

Bayou bash yields lasting memories for columnist, grandson

One dilemma associated with having family spread across the country is figuring out travel plans and keeping up with special events and occasions, such as birthdays, weddings, funerals and graduations. Early June presented a conundrum with multiple events vying for attention.

OUTDOORS

Ken Perrotte



First was my elderly mother-in-law's birthday in Louisiana with my grandson's high school graduation the next week in Texas. My wife really wanted to make her mom's birthday and we both wanted to go to the graduation, but taking two trips back-to-back wasn't going to work. I devised an alternative.

New Orleans is one of my favorite cities and Louisiana has always been a favorite fishing destination. St. Tammany Parish, on Lake Pontchartrain's north shore, is ideally located for ready access to the city, plus it has abundant saltwater and brackish water fishing opportunities near Slidell, including access to massive Lake Pontchartrain.

I called my grandson Aleric and said, "We'd like to attend your graduation, but know how those grad-

uation festivities go; you'll be tied up with school activities, rehearsals and all the rigamarole that goes along with collecting your diploma. How about we do something different?"

Something different involved flying him to Louisiana. He and I would hang out for a couple days, visit New Orleans and work in a fishing trip.

Our first stop in New Orleans was the massive and incredibly impressive National World War II Museum. Next on the agenda was finding an alligator po-boy, something on his 17-year-old bucket list. Personally, I prefer oyster or shrimp po-boys. We checked off the gator sandwich at the Market Café in the French Quarter while listening to live jazz and blues. Our final city stop was the famous Felix's Oyster House where we sampled fresh, salty raw oysters.

I simply cannot go to Louisiana and not willingly overdose on superb Cajun and Creole cuisine.

We grabbed a couple pounds of boiled crawfish from a local seafood shop to have as a pre-dinner appetizer at our new Marriott TownePlace Suites hotel in Slidell. Dinner was at Palmetto's on the Bayou, which features a huge dining deck overlooking the river. Cicadas buzzed as Aleric wolfed down something called Catfish St. James, which involved a spicy gumbo.



KEN PERROTTE

Kenny Kreeger, a longtime charter guide and captain, fishes for redfish in the Louisiana sunrise.

I had a unique, flavorful shrimp and grits.

With a 6 a.m. showtime at Rigolets Marina to fish with Capt. Kenny Kreeger (lakepontchartraincharters.com), lights out came early.

Kreeger, an enthusiastic, young 65 years old, has been a longtime charter guide, fishing the local waters since he was 5 years old. You have many options when fishing out of Slidell and we were anxious to see what might be on the table. He had good news and bad news.

The bad news was three days of westerly winds had blown dirty, muddy water into the area. This tends to drive out the speckled trout. His fellow guides were finding some fish but making 40-mile runs in the process.

ADDRUMROLL

The good news was

redfish (red drum) were still around and black drum fishing was really taking off. Our first location in the Pearl River's brackish water yielded a few small redfish, including a couple keepers that went into the ice chest. Saltwater catfish, including aggressive gafftops, kept stealing our live shrimp bait, confounding our redfish quest.

We relocated to a channel beneath a rusty railroad bridge on Lake Borgne. Aleric quickly hooked up and landed a black drum in the 12-pound range. Kreeger began extolling how good this fish would be filleted, blackened, cut up and fried, etc., reminding me a bit of Bubba outlining the many ways to cook shrimp in the movie *Forrest Gump*.

Aleric's next fish would be his biggest ever. The

spinning reel's drag sang as the fish repeatedly took line. After a good 15 minutes of fighting, Kreeger netted the 26-pound black drum. The smile on grandson's face underscored the momentous occasion.

A little later, I had two fish break my line. We were using 14-pound monofilament with a slighter stronger leader. Oyster shells and other debris were underwater hazards. Light tackle made the hookups fun, but also increased chances of the line breaking.

One fish I lost behaved like a big red drum, running against the current after hookup. The other felt like a brute black drum, almost making me think I was hung up before the line began moving away with something clearly big and powerful at the other end.

Morning sun transitioned to afternoon heat. When the cloud cover broke and the wind died down, it was a bit sweltering. We made one last run, traveling a few miles to fish near bridge abutments on Lake Pontchartrain, hoping to find redfish, sheepshead, anything. Kreeger once held the state record for speckled trout, a fish he caught on Pontchartrain. "This place is where I made my bones," he said.

Eventually, the ever-present catfish claimed the last of our baits. We

called it a day.

LAGNIAPPE

As we prepared to cruise back in, Kreeger said one of marina's shrimp boats might be coming back around the time we'd arrive. Buying shrimp right off the boat was a distinct possibility – at \$2 a pound! I emptied the cooler of everything but our fish fillets and bought 20 pounds.

That night, we celebrated mother-in-law Rosalie's 92nd birthday, dining on fresh, pan-sautéed black drum topped with fresh shrimp and crabmeat (Pontchartrain style). Aleric and I, both tired, then retired to watch the Washington Capitals hockey game.

While sitting in a huge hall and watching 800 youngsters line up for diplomas would have been "nice," I believe our little Louisiana excursion may have been a tad more memorable. I know it yielded more "quality" time.

For more about all you can do on Louisiana's north shore, see louisiananorthshore.com. And, for wide-ranging outdoors, wild game cooking and more coverage, including some video of our Louisiana black drum fishing expedition, visit Ken Perrotte's blog site: www.outdoorsrambler.com.

Ken Perrotte:
Outdoors@FreeLanceStar.com