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Hoda Kotb, Jenna Bush Hager love New Orleans -- and city loves them back as 'Today' films

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com OCT 26, 2018 - 1:16 PM

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Hoda Kotb gives high-fives during the live broadcast of NBC's "Today with Kathie Lee and Hoda" at Washington Artillery Park in New Orleans, Friday, Oct. 26, 2018. Hoda Kotb and guest host Jenna Bush Hager celebrated the New Orleans tricentennial.

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Advocate Staff photo by SOPHIA GERMER

For French Quarter residents or anyone else walking down Decatur Street on Friday morning, the sight of a Mardi Gras float may have been a bit disorienting.

But when Hoda Kotb is in town for a broadcast of NBC's "Today with Kathie Lee and Hoda," a parade, even if it features just one float, is the only way to make an entrance.

Kotb and guest host Jenna Bush Hager made a special trip to the Crescent City to do a live show celebrating the city's tricentennial.

The New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corp. and New Orleans & Co. helped convince "Today" producers to do a show from the city, largely at an elaborate set that was erected in Washington Artillery Park. The show's cast also taped segments around town, which are scheduled to air Monday.

Kotb, who worked as a reporter and anchor at WWL-TV from 1992 to 1998, is fondly remembered in the metro area. That was evident during breaks in filming, when both Kotb and Hager were busy posing for selfies with spectators.

Hager is a frequent visitor as well and has written stories about the city for Southern Living magazine.

“What I miss about New Orleans: everything,” said Kotb, who used to live in the French Quarter. “I miss the feeling when you wake up. I miss the feeling of a random hug on the street. I miss the feeling of, like, music coming out of places. I miss the warmth.”

Hager, who has been to Mardi Gras twice, agreed. She first visited when she was a child with her parents, President George W. Bush and Laura Bush, and returned as a college student.

“It’s what Hoda said about the friendliness and the people: the warmth — you can have all the great food in the world, but it’s the way you feel when you get here,” Hager said.

The live broadcast featured food, cocktails, New Orleans trivia and two only-in-New-Orleans dance troupes — the 610 Stompers and Sirens of New Orleans.

Commander’s Palace chef Tory McPhail, who was making his seventh appearance on the show, created a menu including seafood gumbo

with cracked crabs, crawfish étouffée and pumpkin bread pudding with whiskey sauce. Boiled crawfish also made an appearance.

Compere Lapin bartender Abigail Gullo mixed up what she said were “real hurricanes.” And Trombone Shorty performed “Li'l Liza Jane” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” with musicians from his Trombone Shorty Foundation.

Twenty-something “Today” “social contributor” Donna Farizan, dubbed “Donna-dorable” by the hosts, will appear on the taped segments, which include some of Kotb’s favorite places to eat in New Orleans, including Cafe du Monde and Hansen’s Sno-Bliz.

“Whenever I come to New Orleans now and the plane is landing, my heart pounds, because I remember everything,” said Kotb, who added that she met her best friend, WWL-TV anchor Karen Swensen, in New Orleans. “When I walk around here, I feel like I am home.”

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