



Spring Real Estate

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Months before Sandra Bullock adopted a baby boy from New Orleans in January, naming him Louis in honor of native icon Louis Armstrong -- and even more months before domestic

woes boosted her desire to relocate -- she had already set up house in his hometown.

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In June, the Oscar-winning actress laid down \$2.25 million in cash for an ornate 6,615-square-foot mansion in the city's Garden District. Built in 1876, it was designed by renowned New Orleans architect William Alfred Freret for James Biddle Eustis, who served as a U.S. senator and ambassador to France.

Almost as impressive as its historic pedigree are the neighbors, who include Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and John Goodman, now shooting HBO's "Treme" there. Nicolas Cage also owned two nearby homes until November, when they were sold in a foreclosure auction.

Five hours to the north in Shreveport, there has also been an influx of celebrity residents, including Jennifer Garner, Ben Affleck and Kevin Costner, all of whom have rented homes there in recent years.

"Samuel L. Jackson stayed in Shreveport for months," says Roger DeKay, a commercial Realtor based in Shreveport. "He lived on a golf course. He'd get up and play in the morning and people would just say hello. It was no big deal."

The stars may be drawn in by Louisiana's easygoing Southern hospitality, the spicy food, hot jazz and wild nightlife borne of its one-of-a-kind mix of French, Spanish and African cultures, or by a desire to show solidarity with the victims of Hurricane Katrina, but it's usually work that brings them there in the first place. Since Louisiana enacted a generous film and TV production incentive program in 2002, scores of industryites have been coming to Louisiana to shoot film and TV projects, and many have decided to make it their first or second home.

This five-bedroom New Orleans home is on the market for \$1.39 million

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Producer Michael P. Flannigan was in the middle of shooting a string of six pictures for Millennium Films in Shreveport the late '00s when he decided it was time to invest in a pied-a-terre.

"I figured I could take the living allowance they gave me and sink it into a hotel or rent an apartment," Flannigan says, "but I decided to put it into a mortgage because of what you can get for the money."

Flannigan bought a 2,500-square-foot townhouse with two bedrooms and two and a half baths in Dudley Square, a gated community in Shreveport's South Highland Historic District. He won't reveal the price tag, but quips, "You couldn't buy a garage in Los Angeles for what I paid."

The price gap between Los Angeles and Louisiana has narrowed in recent years, but it remains significant. According to the National Association of Realtors, the median price for a single-family home in the Shreveport-Bossier City area was \$147,000 in 2009, up from \$135,600 in 2007, while in New Orleans it has hovered just above \$160,000 during the same period. By contrast, the median price in Los Angeles was \$333,900 in 2009, down from \$593,000 in 2007.

"Typically, in the Shreveport market, new construction runs anywhere from \$125-\$150 a foot, and you can buy existing construction for \$100 a foot," says Michael Long, a Shreveport Realtor and city councilman. "I'm talking 2,000- to 3,000-square-foot houses for anywhere from \$180,000 to \$300,000-\$400,000 that are nice properties in good neighborhoods with stable residents. If you're inclined to live more in the country, you can find acreage with a decent house on it and be in hog heaven with your horses and your cows or whatever. A lot of the Hollywood folks, especially the guys in the trades who don't mind picking up a hammer and doing some renovation work, are finding great values. You can literally buy a 3,000- or 4,000-square-foot house for \$60-\$70 a foot, put a little bit of money in there, and you're fine."

Flannigan liked the prices so much, he bought three additional condos near his Dudley Square townhouse as rental properties. And since he's been traipsing around the world in recent months, from the Republic of Georgia to Finland, working on films with director Renny Harlin, he's now renting out his personal Shreveport residence as well.

"Producers and actors have stayed there," he says. For the three other condos, "we like to get the longer-term people in there, like accountants and production designers."

While Flannigan rents his properties via word-of-mouth in the film community, real estate agent Shannon Smith is working to formalize the process with her new boutique firm Blackstone Smith Properties in Baton Rouge, created specifically to find short-term housing for visiting film professionals. Rental prices range from \$2,000 per month for well-appointed condos to \$10,000 for large houses for above-the-line talent. Since launching her business this year, she's already worked on such films as "The Ledge," starring Patrick Wilson and Terrence Howard, and "The Big Valley," starring Richard Dreyfuss.

While many of the film and TV people setting up house in Louisiana are essentially high-profile migrant workers, others, like unit production manager Todd Lewis and his wife, costume designer Claire Breaux, have put down solid roots.

When the couple began their Louisiana home search in 2008, they were living in a rented 1,200-square-foot condominium in Santa Monica. Equivalent properties for sale in the area were priced at anywhere from \$750,000-\$1 million, while in New Orleans six- and seven-bedroom homes were well within their price range.

Richie Adams' 2,300-square-foot Baton Rouge home cost less than his 1,000-square-foot condo in L.A.

In the end, Lewis and Breaux looked at a total of 67 places in New Orleans. They saw the last one the Sunday after wrapping work on "The Final Destination" in July 2008: a two-story, 3,000-square-foot, Colonial-style house in Uptown New Orleans with three bedrooms and two and a half baths. Built in 1910, the house had been renovated in the 1990s with granite countertops and an addition in the back which included a rear stairwell, laundry room and large master bathroom. They toured the property, then boarded a plane to Los Angeles. The next day, Breaux flew back and put in an offer, and the seller accepted.

Mindful of the fact that they were buying a home in a hurricane zone, Lewis and Breaux made it a point to look at homes during bad weather.

"How a house has been prepared for any future storms is a big consideration," Lewis says. "For instance, our backyard definitely holds water, so we plan to build up our yard and put in an irrigation system so it drains better toward the street. But our house didn't flood; it wasn't damaged by Katrina."

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That's because Uptown New Orleans is in a flood-resistant area of the city known as "the sliver by the river," which also includes all or part of other neighborhoods including Bywater, Faubourg Marigny, the French Quarter, the Warehouse District, the Garden District and Carrollton.

"The areas closest to the river are usually the highest in elevation, and that's why they survived and did real well, so therefore everybody wants to live there now," Long says.

Unfortunately, most of New Orleans is 3 to 8 feet below the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, and when Hurricane Katrina hit in late August 2005, about 80% of the city -- some 144 square miles -- was flooded, destroying 204,737 homes. The city still has 61,000 blighted or abandoned properties, far more than any other U.S. city. At the same time, it has only 300,000 inhabitants, down from 485,000, pre-Katrina.

In the wake of Katrina and Hurricane Rita, which hit less than a month later, many residents fled to Shreveport or the state capital, Baton Rouge, 80 miles to the northwest.

"People came in and bought whole subdivisions," says Baton Rouge Realtor Pat Meyer. "It was bizarre. Prices rose about 10%-15%. Now that has leveled off, and prices have come back down to pre-Katrina levels."

The post-Katrina influx meant title designer Richie Adams' move from Los Angeles to Baton Rouge in October 2005 was more expensive than it would have been just two months earlier, but, he says, "the 1,000-square-foot condo I had in Brentwood at Sunset Boulevard and Barrington still cost more than the 2,300-square-foot house I bought on historic LSU Avenue," built in the 1930s.

Numerous film projects were also forced to flee New Orleans or abandon plans to shoot in the city -- including "Premonition," starring Bullock, and "The Guardian," starring Costner, both of which went to Shreveport -- effectively turning Shreveport and Baton Rouge into major production hubs overnight.

The producers of "The Guardian" called DeKay from Shreveport Airport after escaping the storm.

"They literally left New Orleans with the clothes on their backs and the flip-flops on their feet," DeKay says. "They said, 'We need somebody who can find us 10,000 square feet of office, a 60,000-foot warehouse and a place to put this wave pool, which is 80 by 100 feet, and we need it now.'"

DeKay dropped everything and found them what they needed, including a site for the wave pool, which now operates as the Louisiana Wave Studio. In the years since, he's continued to help visiting productions find office and warehouse space.

"Nothing has changed," DeKay says. "They always need it immediately."

Katrina was an even larger life-changing force for Amy Mitchell Smith, who came to Louisiana from New York in 2005 to help spearhead efforts for the relief organization FilmAid International and wound up with a new job, a new husband and a home in Baton Rouge's Garden District.

"I went from having an apartment in the West Village that was 450 square feet to this incredible old home that is 3,000 square feet with a back house," says Mitchell-Smith, who previously worked in sales and acquisitions for Miramax and is now executive director of the Baton Rouge Film Commission.

One of Blackstone Smith Properties' rentals in Baton Rouge

The couple closed on the house two weeks before they married in March 2007 and moved in after returning from a honeymoon in Brazil, then settled down to work on some major renovations, including replacing the vintage knobs and tube electrical wiring.

"Fortunately, my husband Aaron is a residential contractor with a specialty in historic restoration and renovation," Mitchell-Smith says.

Stylistically, Mitchell-Smith describes it as "the type of house Joan Didion would live in if she were in Louisiana. It's got a bit of an Arts & Crafts feel to it, but it's a traditional American home that you would have seen built in the '30s."

While Arts & Crafts (aka Craftsman) homes can be found throughout the U.S., Louisiana boasts several architectural styles that sprang from its own uniquely rich cultural heritage, including Acadian, Creole Cottage and Creole Townhouse. It also has a large selection of stately Antebellum homes common to the American South. Newer developments often work in elements of these vintage styles, such as Greek columns or dormer windows that protrude from roofs.

Historic homes come with their own unique stories, and when the home in question is in New

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Orleans, the tales are often downright outrageous. Art director Chris Spellman owns a house in the French Quarter, built in 1840, where people once taught the art of dueling. In fact, from about 1830 to 1860, more than 50 maitres d'armes operated fencing academies in his neighborhood, known as Exchange Alley. Cage's former home at 1140 Royal St. in the French Quarter once belonged to Madame LaLaurie, a socialite who according to popular -- and in all likelihood apocryphal -- legend tortured, mutilated and killed 100 slaves there in the 1830s.

Slavery was horrific enough without mutilations, and its remnants are visible in many New Orleans properties from the 19th century. Typically, there would be a main house made of brick with a courtyard behind it, on the other side of which would be a wooden structure housing a kitchen on the first floor and "servants' " quarters on the second.

"Now everyone finds euphemisms for them, except for black people who call them slave quarters, because they know what they are and I guess they're not in the mood to forget," says Susan Hoffman, who along with her husband, veteran executive Peter Hoffman, splits her time between homes in New Orleans and Los Angeles. "You also see townhouses where they have two floors, then space above it with five or 6-foot ceilings where the servants would sleep."

The Hoffmans bought their historic townhouse at 900 Royal St. in the French Quarter as a second home in 1992, and over the ensuing years acquired the adjacent properties at 906 and 910 Royal St. and poured money into their restoration. All three buildings were commissioned by Mme. Aimee Miltenberger for her sons and completed in 1836. Today, the bottom floors house shops and galleries, while the carriage house across the courtyard from 910 has been transformed into a restaurant named Cafe Amelie.

The Hoffmans reside on the upper floors of 900 and rent out portions of the other buildings as apartments. When Mardi Gras comes in February or March, they have prime balcony seats to view the action.

"A lot of (residents) leave, because they're sick of Mardi Gras, but I give a party almost every year," Hoffman says. "A lot of people think I'm nuts to do it, but I open up the house and it's really fun."

Over in Uptown New Orleans, Lewis and Breaux are more likely to be found relaxing on their front porch swing, looking up at the big oak tree in their front yard, than whooping it up in the Quarter. But if they want to check out the blues clubs on Bourbon Street, "we could be there in 10 minutes," Lewis says. "Here, you can pretty much be everywhere in 20 minutes."

If there's a major drawback to living in Louisiana, it's the weather, particularly the summer humidity.

"By the time it gets to August, it's sweltering outside," Lewis says. "You just walk outside and it hits you like a brick wall. But right now is a wonderful time to be here."

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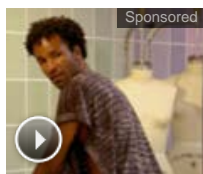
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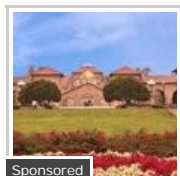


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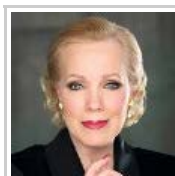
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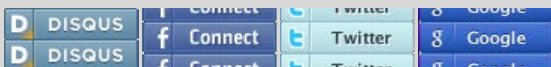
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