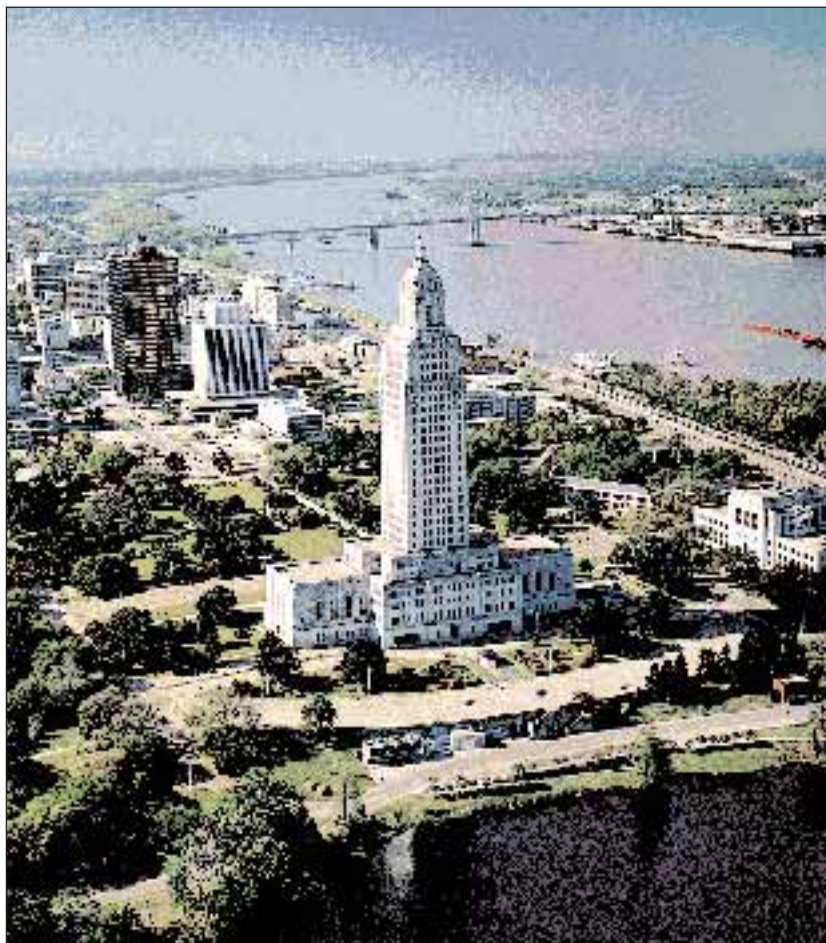


communityprofile



The tallest building in Baton Rouge, by law, is the state capitol building. The Mississippi River flows by on the western side of the city.

JAMBALAYA

Like a chef making Cajun stew, Baton Rouge blends its French, southern, and Cajun heritages, seasons it with a colorful state government, and stirs in fervid sports enthusiasm. The result is worth savoring, say residents.

By Bett Coffman

RED-MARKED TREES THAT ONCE DIVIDED the hunting grounds of two Native American tribes gave Baton Rouge its name. Today the city is still a place where cultures meet. Where southern plantation owners once lived along side the Cajuns, their descendants now

celebrate their combined cultural heritage, debate state government, and cheer on college football.

Louisiana State University, a powerful lightning rod for sports fervor, has a significant social impact on the city, as well as the entire state. While LSU has brought a significant international population to the city, most of the

physicians in Baton Rouge tend to be Louisiana natives.

“Louisiana is kind of a funny state. You hear so much negative about it in the news, yet those of us who live here love it in spite of its notorious [reputation],” says Robert St. Amant, MD, a Baton Rouge native and family practition-

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PHOTOS / GREGORY GUIRARD



ABOVE, The Atchafalaya Basin, a swampy area south of Baton Rouge, is popular for boating, fishing, and other outdoor activities.

LEFT, Oak Alley, one of many preserved plantations along River Road which runs along the Mississippi from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

BELOW, Sports fans in action at Louisiana State University.



er. "I think a lot of people in Louisiana are home-rooted and family oriented. If you're born here, you may go out of the state to train but you come back."

Fun on the bayou

Despite its reputation for high crime rates and problems with public schools, physicians here are quick to praise the climate and opportunities for sports and outdoor activities.

Ron Radzikowski, MD, is one who enjoys the mild winters. "I don't like the cold weather. We see snow about every five or 10 years and that's plenty. We'll have maybe a half-dozen days when it gets really cold."

St. Amant agrees. "The weather is very accommodating. It's very moderate most of the year. Oh, it can get hot, yes. It can get in the 90s and the humidity can be up. But this winter we've probably had three or four mornings where it's gotten below 32 degrees."

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The Roseland Terrace subdivision is the oldest part of Baton Rouge's Garden District. The first homes were built here in about 1911.

POPULATION:

Baton Rouge: 229,027

MSA: 570,662

CLIMATE:

Annual Precipitation: 60.9"

Annual Snowfall: .2"

Average High/Low Temperatures:

January - 60°/ 40°

July - 91°/ 73°

Days of sunshine: 218

TRANSPORTATION:

AIRPORTS - Baton Rouge

Metropolitan Airport, served by four commercial carriers with 25 daily departures.

INTERSTATES - Interstates 10 and 12, U.S. highways 190, 61, and 1

COST OF LIVING:

Cost of living is indexed at 99.7, 100 is national average

Per Capita Personal Income: \$21,159

Median Home Price: \$72,437

On this particular mid-February day, St. Amant describes a spring-like scene. "Right now, looking out, the grass is turning green, the trees are starting to bud out, and our azalea bushes and Japanese magnolias are in bloom." Those temperate days are good for hunting, fishing, and enjoying the outdoors. The swampy area south of Baton Rouge is excellent for recreation. "The whole of Atchafalaya Basin is a very unique area with the alligators, snakes, cypress trees and beautiful birds. The bass fishing is really good. We have a lot of lakes dotted around, too," says Radzikowski.

The internist regularly enjoys fishing trips to various parts of the region. "In the fall when the river gets low—below four feet in New Orleans—we get a salt water wedge that sneaks up the river down deep. Then the fresh water is on top since salt

water is heavier so you get speckled trout and redfish coming up into the river and you'll be fishing in an area and you'll catch a speckled trout and a redfish and a flounder and bass."

St. Amant praises the hunting opportunities available in the area. "It's good for anything and everything from duck to deer, turkey, squirrels, rabbits—both large game and small game," he says.

The foods of Louisiana are varied and sumptuous, and locals take advantage of the produce from the rivers, marshes, and the Gulf of Mexico. "Good seafood is what we all look forward to in spring and summer. In the fall we have an abundance of pecans. We eat them plain or make pecan pie," says Jerry Fourier, MD, the immediate past president of the East Baton Rouge Parish Medical Society. He also enjoys the unusual vari-

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eties of rice grown in the area. One of his favorites is Popcorn rice. "When you cook it, it smells like popcorn."

Southern and French Creole cuisine, as well as spicy Cajun food, are among the typical offerings in Baton Rouge. Just an hour's drive north of New Orleans, Baton Rouge offers much of the same cultural richness of its neighboring city, from food to music to Mardi Gras festivals.

"The cuisine is probably only second to New Orleans in the state," says Michael Guarisco, MD, an internist. "There are at least a half-dozen restaurants in Baton Rouge that are the equivalent to the better restaurants in New Orleans, and that city is, of course, known worldwide for its cuisine."

Social struggles

Unfortunately, another characteristic that Baton Rouge shares with its larger neighbor to the south is a reputation for high crime levels. FBI statistics indicate that crime rates for Baton Rouge are somewhat above the national averages.

"The law enforcement people have been working very hard to correct that and I think they have made some good strides, but we have some areas that aren't safe," admits Radzikowski. "Unfortunately a lot of the crime here has been black on black crime. But they are working very hard to do something about that."

Following a shooting which killed one man and wounded three children at the city's Martin Luther King Day celebration this year, African American church and civic organizations in Baton Rouge staged demonstrations to control violence within the African American community.

Fourrier says residents of his neighborhood have taken action as well, establishing a neighborhood watch pro-

gram. "The robberies and assaults were getting so out of hand we had to do something," Fourrier says.

St. Amant says that crime in Baton Rouge is localized. "I think any city is going to have some level of crime and in most cities, like in Baton Rouge, it boils down to what part of the city you're talking about. There are some areas that you simply avoid because they have a reputation for being high-crime areas," he says.

The city is struggling to improve its public schools. Although many of Louisiana's public schools are losing students and dealing with discipline and academic problems, the problem is worse in urban districts than suburban ones. The East Baton Rouge Parish (counties in Louisiana are known as parishes) schools have been losing students for the past decade, while private, parochial, and outlying schools have dramatically gained census.

A tax proposal last fall that would have generated large amounts of revenue for the schools failed. The overwhelming scope of the tax plan, as well as a lack of confidence that the school system would use the money efficiently seemed to be the deciding factors.

(The initiative) "appeared to be so overwhelmingly big that I just don't think people could fathom that kind of long-term tax burden," says Guarisco.

Physicians agree that the private and parochial schools in the district are excellent. Currently, the private and parochial schools in East Baton Rouge Parish serve about 25 percent of the students, including most of the children of these physicians.

St. Amant believes the public school problems are due to deteriorating buildings and the demoralizing effect of busing to achieve desegregation. "The kids are transported out of their

own neighborhood miles and miles away to schools where they are not familiar with the people and are not in neighborhood schools," he says.

Recently, forced desegregation has been replaced by a more community-based school plan and an optional magnet program where students may choose specific schools based on the school's special programs. This plan achieves voluntary desegregation of the predominantly African-American schools, proponents argue.

St. Amant sees positive elements within the Baton Rouge district. "We have a good magnet program and some of the magnet schools actually are top notch. In fact some of the regular schools are top notch, but it's where you live and whether you get access to those schools," he says.

The school board is working continually on plans to improve buildings, increase teacher pay, and improve available technology. A new accountability program, which would reward and punish schools based on their improvement in achievement test scores, as well as a plan which allows parents the opportunity to change schools if their home school does not meet standards of improvement, are among several initiatives set to aid the system's problems. Another, less burdensome tax plan to generate funding is likely to be proposed this summer.

Heart of the City

At the heart of downtown Baton Rouge is the Louisiana state government. The state capitol building dominates the skyline and state government issues dominate local headlines. The city has been the state's capital since it was moved from New Orleans in 1849. The old capitol building, a gothic, castle-like structure, once destroyed by fire during

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the Civil War, has been fully renovated and is now the Center for Political and Governmental History.

Baton Rouge has had its share of colorful leaders. Huey Long, Louisiana's charismatic and controversial governor from 1928 until his assassination in 1935, left his mark on the city. Known as the "Kingfish," Long ordered the construction of the new capitol building and decreed that it would be the tallest building in Baton Rouge. More recently, Edwin Edwards, the state's four-time governor, made headlines when he was accused of accepting improper payments from a riverboat gambling investor.

The political wrangling that goes on in the capitol is a part of life in Baton Rouge and discussions can get heated at election time.

"We have some characters," says Radzikowski. "The people in this state draw lines in the sand, but after it's all over, it's business as usual. It's not such a negative thing that it stops us from moving forward."

Tigers and Kingfish

When residents are not debating issues of state government, they rally behind the college sports teams. Baton Rouge's two largest universities, Louisiana State University and Southern University, each have strong sports programs. LSU in particular enjoys enthusiastic support among local residents.

"LSU has a very rich tradition with football and baseball," says Radzikowski. The LSU baseball team has won four national NCAA titles in the last seven years.

Fourrier is a fan of LSU basketball, baseball, and football as well as academics. "In addition to the athletic teams, there is a good business college. The engineering college is superb. There is

a very strong agricultural department with research into rice and sugarcane."

LSU, with 26,000 students, is a major economic and social force in the city.

"The university just brings a lot of youth and vigor to the city that probably would not be here otherwise," says Radzikowski. "And there are a lot of jobs tied to the university."

Community sports are also strong here say Guarisco and St. Amant, who both have young sons who participate. "You have a great YMCA system. There is a great soccer league. There is pee wee basketball and football and baseball. This is a great sports town," says Guarisco.

St. Amant's son enjoys youth hockey. "We have a minor league hockey team here, the Baton Rouge Kingfish, which is interesting if you think of south Louisiana and the heat we experience. Now they have developed a youth hockey league. My son is part of that so for two years now he has been participating in ice hockey," says St. Amant.

The universities contribute to more than sports, Guarisco says. "Because of the universities and their music departments and their theater departments, we have an exceptionally good symphony for a city our size. We have several theater groups, we have a ballet, we even have a little opera company. You get a little bit more of the highbrow stuff than you would get in an area this big as well as all the other good ol' boy stuff," he says.

Cajun, zydeco, blues, and jazz music also enliven the cultural scene. And nearly two dozen preserved and restored plantation homes and gardens are open to visitors between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, especially along Louisiana's historic River Road.

Industrial strength

In a curious cohabitation, the same corridor along the Mississippi River is the seat of a strong petrochemical industry. More than 100 chemical plants are located north and south of the city long the Mississippi River, including facilities of companies such as Exxon, Dow, and Shell.

Guarisco says the industry is at least partly responsible for the city's quality of life. "It employs a large percentage of the population with good-paying, well insured types of jobs," he says. "These chemical plants are all very good corporate citizens."

Despite its economic importance, the petrochemical industry has been blamed for the nickname given to the corridor along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans: Cancer Alley. Radzikowski says that an LSU study several years ago indicated that the petrochemical industry is not necessarily the source of the problem, however.

"When you subtracted out the drinking and smoking, (the cancers you'd expect from heavy drinking and heavy smoking in the area) our cancer rate's not a lot different from anybody else's," says Radzikowski. "We have along the Mississippi River a lot of fishermen and hunters that do that for a living. They tend to smoke more than other groups. The Cajuns smoke more. Black Americans along the river tend to smoke more. I would love to educate them and get them to quit, but that's one area of medicine in which we're not very successful."

Of vital importance to this industry is the port. Baton Rouge is the fourth largest deep-water port in the nation. This inland port, 290 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, is accessible by ocean-going ships and handles large volumes of sugarcane, cotton, and petrochemical products.

River valley pollution can be a prob-

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lem in Baton Rouge's long summers, according to Radzikowski. "We have some summertime smog which is related to the petrochemical industry," he says. "The heat cooks that up. We get very high ozone readings in the summer. If you're an asthmatic it can be a problem. Of course we have the typical problems that people in the south have. We have a long growing season and pollens in the spring and pollens in the fall."

Medical rivalries

Baton Rouge residents do not lack in medical treatment facilities. Radzikowski, the medical director for the Primary Care Network of Our Lady of the Lake, says he has found camaraderie in Baton Rouge medicine. "Our community is a bit unique because we have two major hospitals, Baton Rouge General and Our Lady of the Lake. Physicians have participated on the staffs of both hospitals and supported both hospitals and moved back and forth. It's been a very congenial medical community in which to practice."

Despite that congeniality among physicians, St. Amant says the two systems are competitive. Our Lady of the Lake has a large tertiary-care hospital which receives referrals from outlying areas as well as from facilities in Lafayette and Monroe. Baton Rouge typically does not compete with New Orleans for patients, drawing regional patients from western and northern parts of the state.

Baton Rouge General Health System, which includes Baton Rouge General Medical Center and Baton Rouge General Health Center, offers specialized services for cardiology and radiology and regional centers for burn and cancer care. The Medical Center is a tertiary facility which also houses the resi-

dency programs. The Health Center, a newer facility, "is a primary care oriented hospital which does deliver babies which the hospital downtown does not," says St. Amant, the chairman and medical director of First Care Physicians, a primary-care group affiliated with General Health System.

Baton Rouge is also home to the Ochsner Clinic, a large, multi-specialty group based in New Orleans which was modeled on the Mayo Clinic. Ochsner has four facilities in the Baton Rouge Area and employs a total of 80 physicians in the city.

Woman's Hospital presents a unique resource for Baton Rouge, providing a broad spectrum of care for women, including obstetrics. And a Columbia Hospital is located in the O'Neal Lane area, east of downtown.

The Earl K. Long LSU Medical Center provides care for the city's indigent and opportunities for medical education. "Many of us are on staff out there and work with the residency program," says Radzikowski.

Although physicians are needed in outlying rural areas of Louisiana, the city of Baton Rouge seems to be well supplied. "It is getting harder and harder for a young primary-care physician to come in and build a practice in a short amount of time (one year) unless you go into an established practice where there is an abundance of patients and the new physician can take up the slack," says St. Amant.

Physician surplus may be more of a problem if the city's atmosphere remains. As long as the Tigers keep winning and the festivals keep rolling, Baton Rouge will continue to have lagniappe—a little something extra—that makes it unique and intriguing. ■

Bett Coffman is the associate editor of UO.