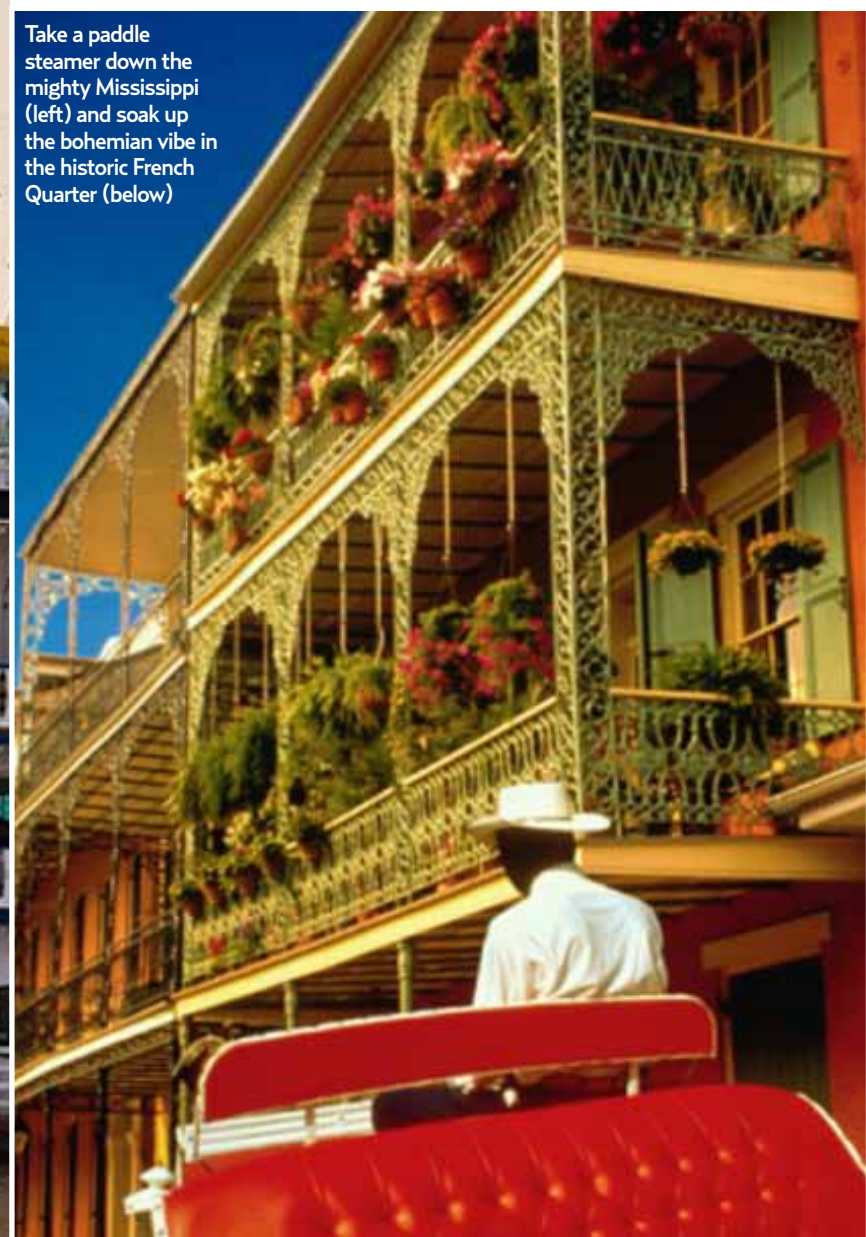




Take a paddle steamer down the mighty Mississippi (left) and soak up the bohemian vibe in the historic French Quarter (below)



# Next Stop, New Orleans

Nigel Tisdall takes in the changing landscape on a lazy train ride from the Big Apple to the Big Easy

**W**HY DID IT TAKE SO long? For years my wife and I had dreamed of crossing the States on an epic train ride – sipping beers, listening to Bob Dylan and discovering our inner hobo. After all, it's not hard to do. Every day long-distance locos bearing romantic names like California Zephyr and Texas Eagle chuff out from the country's major cities. And while this may be the land of the car, these days Americans are riding the rails in record numbers. It's safer, greener, less stressful – but, more importantly, travelling by train lets you feel the immensity of this great country as it rolls by like a long, scenic movie.

We've plumped for a trip on the Crescent, travelling south on a 30-hour, 1,377-mile trundle from New York to New Orleans that passes through 13 states and stitches together two of America's most enjoyable – but utterly different – cities. Many great US rail journeys start in Chicago, but this ride lets you kick off your holiday having a ball in the Big Apple. For us, that means enjoying the high life. Every summer New Yorkers take to the rooftops like kids scampering up a climbing frame. The Cantor Roof Garden at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the top of the Rockefeller Center – these are the places to be. Many hotels tune into this aerial life, like the very cool, 18-storey The James in SoHo which is crowned with a



Take in the city's sights from one of its iconic streetcars

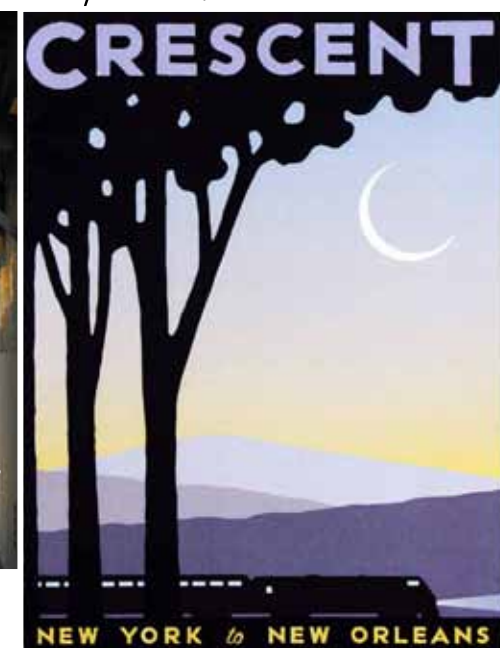


New Orleans is all about the music



Making tracks: the Crescent train passes through 13 states on its way from New York to New Orleans

*'New Orleans is a place of Caribbean colours that lives by its own rules'*



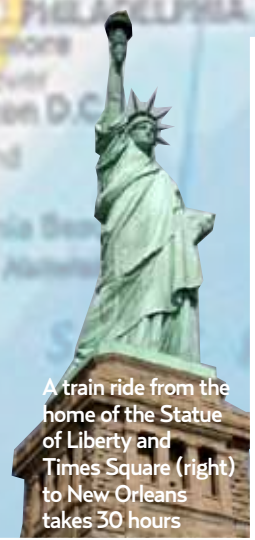
rooftop pool and bar with engrossing views over Manhattan. It's the sort of place where you have one too many cocktails, but fortunately breakfast in the companion David Burke Kitchen features reviving Bloody Marys pepped up with bacon and smoked okra.

With just a couple of nights here we settle on three adventures. We take a trip to Ground Zero to see the 9/11 Memorial and the astonishing, rapidly rising towers of the reborn World Trade Center. We go cycling beside the Hudson River (a 'Boris bike' rental scheme launches this year), and we walk the High Line, an elevated railway line turned arty park that runs from Gansevoort Street to West *{continued}*

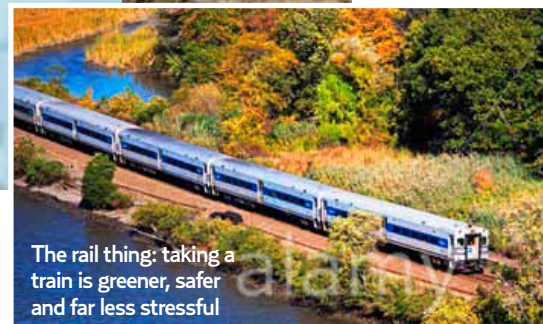
Try the gumbo – a New Orleans classic (below); revellers at Mardi Gras (right)



NEW YORK



A train ride from the home of the Statue of Liberty and Times Square (right) to New Orleans takes 30 hours



The rail thing: taking a train is greener, safer and far less stressful

34th Street – or, as the locals put it, from Meat to Elite. One essential sight for train-trip fans is Grand Central Terminal, a barrel-vaulted cathedral to transport from 1913 that also has a fabulous food market. The day we visit there's a New York Yankees baseball game on and the concourse is awash with so many fans wearing their collarless, black-and-white striped kit it's like some mass pyjama party. You can take your pick from a feast of seafood in the station's cele-

brated Oyster Bar, where the molluscs sport alluring names like Lady Chatterley and Naked Cowboy, while the destinations on the departures screen are so enchanting it's tempting to jump on board and see what life's really like in New Canaan, White Plains or Poughkeepsie.

Sadly, all long-distance trains depart from the more mundane Penn Station on 31st/33rd Street. Unsurprisingly, our luggage has ballooned with shopping, so a burly Amtrak porter is required to lead us down the long line of the Crescent's streamlined steel carriages. 'I'll see ya right' says our uniformed sleeping-car attendant, Bennea, who is so bright and cheery she deserves her own chat show.

New high-speed rail services are apparently on the way, but our train still has a solid, lived-in look that seems unchanged since the 1960s – all clunky metal and robust fittings that makes it feel like we're about to be fired into

outer space. Our Viewliner Roomette comes with two armchairs that convert into bunks, plus a sliding door and a tiny loo and basin. It's compact but fun and all meals are included with your ticket. Train travel here is egalitarian – you dine where you're put, munching apple pie à la mode on green leatherette seats opposite fellow travellers who may ignore you, interrogate you, or just crack up at your Limey accent. The food is plain and plentiful and comes spiced with bizarre questions, such as, 'Would ma'am like a "protein topper" on her salad?' Otherwise known as a bit of chicken. As for sleeping – well, it's only one night of shake, rattle and roll, not to mention the endless blast of the horn as we power south through North and South Carolina, saying hello and goodbye to mysterious places like Gastonia, Spartanburg and Clemson.

By dawn the world has changed. Pulling back the curtains, we find Atlanta loitering outside the window. Welcome to Georgia, gateway to the Deep South and the home of Coca-Cola and *Gone with the Wind*. A 25-minute stop {continued}



New York's Grand Central Terminal lives up to its name

allows us time to stretch the legs, take gripping photos of the baggage car, and chat with our fellow escapees. The guy next door, we discover, is a regular who always travels with a stack of cigars of different lengths that exactly match the time available at each stop.

Should you ride these rails, be sure to pack your knitting, your Neil Young, your sherbet lemons – homely pleasures to enjoy as you thunder over the Chattahoochee River and play spot the difference between Tallapoosa and Tuscaloosa. Alabama segues into Mississippi, the temperature rises, the land turns swampy and secretive. Water-logged forests herald the Crescent's crossing of the vast Lake Pontchartrain as the sun starts to set.

It was these waters that flooded New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, but The Big Easy has got its groove back now. Last year over 8 million visitors rolled in. New hotels have opened and the Louisiana Superdome – once a vision of refugee hell – has had a £54m revamp. Set beside a venerable bend of the Mississippi River, the city is surprisingly small, a place of Caribbean colours that lives by its own rules and rhythms. Most obviously, this is the only city in the US where you're allowed to drink in the street. There are large signs saying 'Cocktails to

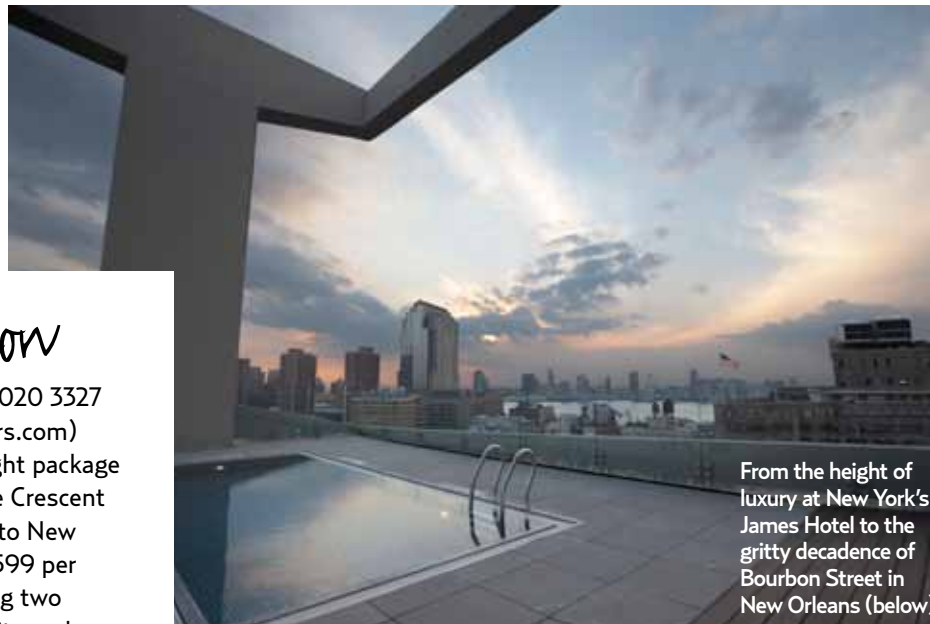
## Book now

● Railbookers (020 3327 0812; railbookers.com) offers a five-night package travelling on the Crescent from New York to New Orleans from £599 per person, including two nights in each city and one in a sleeping-car roomette. Flights are extra. For more great US rail journeys see amtrak.com.

● A round-trip flying from London to New York then back from New Orleans via Miami with British Airways and American Airlines costs from £536 (ba.com).

● In New York, stay at The James (jameshotels.com, from £261). For more information see nycgo.com.

● In New Orleans, stay at Soniat House (soniathouse.com, from £214) or International House (ihhotel.com, from £93). For more information see neworleanscvb.com.



From the height of luxury at New York's James Hotel to the gritty decadence of Bourbon Street in New Orleans (below)

Go' and every weekend the party strip of Bourbon Street becomes a maelstrom of out-of-town drunkards. It's a lively night, for sure, but not the real reason to visit.

Like Venice – another great city that tries to walk on water – New Orleans has bags of atmosphere. The richly coloured French Quarter, all gushing flowers and cast-iron balconies, is wilfully decadent. Its streets are full of shops selling perfume, corsets and lingerie, with names like Trashy Diva, Voluptuous Vixen and Constant Envy. The restaurants serve intriguing dishes

like sheepshead (a fish), gumbo and dirty rice, the locals use exotic words such as *lagniappe* (a little extra) and po-boy (a sandwich). One must-do is a ride on a clanking wooden streetcar to the Garden District, home to overblown antebellum mansions and the dreamy Lafayette Cemetery with ornate 19th-century tombs. Another is a bike tour, pedalling through gentrifying neighbourhoods like Bywater, lined with wooden 'shotgun' houses now colonised by creative types. There are rewarding attractions, too, like the Ogden Museum of Southern Art and the Backstreet Cultural Museum in Tremé filled with Mardi Gras costumes.

And then there is the music. If you think Nawlins is all about heading off to a

little shack-bar on a warm night to hear brilliant jazz for a just a few bucks tossed into the passed-round hat – well, it's true. There's some 50 live music venues to choose from, with a good cluster in Frenchmen Street. Listening to the ecstatic trumpets and pumping trombones, it's hard to believe that a day and a half ago we were in fast-paced, skyscraper-filled, famously rude Noo Yawk. Now life has turned deliciously sensual and bohemian. Spanish moss hangs from the live oaks, paddle-boats cruise the river, and an hour here – as Tennessee Williams put it – 'isn't just an hour – but a little piece of eternity dropped into your hands'. This is the great yin and yang of America, and it's still all joined together by those ribbons of steel. ■

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Old-world charm at New Orleans' Soniat House hotel



Photographs by Matthew D White/Wonderful Machine, Getty, Axiom, Alamy, 4 Corners, Superstock, National Geographic, Nigel Tisdall