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America's Family Mardi Gras

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Residents of Mobile, Alabama love Mardi Gras. When you experience this city's legendary fete, you'll understand why: it's a nonstop lineup of wholesome parades, parties and fun. "You can bring grandma, grandpa and all the kids and have a good time—that's what Mardi Gras in Mobile is all about," says Gordon Tatum, Jr., curator of the Mobile Carnival Museum.

Mobile is the birthplace of Mardi Gras in North America, a celebration that began in 1703 when the area was still a French colony. The city's modern Mardi Gras began on New Year's Eve in 1830, when Michael Krafft and his friends "borrowed" cowbells, rakes and pitchforks from a hardware store and paraded noisily until early morning, creating the first mystic parading society in America, the Cowbellion de Rakin Society. Mobilians have celebrated Mardi Gras ever since, suspending the festivities only during wartime.

Mystic Societies

Mystic societies—secret organizations that host parades, balls and other activities—abound in Mobile. The city has more than 30 such societies, including the Order of Myths (one of the oldest continuously parading societies); the Maids of Mirth, who started the tradition of throwing Moon Pies (a marshmallow-filled cookie sandwich) from floats; and the Mystics of Time, famous for their fire-breathing dragons floats (that Tatum says "make every child scared, speechless, terrified... but they wouldn't miss it for the world!"). There are also some 50 nonparading societies that organize balls and events. These balls, which include plenty of food, drinks and dancing, feature society members in costumes and masks to hide their identities. Invited guests wear full-length ball gowns or white ties and tails. The dancing is nonstop, since it's "double rush," meaning everyone can ask each other to dance. The music is varied and usually top-notch. "There are generally three music groups at a ball," says Tatum. "For example, on one side you may have Guy Lombardo's Orchestra. Next-door is Peter Duchin's Orchestra [a big band], and in the lobby are the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Organizers try to appeal to all age groups," he explains.

"Throw Me Somethin', Mister!"

You'll hear this, along with "Moon Pie, Moon Pie!" hundreds of times as you watch one of the 36 parades go by. The excitement builds as the action starts. First, you hear the bands approaching (like Marcus Johnson's Bay City Brass Band, an African-American band that plays at more than 100 Mardi Gras events), and then you'll marvel at the beautiful papier mâché floats sprayed with gold and silver leaf, representing the mystic society's theme for the year. You'll likely see King Felix III and his queen, who are elected by the Mobile Carnival Association, and King Elexis I and his queen, who are chosen by the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association. But the most exhilarating part are the "throws"—the thousands of beads, candy and doubloons thrown by parade riders to the revelers below.





Joe Cain Procession

On the Sunday before Fat Tuesday, the Joe Cain Procession honors the city clerk and volunteer fireman who revived Mardi Gras in Mobile after the Civil War by dressing as a mythical Indian, Chief Slacabamorinico, and parading in a decorated coal wagon. Cain chose a Chickasaw Indian—a tribe that had never surrendered or been defeated—to play a practical joke on the Union soldiers who occupied Mobile, lifting Mobilians' spirits.

Chief Slacabamorinico, currently portrayed by ordained minister and historian Wayne Dean, Sr., leads the procession on a mule-drawn wagon. Dean wears a costume closely modeled after what Cain wore: a headdress with turkey feathers, black braids and plaid skirt with deer tails. This procession has become one of Mardi Gras' largest and most entertaining events, although not the fanciest. Dean says, "The floats are mostly built on trucks, and not slick or professionally done." It features humorous societies such as the Merry Widows, who represent Cain's mourning wives; the Mistresses, Cain's "ladies" veiled and dressed in red; and the Mystic Order of Dead Rock Stars, which honored Jimi Hendrix in 2006.

Mardi Gras Any Time of the Year

Even if you don't visit Mobile during Mardi Gras, you can still get a taste of the experience. Visit the Mobile Carnival Museum (mobilecarnivalmuseum.com), which is open year-round, and marvel at the gorgeous trains, gowns and crowns from past kings and queens while watching videos of the elaborate coronations. Make sure you meet Tatum, the museum's curator, an impeccably dressed Southern gentleman, and ask him about the heaviest women's train, weighing 86 pounds; the crown made from gold and precious stones; the Vera Wang original Queen's gown; and the Mobile families with three generations of carnival royalty.

A King Cake is a delicious Mardi Gras tradition. Get one at Pollman's Bake Shop (pollmansbakery.com), an old-fashioned, third-generation Southern bakery, currently run by Fred J. Pollman. In 1959, Pollman's uncle developed his own version of this colorful, sweet coffee cake filled with cream cheese, strawberry or other flavors. A tiny plastic doll is hidden inside, and whoever finds it is supposed to host the next King Cake party. Also try Pollman's famous brownies and exquisite apple pie.

For souvenirs, go to Toomey's Mardi Gras Store (toomeys-mardigras.com), also open year-round and a Mardi Gras experience in itself. There you'll find hundreds of elaborate carnival beads and other unique beads for holidays and theme parties. The store also sells costumes, masks, T-shirts, Moon Pies and everything else you need for carnival in Mobile or at home (Toomey's ships throughout the States and to Puerto Rico and the USVI as well).

Where to Stay

The Renaissance Riverview Plaza (riverviewmobile.com) is located near all the Mardi Gras parade routes, which makes it a great place to stay. For 2008 Mardi Gras and beyond, consider the Battle House (rsabattlehouse.com), a renovated hotel reopening in April 2007 that was the site of many Mardi Gras balls.

Come enjoy Mobile's Mardi Gras 2007 from Feb. 2-20 with your children in a family atmosphere. Check mobile.org for schedules and other information.



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