



By Dave Lockhart with Dave Weretka

# GOLF, GUMBO, AND GAMING ON THE BAYOU



The sparkling vacation destination of Lake Charles, Louisiana, is located just off the Gulf of Mexico near the Texas border. In the southwest corner of Louisiana you will discover outstanding golf, great cuisine, world-class gaming and world-class people. Better yet, this fascinating region also features comfortable seasonal temperatures ideal for a golf journey no matter the season.

While guests have ample options to accommodate their lifestyles and budgets, the **L'Auberge du lac Casino Resort** ([www.lakecharles.com](http://www.lakecharles.com)) on the pristine banks of Lake Charles seems like a perfect choice for sportsmen and women. This 26-story hotel basically combines chunks of Las Vegas with slices of Myrtle Beach to create an unbelievably delicious gumbo of fun.

The fabulous Tom Fazio Contraband Bayou golf course rests a few steps away from the hotel lobby. Ignore your inclination to play it safe off the tee and pull out the driver on all the par 4s and 5s. Remember that you're playing a Fazio course: hit it

slightly off the fairway and there's a decent chance you will get a kick off the friendly mounds that border each side of the fairway.

There's a nice mix of holes with just enough water hazards and strategically placed eye-popping white sand bunkers to keep you focused. The GPS on the carts tells you where to hit it, and in the process takes the yardage excuse out of the equation. You won't lose many nuggets on this well-maintained fun design with a fun name that describes this Louisiana area to a tee – Contraband Bayou.

The layout is yet another solid design from America's favorite course architect as it captures both the feel and the essence of the Louisiana marshland. Fazio has been honored for creating award-winning courses throughout the United States. No living designer has more courses credited on *Golf Digest's* list of America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses and *Golfweek* magazine's collection of America's Best.

The resort features exquisitely appointed guest rooms and includes

a stunning outdoor pool area with private cabanas, jacuzzis, and a lazy river for totally chilling out. When you're done relaxing you'll want to get your other game on and hit the casino.

L'Auberge claims an enormous glass dome, a grand vaulted ceiling, and 30,000 square feet of the best gaming around. It features more than 60 table games and 1,600 slots. From blackjack to baccarat, there's always a game to be played. Of course, the action never stops around here – even when you're not playing. That's why they put Globar at the center of the gaming floor. Grab a drink and enjoy the scenery, because you never know when you'll hit it big.

In between golf and gaming, you can't go wrong, with many themed restaurants and the other libation stations inside the hotel. My favorite dining spot is the Ember Grille & Wine Bar. It features outstanding service, abundant wine selections, and steaks that rival the best beef you can find in Chicago.

Yes, Louisiana is a foodie's delight. You literally can't go wrong

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or go home hungry in Lake Charles. Creole cooking is some of the tastiest food you can find due to its amazing variety of delectable sauces and spices. The seafood gumbo and the crawfish are absolute musts when visiting a casual laid-back restaurant. Affectionately known as “mudbugs,” this delicacy looks like a miniature lobster but serves up a taste similar to shrimp. It can be a bit of work to unravel the shell on this freshwater crustacean, but truth be told, that’s half the fun! Try the authentic Seafood Palace restaurant ([www.facebook.com/seafoodpalace](http://www.facebook.com/seafoodpalace)) in town for the true local dining experience.

The kolache (co-lat-chee) is another delicacy not to be missed. As popular in Louisiana as it is in Chicago, this a soft pastry that in Cajun Country can be filled with fruit, cheese, ham, sausage, jalapeños, or just about anything else you can dream of! Usually served for breakfast, the kolache will provide a nice anchor to your belly when you hit the links.

If you’re looking for other great golf experiences in the bayou, test

your game at **The National Golf Club of Louisiana** ([www.nationalgcla.com](http://www.nationalgcla.com)). This superbly conditioned layout will surely get your attention with some 80 sand bunkers and 14 lakes. And if those hazards don’t stop you, perhaps a few of the alligators will. While they seem friendly enough, I’ve always had difficulty discerning the difference between a gator smile and gator sneer. So I heartily recommend letting sleeping golf balls lie if they find the water. Nothing slows a round down more than a lost finger or toe!

The course is nestled among stately pines accented by wide fairways and fast true greens. One of the more memorable holes is the beautiful par-3 No. 5 near the clubhouse. It has three church pew bunkers in the front left of the green and water all the way to it from the tee and around the left side of the green. The hole can play from 100 yards to over 210 yards to an elevated and undulated green. Top conditioning and outstanding putting surfaces make this par-72, 7,000 yard layout a true gem.

As referenced earlier, it’s the people of Lake Charles that make the region such a delight. Southern hospitality must certainly have originated in this community, as the locals are to a person warm, hospitable, and attentive. Nothing starts a day better than the question “How y’all doing?” said with a Cajun lilt. Somehow, somehow, they have managed to keep their spirits up despite occasional hurricanes and an oil spill. Lake Charles is a place of both soul and character.

The newest must-stay-and-play destination in the area is the **Golden Nugget of Lake Charles** ([www.goldennugget.com/lakecharles](http://www.goldennugget.com/lakecharles)). The centerpiece of this all-encompassing gaming resort is The Country Club at Golden Nugget designed by award-winning architect Todd Eckenrode. The course has five sets of tees so it plays comfortably to anyone’s game tipping out at 7,000 yards. The manicured greens framed by the property’s native bayou land offers varied levels on every hole and provide a spectacular

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backdrop for guests seeking a getaway within their getaway.

Following your round, head to the Grand Event Center at Golden Nugget for entertainment. The complex attracts a long list of world class acts including upcoming shows by ZZ Top and Rock 'n Roll Hall of Famers Cheap Trick – the pride of Rockford, Illinois.

#### Gray Plantation Golf Course

(www.graywoodllc.com) is a semi-private gem where the breeze off the bay plays a pivotal role in your day's strategy. This place has terrific vistas and good challenges on every hole. Designed by Rocky Roquemore, this is a traditional layout that will challenge the weekend warrior and the touring professional. Nature abounds here, with beautiful birds and interesting wildlife to help make Gray Plantation part of the Audubon Golf Trail for the State of Louisiana.

Don't leave the premises without enjoying one of the best 19th holes in all of Louisiana. Sit outside on the veranda of the plantation-style clubhouse and slurp up a bowl of gumbo,

a muffleta sandwich, and the local Abita beer. Spicy, tasty and smooth ... a fantastic way to finish the day. Gray Plantation has won numerous high accolades from Zagat's and *Golfweek*.

A great place to quench your thirst after a round is Crying Eagle Brewery (www.cryingeagle.com) which features an array of delicious microbrews. Take the tour and receive an education on what goes into making these tasty craft brew delights such as the Ready to Mingle Belgian, the Calcasieu Common Ale, and the Chuck Golden Ale.

Adventurous foodies will enjoy a visit to Tia Juanita's Fish Camp. Don't worry, this is not a place where you have to bait a hook and catch your own meal; rather, it is a low-key, tasty restaurant featuring a menu of Mexican and Cajun-Creole seafood dishes. Take in the grilled shrimp tacos, and don't forget the house-made jalapeño ranch sauce. It adds a delicious zing to all dishes. My personal recommendation is to take in a few of the menu's boudin offerings available at the camp.

What is boudin? It's considered a staple snack in the southern regions of the Bayou State. Boudin is made of varying amounts of pork meat, liver, rice, onions, parsley and dry seasonings like salt, red pepper, black pepper, and garlic powder. Tia's smoked boudin quesadillas in a grilled butter tortilla are truly memorable. Locals and visitors agree that this affordable culinary experience is worthy of a stop. Both Yelp and Google give Tia Juanita's an impressive 4-1/2 stars.

Both American Airlines and United Airlines seem to agree that Lake Charles is a worthwhile destination as each has regular flights to the Lake Charles Airport. Don't forget to pack a fishing pole inside your golf bag, as Lake Charles isn't just a city name but a destination that serves up a multitude of water activities including boating, water skiing, and swimming.

Lake Charles, Louisiana: Go on down and have a ball, y'all!

For more information, go to [www.visitlakecharles.org](http://www.visitlakecharles.org)

