

"New Orleans is back to life," I said to myself in an upbeat tone as I toured the Big Easy's carnival-like downtown recently on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The French Quarter's narrow streets were bustling. Souvenir shops were crowded, and lines formed outside restaurants.

The city was also under major repair. An enormous sign outside the Super Dome proudly declared the facility was reopening in September. Sidewalks and buildings were also being renovated.

The city even displayed a sense of humor about being the target of the greatest natural disaster in U.S. history. T-shirts poked fun at the catastrophe with humorous sayings. My favorite was one that read, "Make Levees, Not War."

I laughed at the T-shirts. I felt delighted to be in New Orleans. I felt good about the city.

And then I took a drive around the city with Peter Carew, a long-time superintendent in New Orleans, who's in charge of two municipal golf courses. Carew showed me neighborhoods that were destroyed by the fierce flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina. I saw homes in rich, middle-class and poor areas. They had one thing in common: They were all reduced to ruins.

It was jaw-dropping shocking.

Carew put me within touching distance of the devastation. I didn't feel so good about New Orleans anymore.

It's been almost eight months since Katrina. The water from the flooding has receded, but the destruction remains. It's so vast and vivid that it's difficult to comprehend. It's house after house, block after block and mile after mile of gutted homes and piles of debris. It's row after row of desolation.

"I've seen the after pictures of Hiroshima," Carew says. "That's what this looks like."

It's hard for Carew, who lives on the less-wrecked west side of the Mississippi river, to come to the decimated east side. His office was here, as is one of the two golf courses he manages. But Carew can only hope that the Joseph Bartholomew Golf Course, which was under several feet of salt water for about six weeks, will reopen someday. Right now, it looks more like a

I Felt Good About New Orleans, Until...

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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forsaken field than a golf course. Its tees, greens and fairways are a blend of dead grass and weeds.

It's understandable that with power and water still not available in some areas, not to mention the sharp increase in the number of homeless people, that the course is not high on the city's to-do list.

After touring these parts with Carew, I realized how foolish I was to think that New Orleans was back to life. It's not. There are signs of a city on the mend, but it has a long, long way to go. And it may never get there.

Tourists head to New Orleans to revel on storm-spurred Bourbon Street, an area that continues to party on despite what happened. They eat, drink and carouse, but many keep a blind eye to the destruction only a few miles away.

"They think the city's back to normal," Carew says of tourists, "because they haven't seen the outskirts."

Last summer, after Hurricane Katrina had destroyed parts of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, we were all taken aback by what happened. We wanted to do something for the people whose lives were terribly disrupted. And we did. We donated money to the Red Cross. We prayed at church.

But I must confess that three months afterward I wasn't thinking as much about New Orleans and the Gulf Coast as I was when what happened was front-page news for two weeks. I wasn't overly concerned about the hundreds of thousands of displaced people, many of whom lost everything.

But after seeing what I saw, I'm thinking about them again. And I vow not to forget them three months from now.

And I will pray and hope for them. As you go about your business at your respective golf courses, I ask that you do the same.