Mardi Gras is the last two weeks of Carnival. On Lundi Gras (Fat Monday) the city hosts a splashy free-to-the-public masked ball at the Spanish Plaza, and on Fat Tuesday, the final day, there are parades all day long, eye-popping costumes, and about a million people having a grand old time. Visitors to the city are encouraged to enter the Mask-A-Thon contest that takes place annually on the big day.

St. Patrick's Day and St. Joseph's Day soon follow, with yet more parades and parties around the city. Next up is Spring Fiesta, which leads in to the French Quarter Festival and the Jazz & Heritage Festival. In July on Bastille Day New Orleanians honor the city's French connections. La Fete spotlights one of the city's most celebrated attractions: New Orleans cuisine! When October rolls around there are a number of Oktoberfests in town, and the whole month of December is devoted to a Creole Christmas. That's a very special time in New Orleans when Papa Noel pays his visit (in a parade, of course), the historic homes are decked out for the holidays and there is caroling in Jackson Square. Jackson Square is also the scene of a huge New Year's Eve celebration, and hard on the heels of that is the annual Sugar Bowl game. And then guess what! It's Carnival time again!

...AND ALMOST FREE!

The ST. CHARLES AVENUE AND RIVERFRONT STREETCARS offer some of the best tours of the city. For just 80 cents ($1 riverfront; exact fare required) you can take a ride on one of the oldest continuously operating street railways in the country. View the beautiful mansions of the Garden District and Carrollton Avenue, or see the attractions along New Orleans' revitalized riverfront.

Catch the FERRY for a breezy ride across the mighty Mississippi. You'll find a whole "new" New Orleans on the other side. Ferries cast off from the Canal Street Wharf, the Jackson Avenue Wharf, and Chalmette and cost $1.

Don't miss PRESERVATION HALL where $3 in the hat gets you a night of some of the best jazz in the city! This historic site is located at 726 St. Peter.

A trip to explore New Orleans' many MUSEUMS is a must. The New Orleans Museum of Art in City Park houses several notable traveling exhibits throughout the year and has many fascinating pieces in its permanent collection. Admission is $4 for adults, $2 for children and seniors. Call 488-2631. Take a look at the exhibition gallery of the Historic New Orleans Collection on Royal Street, one of the foremost private museums in the country. For information call 523-4662. Just $1 gets you into the Pharmacy Museum located at 514 Chartres St. For more information call 524-9077. The Virlane Collection is another must-see housed in the K&B Plaza and open during regular business hours. The Louisiana State Museum is really many museums in one. Buildings include the Cabildo, the Presbytere, the 1850 House, and the Old U.S. Mint. For information call 568-6968. The Germaine Wells Mardi Gras Museum in Arnaud's Restaurant includes the "Queen's Collection," gowns and memorabilia of Germaine Wells, queen of several Mardi Gras krewes from 1937 to 1968. Tour the Old Mint and see a varied display of New Orleans history such as the jazz and Mardi Gras exhibits. It's located at 400 Esplanade, and you can call 568-6993 for more information.

For a wonderful VIEW of the city and the river, ride to the top of the World Trade Center for only $2 (children 6-12, $1). The WTC is located at #2 Canal Place and is open daily from 9-5. For more information, call 525-2185.

Looking for an outdoor activity? Try the famous AUDUBON ZOOLOGICAL GARDEN. Meet the animals face to face. See the famed white tiger, white alligators, the Louisiana Swamp exhibit, and the World of Primates for a small admission charge of $7 for adults,$3.25 for senior citizens and children under 12. The zoo is located on Magazine Street behind Audubon Park. For more information, call 861-2537.