

## From Epiphany to Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras celebrations beyond New Orleans

### HIGHLIGHTS

New Orleans may have the biggest Mardi Gras, but it's far from the only one

Pass Christian, Mississippi, has a wholesome, family-friendly parade

Among Florida towns that celebrate Mardi Gras: Pensacola, Dunedin

### VIDEOS



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“Be aggressive,” she schooled me. “People will run you over to get those beads.”

My friend Amy was prepping me for my first foray into Mardi Gras in Mississippi. Yes, that’s right: Not New Orleans. Not Mobile, Alabama, where the first Mardi Gras was held, I’d learn. But along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, where the Fat Tuesday celebrations predate the big ones in New Orleans, they’ll tell you proudly.

“N’awlins just makes more noise about theirs,” Debbie Raymond, a native Mississippian, told me. “Here we start celebrating on Epiphany, Jan. 6, and continue through to Fat Tuesday. Every community has its own parade.”

From its Mobile roots to its popularity throughout Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico region, Mardi Gras gets celebrated far beyond the famous Big Easy big blowout. Quirky traditions involve king’s cake, royalty balls, local music and food, a reverse parade, throwing moon pies and tossing chickens.

Although Feb. 9 is the official Mardi Gras day this year, most communities start their carnival celebrations on Twelfth Night (Epiphany) with the main events beginning the weekend before Fat Tuesday.

At many of the celebrations outside New Orleans, you get a deeper sense of the hometown customs that define the festivities. These celebrations put their own spin on rolling with the good times.

## THE FIRST

**Mobile, Alabama**, lays claim to the oldest carnival celebration in the U.S., circa 1703. Nicholas Langlois introduced the French tradition of Fat Tuesday indulgence a day before Ash Wednesday imposes fasting and austerity in the Catholic Church.

ADVERTISING

## MOBILE, ALABAMA, CLAIMS THE OLDEST CARNIVAL CELEBRATION IN THE U.S., CIRCA 1703.

The Mobile Carnival Museum lays out more of the history and traditions of the local celebration, which is getting into serious street festival mode about now. Credited with inventing the notion of mystic societies, generally known by the name “krewes” elsewhere, Mobile is home to some 30 such groups that parade on a number of different routes through downtown Mobile Bay. Up to six parades take place on the big day.

On Feb. 7, the Joe Cain Parade pays homage to the Mobile man who rekindled Mardi Gras after it sputtered out during the Civil War years.

## MOST FAMILY-FRIENDLY

The big parade in **Pass Christian, Mississippi**, takes place the Saturday before Mardi Gras (Feb. 6 this year) so that families can attend. No boob-flashing here — just wholesome floats rolling down the main drag along the small town’s waterfront, with its view of the harbor, yachts and shrimping trawlers.

But never doubt that the requisite adult partying accompanies the event. In its 86th year, it is one of more than 20 parades held along Mississippi’s 45-mile Gulf Coast, including a couple of night parades and **Biloxi**’s big 100-float Mardi Gras day celebration.

**100,000** people are expected to attend the Gulf Coast Carnival Association Mardi Gras Parade in Biloxi

The Gulf Coast Carnival Association Mardi Gras Parade snakes through downtown Biloxi streets and along the waterfront for about two hours, attracting

some 100,000 revelers. Especially for the kids, the town's Children's Mardi Gras Walking Parade takes place this year on Saturday, Jan. 30.

While in the Pass Christian neighborhood, take a side trip to the sweet little town of **Bay St. Louis** and have a close look at the exquisite, labor-intensive Mardi Gras royalty costumes displayed in the Visitors Center's historic depot setting. (You, too, can own one for upwards of \$10,000.) More costumes are on display at the Mardi Gras Museum in downtown Biloxi's historic Magnolia Hotel.

## **MOST CAJUN**

Zydeco music and a chicken run distinguish **Lake Charles' Mardi Gras** — the second largest celebration in Louisiana — from the first largest. Another claim to fame: The Mardi Gras Museum of Imperial Calcasieu boasts the largest display of carnival costumes in the world and includes a float you can climb aboard.

The morning of Mardi Gras, visitors can ride a "Cajun float" on a hayride mission to the town of Iowa to gather all the ingredients needed to make gumbo. To score the makings, participants must pass muster in the Zydeco dance category and do the Chicken Run (a.k.a. Courir de Mardi Gras). This involves chasing down — you guessed it — live chickens. Only a few towns with deep Cajun roots keep this tradition alive and running in Louisiana.

## **LAKE CHARLES' MARDI GRAS IS DISTINGUISHED BY ZYDECO MUSIC, A CHICKEN RUN AND THE MARDI GRAS MUSEUM OF IMPERIAL CALCASIEU.**

The big parade starts at 5 p.m. in Lake Charles, culminating a weekend celebration that includes a lighted boat parade, gumbo cook-offs, dances, a kids' parade and other festive events in and around the town.

## **IN FLORIDA**

The month-long carnival season in **Pensacola** climaxes with parades downtown and along its beaches. Kicked off with a "parade in reverse" (floats are stationary, revelers walk) earlier this month, Pensacola's celebration packs all of its krewe parades into the weekend of Feb. 5-7. One highlight, a nighttime illuminated Krewe of Lafitte Parade, thunders through downtown streets Friday with 250 pirates and one live cannon.

Saturday's Grand Mardi Gras procession parades more than 240 floats with 6,000 participants. Sunday's wrap-up lets the good times roll island style as the Krewe of Wrecks Parade travels the shoreline route along Pensacola Beach.

The season ends on Fat Tuesday with the Priscus Procession — a nighttime pub crawl through downtown Pensacola with krewe kings, queens and members, plus anyone else age 21 and over who wants to hang.

The little town of **Dunedin**, north of Clearwater, is known more for its Scottish heritage than French connection. Nonetheless, it has partied family-friendly style every year for the past 25 in its downtown park and parade route.

It begins on Mardi Gras day with live entertainment at Pioneer Park at 4 p.m. The parade of 50-some floats goes on for more than an hour, and the party continues at the park until 11 p.m. Local bars and clubs host events into the wee hours.

A more commercialized gala at **Universal Studios in Orlando** includes 14 concerts and a number of parades Feb. 6 through April 6.

## MARDI GRAS CELEBRATIONS

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/living/travel/article55942180.html#storylink=cpy>