Charles CVB.

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## Crawfish Étouffée

*Chef Clinton Charlie  
Cajun Charlie's Seafood Restaurant  
& Gift Shop*

**MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS.**

**1 stick margarine**  
**1 pound peeled crawfish tails**  
**Salt, pepper and garlic powder, to taste**  
**1 tablespoon paprika**  
**1 medium onion, chopped**  
**1/2 cup green bell pepper, chopped**  
**2 cloves garlic, chopped**  
**3 cups water, in all**  
**2 tablespoons cornstarch or flour**  
**1 tablespoon green onion tops, chopped**  
**Cooked rice, for serving**

Melt margarine in a Dutch oven. Season crawfish tails with salt, pepper and garlic powder. Add paprika to margarine. Sauté crawfish tails about 5 minutes. Remove crawfish and set aside.

Add onions, bell pepper and garlic. Sauté well, at least 10 minutes. Return crawfish tails to pot and add 2 cups of water. Stir and simmer slowly, about 40 minutes. Add cornstarch or flour to 1 cup of water and add to mixture. Bring to a boil for 1 minute. Check for taste and add extra seasoning if desired. Serve over cooked rice. Garnish with green onion tops.

**Chef's note:** Crabmeat is a Gulf Coast ingredient used in ceviche, a South American dish, which normally calls for raw fish. In this case, the crab is already cooked. We've found a touch of olive oil rounds out the flavor nicely.

### Louisiana Crabmeat Ceviche

*Chef Arthur Durham*

*La Truffe Sauvage*

**MAKES 4 TO 5 APPETIZER SERVINGS.**

- 1 pound jumbo lump crabmeat
- 1/2 jalapeño
- 2 tablespoons red onion
- 1 large, ripe tomato
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, or to taste

Check the crabmeat for shell pieces and clean as needed. Place in a medium-sized bowl. Seed the jalapeño, depending upon the heat you prefer – the more white ribbing left, the hotter the dish will be. Mince finely along with onion. Cut the outer flesh away from the tomato, discarding pulp and seeds. Dice finely. Add the lime juice, olive oil, cilantro, salt and pepper. Gently toss and check seasoning. Serve in a chilled martini glass.



### Red Snapper en Papillote

*La Truffe Sauvage*

**MAKES 4 SERVINGS.**

- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon sea salt, plus additional for fish
- 2 teaspoons black pepper, plus additional for fish
- 1 eggplant, peeled, sliced thinly lengthwise, lightly salted and pressed for 1 hour
- 2 small zucchinis, sliced 1/4-inch thick on a bias (angle)
- 4 portobello mushrooms, stemmed, with bottom gills trimmed away and top layer peeled

- 1 red and 1 green pepper, roasted, peeled, seeded and julienned
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh herbs, or 2 tablespoons dried
- 4 pieces parchment paper, each 20 x 15 inches
- 4 filets of red snapper (6 ounces each)

Combine the olive oil, vinegar, salt and pepper. Rinse and pat the eggplant dry, place on a baking sheet and drizzle with the oil/vinegar, and broil in oven until just done. Lay zucchini and mushrooms on same pan after eggplant is finished, drizzle with oil/vinegar and broil until just cooked. Since the peppers are roasted already, toss with the oil/vinegar. When vegetables have cooled, sprinkle generously with herbs. (This can be prepared a day before.)

Fold parchment in half so it is 7 1/2 x 10 inches and reopen. Lay eggplant, portobello mushroom, zucchini and peppers on top of one another, top with snapper, season with salt and pepper and drizzle lightly with olive oil. Crimp edges as tightly as possible, by making 1- or 2-inch folds, one after another, each sealing the other. The package should appear to be a half moon. Repeat until all are complete. You can hold these for several hours until ready to bake. Bake in oven at 400°F for 18 to 20 minutes on a baking sheet. When serving, be careful of the steam released when the package is opened.