



## A Postcard from New Orleans

Posted by [Stuart Staniford](#) on December 28, 2005 - 11:04pm

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Tags: [hurricane katrina](#), [new orleans](#), [peak oil](#) [[list all tags](#)]



Greetings from New Orleans. I'm mostly here supporting my wife Zoe in a project of hers, but thought I'd send y'all a few snapshots from a day's driving around the city and talking to folks. It's not 100% peak oil relevant, but since we took such an interest in the hurricanes, perhaps a three month update will have some interest.

Near our hotel in the Garden District, there are sizeable patches of near-normality in wealthy neighborhoods:



*Credit: Zoe Hare*

I estimate that around one in two retail businesses are open in the Garden District, central business district, and French Quarter. Here and there, a little holiday cheer has been achieved.



*Credit: Zoe Hare*

However, only a few blocks away, we started to run into scenes like this:



*Credit: Zoe Hare*

Next to I-10 things got really eerie for a peak-oiler. This abandoned gas station was a powerful metaphor. The spray paint markings are left over from the search for bodies. Note the brown tide marks on the right hand gas pump - the water was only about a foot deep right here. (You can click on the pictures to get a larger version).



Just across the street, under the freeway, the authorities have been storing abandoned vehicles

dragged from out of nearby neighborhoods. The pillars are decorated with murals from before the hurricane. This scene stretches on for block after block after block of ruined vehicles.



A poignant moment - a child's train through the smashed back window of an SUV evokes a normality that will not return.



As we got into the really hard-hit neighborhoods, it became clear that much of the city is still almost uninhabited. Apparently the population of the city proper has been reduced from about

500,000 to around 100,000. This scene in the 9th Ward is typical. There are blocks and blocks with no-one around and all the vehicles ruined and abandoned. Here and there, a house has life and fresh paint and a clean vehicle.



*Credit: Zoe Hare*

The National Guard is still here, though mostly a fairly low-key presence. The police are more numerous. We never felt unsafe in any neighborhood, at least by daylight.



*Credit: Zoe Hare*

The economy is obviously very hard-hit, but in ways that are still confusing to me. On the one hand, every business we went in was operating with a skeleton crew. Hotels and restaurants are often working with 15-30% of the headcount they had before the hurricane and cannot get workers. And yet, here is the scene at the local unemployment office. This line stretched for well over a hundred yards.



*Credit: Zoe Hare*

Talking with the folks there, it seemed the explanation for at least some people was that they had lost everything, including their identification. They couldn't work without ID, and couldn't afford the fees to get new ID. Many of the people had been made homeless by the hurricane.

My impression overall is that much of New Orleans is not being rebuilt at this point due primarily to political problems - lack of federal action, and local race/class political dynamics (there are people who would like to see the poor neighborhoods redeveloped for a pretty different demographic than lived there before).



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