

Let Me Take You to the Mardi Gras

In New Orleans–a town famous for its French Quarter and Bourbon Street, for hot Cajun and Creole cuisine and for cool Dixieland jazz, one event surpasses them all as the city's legendary signature piece–Mardi Gras! It's a season of revelry and romance, of madness and music, of parades and parties, of comic costuming in the streets and grandiose private masquerade balls. Mardi Gras is a time when the gaudy and the gorgeous all come together for one gigantic blowout. From the regal to the ridiculous, the New Orleans Mardi Gras has it all!

Since the first modern day pageant was presented in 1857, with timeouts occasioned by World Wars, more than 1,800 Mardi Gras parades have been staged in metro New Orleans. The festival that was conceived as a party the city threw for itself has grown into one of the world's grandest tourist attractions. Yet for all its international fame, it can be difficult for a first-timer to grasp. The celebration even has its own vocabulary, and to make matters a bit more confusing, Mardi Gras is scheduled on a different date each year! Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Mardi Gras, however, is its connection to religion.

The Basics

Carnival, loosely translated from Latin as "Farewell to flesh," is the season of merriment that starts in New Orleans each year on January 6, the Twelfth Night feast of the Epiphany–the day the three kings visited the Christ Child. *Mardi Gras*, French for Fat Tuesday, is the single-day climax of the season. While Mardi Gras undoubtedly has pagan, pre-Christian origins, the Catholic Church legitimized the festival as a brief celebration before the penitential season of Lent. The date of Mardi Gras is set to occur 46 days before Easter and can fall as early as February 3 or as late as March 9.

During the 12 days preceding Mardi Gras, more than 60 parades and hundreds of private parties, dances and masked balls are annually scheduled in the metro area. Fat Tuesday is a legal holiday in New Orleans, a day when half the town turns out in costume to watch the other half the parade! Then, promptly at midnight, the party's over, as Ash Wednesday ushers in the austere Lenten season.

The single custom that most distinguishes Mardi Gras parades is that of *throws*–trinkets tossed from the floats--which turns New Orleans parades into crowd participation events unmatched any place else. "Throw Me Something Mister" is the battle cry of the one-million plus people who line the parade routes. Most popular among the millions of throws are those that illustrate the organization's logo and the parade's theme, including plastic drinking cups, medallion necklaces and colorful aluminum coins called *doubloons*.

How Does It Work?

Mardi Gras annually generates nearly half-a-billion dollars for the New Orleans economy. Since no commercial or corporate sponsorship of Mardi Gras parades is permitted, it is the Carnival club members who put on the show and foot the entire bill.

Mardi Gras organizations are non-profit clubs called *krewes* and many are named after mythological figures such as Aphrodite, Eros, Hermes, Pegasus and Thor. Each krewe is completely autonomous and there is no overall coordinator of their Carnival activities. The secrecy with which some of the older krewes cloak themselves is part of the mystique of Mardi Gras. Several do not reveal the theme of the parade until the night of the event, and the identity of their royalty is never publicized. Most of the newer organizations take a more public approach.

Krewe members pay dues, ranging from $250-$850. In addition, they spend as much as they wish on throws. Some krewes stage parades, others present private *tableau balls* or *bal masques* (masquerade balls in which scenes are acted out); many do both. About a dozen organizations that date from the 19th century use the Carnival ball as the highlight of the debutante season, as daughters of the socially elite members are presented at the city's Municipal Auditorium. Admittance is by invitation only and formal attire is required. Newer organizations have replaced the bal masque with lavish supper dances at the city's finer hotels.

A Carnival krewe is led by the captain, who is the permanent leader of the group. Each year, a king and queen are selected to reign over the parade. While most clubs select their royalty from within their own ranks,