



WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A MEMBER OF

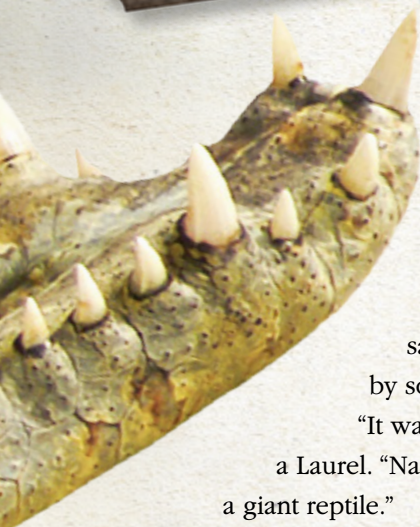
THE CHURCH IN

LOUISIANA,

USA?



**GATORS AND BOARS
AND SERVICE, OH MY!**



Ever watch a hungry alligator leap from the water in a feeding frenzy just a few feet from your face?

Good times, right there. At least, good times if you're safe in a boat and surrounded by some of your closest friends. "It was crazy!" says Arizona H., a Laurel. "Nature's beautiful, even if it's a giant reptile."

You know you're in good hands when your Mutual activity involves ginormous reptiles and wild boars crashing through the swamp around you.

For those of us living in more swamp-challenged climates, here's a quick glimpse at what it's like to be a member of the Church in Louisiana, USA.

LIVING IN THE BIBLE BELT

In an area with large high schools (think 2,000 students or so), there are only around six or seven LDS students in each of the two high schools included in this ward's boundaries.

"Down here is in the Bible Belt," says Jordan D., a Laurel. "We get called out on our standards a lot. Like the dating standard—they don't get that one at all. But tea and coffee—that's the worst."

In her high school, sweet tea is provided in the cafeteria by the jugful, not to mention all the tea in the vending machines. As she puts it, "Kids drink tea and coffee all day, every day." And a lot of her friends at school don't understand why she doesn't.

Sometimes those friends try to get her to drink tea along with them. "We all have our light that people can see, but they can't understand it," Jordan says. "So they're always watching."

Elizabeth L., a Mia Maid, added that "a lot of people aren't really familiar with our religion. There's only one LDS church building in our town, but on every corner there's a church of a different faith."

So yes, there are lots of different churches. But do you know what else that means? Lots of religious conviction! You can hardly attend a public event, from sports to



graduation ceremonies, that doesn't include at least a prayer.

And that famous southern hospitality? Alive and well. "Everyone is so nice," says Arizona. "If you're in a store and drop something, there are three people helping you to pick it up."

Even though they stick out in some ways because of their beliefs, these LDS youth have been able to find common ground with friends of different faiths.

"I've made friends of other faiths who have the same standards as me. They want to be modest because that's who they are," says Arizona. "Some of my friends believe different things from me, and that's OK. The gospel of Jesus Christ allows us to deal with challenges, even if it's in different churches."

SERVING A WEEK IN ONE DAY

Several hours' drive from their area is the closest bishops' storehouse. The 13 youth in their ward wanted to head down for a service project. This particular storehouse serves a massive geographical area, providing food

and other necessities—including after hurricanes and other natural disasters.

"It was really spiritual," Elizabeth says. "We all got together and started working. It was pretty cool how all of us got so much done so fast."

The youth scrubbed food bins, bagged food, cleaned the delivery truck, did yard work, and helped in a dozen other ways.

"I had never been to a bishops' storehouse," Arizona says. "There are so many parts that make up a bishops' storehouse, it's amazing. I thought it was a big room with food in



it. It's so much more." Part of that "so much more" includes disaster relief gear like generators and blankets. "During Hurricane Katrina tons of people came needing help."

The youth service project was a massive success. So successful, in fact, that the senior missionary couple working at the storehouse that day figured the youth probably banged out a week's worth of service in a few hours.

So . . . what to do with the rest of the day?



ADVENTURING WITH FRIENDS

Now we're back to those leaping alligators. When the youth planned the big service project at the storehouse, they thought they'd take advantage of the unique part of the world they live in at the same time.

"It's really pretty here," says Arizona. "Our backyard is part swamp, part lake. It's awesome."

After the service project, they still had time for a swamp tour. And yes, those swamps are full of swamp critters you wouldn't want to bump into while out on a brisk swim. But from within the safety of a tour boat? Bring it!

The tour guide would entice the alligators near the boat with marshmallows and hot dogs. "We were *so close* to the animals," Jordan says.

Then came time for the boars. The tour guide lured them from the trees with a shrill call. "I thought he was making a Wookiee call," Arizona says. Responding to the weird sound, the boars came charging out of the trees to get their share of the food haul.

"I think the world revolves around marshmallows," Arizona added.

PULLING TOGETHER

Activities like the swamp tour and service project are only a small sample of how these youth stay connected. "I like how in my ward

all of the youth are really close," Jordan says. "We're a small group and we know each other better."

As a bonus, being in a tight-knit group like that is the best way to fend off a swarm of gators. Just in case. **NE**



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF RACHEL CLARK. PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISTOCK/THINKSTOCK

