

[Star Gazing Spurs Movie Tours in NOLA](#)

A husband-and-wife tour team could be the start of a new stream of business in Hollywood South.

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On any given day, Jonathan and Michelle Ray can be found sitting in a white van with a group of strangers watching actor Jean-Claude Van Damme fend off a gang of street thugs on Frenchmen Street.

The passengers, ranging from Midwestern retirees to Finnish vacationers, nosh on popcorn and absorb the action. Soon the scene from the 1993 film “Hard Target,” set in New Orleans, cuts out from the small television screens attached to the seat backs in the Ray’s customized tour van. A few “oohs” and “aahs” escape as they look out the windows to see the same mismatched music club façades.

The Rays, owners of Original New Orleans Movie Tours and its only tour guides, relish these moments. “I like when they’re oohing and aahing because I know they’re enjoying it,” Jonathan Ray said. “You hear them behind me and they’re getting into it.”

In its first month of business, Original New Orleans Movie Tours has ushered dozens of tourists through local neighborhoods to the sites where iconic — and perhaps less so — moments in New Orleans film history were shot. Tourists pay \$54 per person for the three-hour tour.

The business is one of the first in the city to cater to tourists interested in experiencing not just movie history but the movie itself. As live filming becomes more routine in New Orleans, the Rays expect to have some company.

City and tourism officials alike have called attention to the impact Hollywood film crews have in improving the city’s economy and its image. Since lawmakers established a state film tax credit in 2002, 139 films have been shot in New Orleans, according to the New Orleans Office of Film and Video. Louisiana Economic Development estimates the movie industry has generated \$1.48 billion in economic activity statewide.

Jennifer Day, director of communications and public relations for the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, said New Orleans images in film and on shows such as the HBO series “Treme” are now a key part of the bureau’s travel narrative. Recently, the bureau has directed crowds of travel writers interested in “Treme” to walking tours like one the New Orleans African American Museum organized this year.

But tourists overall, Day said, are increasingly interested in visiting the sites of movie scenes, glimpsing stars and running into live filming in New Orleans. “The fact that we pretty much have something in production every day, that really ups the ante,” Day said.

The Rays, both hospitality industry workers, poured \$50,000 into Original New Orleans Movie

Tours after Jonathan Ray interned on several movie sets last spring. The tour, they say, offers a much-needed alternative to swamp and ghost tours. “We’re trying to change and add something because it’s been so stale in this city for so long,” Jonathan Ray said. “There’s been nothing new.”

Laura Mandala, managing director at Mandala Research in Alexandria, Va., has studied how and why people travel for more than a decade. She notes that thriving tourism markets offer “as wide an array of activities as you can and get (tourists) to stay longer and spend more.”

Film, Mandala said, has been a way to evolve tourism in New York and Los Angeles. Now other areas are following suit.

Mandala said movie-related tourism packs a particular punch. In a January survey of 1,500 travelers, Mandala Research found 23 percent responded that movies and television programs heavily influenced their travel decisions.

Mandala notes that travelers get juicy stories from movie-related tourism. “And sharing those stories back home is an important part of why (people) travel,” she said

Robert Florence, owner of Historic New Orleans Tours, says the influence of media on local tourist attractions isn’t new. Two decades ago, he said, there were no vampire tours. “It started with two words: Anne Rice,” Florence said.

Florence said film history crops up throughout his historic tours. He only offers a movie tour on request but expects that to change in five years. “By then (film) won’t just be incidental; it will be a reason for which people come to the city,” Florence said.

At Original New Orleans Film Tours, Jonathan Ray uses film industry contacts to locate live sets for his itinerary. In the Central Business District, the Rays stop and hand passengers a call sheet from a chase scene filmed there for “The Mechanic,” a 2009 action film. “We actually try to give them a little insight as to what actually goes into the making of a movie,” Jonathan Ray said.

The Rays say they want to keep their tour small and worry about the impact larger movie tour groups could have on open movie sets in New Orleans. Even so, they couldn’t be happier about the outlook for their business.

“We are the third biggest filming destination in the U.S.,” Jonathan Ray said. “People are starting to figure that out.”