

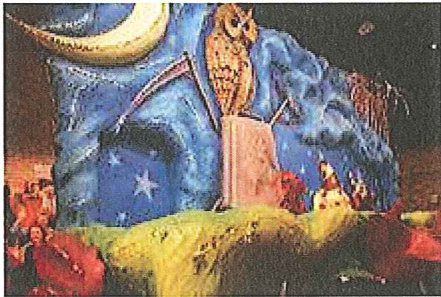
## Travel

### Mardi Gras in Mobile

#### America's first city to celebrate the holiday keeps the festivities family-friendly

By Sally Walker Davies  
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Say "Mardi Gras," and the images that immediately come to mind are of elaborate floats slowly parading through the narrow streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans, while well-lubricated and often scantily-clad revelers elbow each other for the chance to catch brightly colored beads.



Mobile's Carnival Museum displays floats that trace the holiday's history in the city. Head a few hours east along the Gulf of Mexico to Mobile, Ala., and it's a whole other party.

In this genteel Southern city, you're more likely to catch a Moon Pie thrown from a float than traditional Mardi Gras beads. For residents of Mobile, Fat Tuesday is all about tradition and pageantry, family and legacy.

It's an often-forgotten fact that Mardi Gras started first in Mobile in 1703 (masked balls were held privately in New Orleans as early as 1718), when French pioneers marked the day on the 27 Mile Bluff, the city's first settlement.

A few years later, in 1711, the carnival aspect of Mardi Gras kicked in, when residents who had gathered for a festive evening pulled a papier-mâché bull, Boeuf Gras (another name for Mardi Gras) down Dauphin Street in what is thought to be the first carnival parade in North America.

But it wasn't until 1830 that Mobilian Michael Kraft and a crew of friends, reluctant to end their New Year's Eve dinner party, gathered up rakes, hoes and cowbells from a nearby store, covered their faces to conceal their identities and paraded through town to the mayor's house, thereby forming the first masked parading society in America -- the Cowbellion de Rakin Society.

The Cowbellions moved their raucous revelry to Fat

Tuesday, presenting the first Mardi Gras parade in 1840. Soon, they were joined by dozens of other mystic societies in the festivities, which were brought to a halt during the Civil War.

After the war, when Union forces still occupied Mobile on Fat Tuesday 1867, Mobilian Joe Cain dressed as a Chickasaw Indian chief and led a parade through the occupying forces -- an in-your-face kind of gesture proclaiming that Mobile was getting back to its traditions and Mardi Gras was back.

Mobile's Mardi Gras celebration encompasses all of Baldwin County (which includes Mobile), with more than 40 parades and about 25 balls put on by the mystic societies. Parades started Jan. 5 with the Krewe De La Dauphine parade on Dauphin Island. The first parade in downtown Mobile is Friday.

Leading up to this year's Fat Tuesday -- Feb. 5 -- parades will occur on select weeknight evenings and every weekend with as many as six parades on the last few days of the celebration.

Krewe members toss colorful doubloons stamped with their seal, beads and Moon Pies from the floats. The Moon Pies are much easier on the parade-watcher than what used to be thrown, boxes of Cracker Jacks.

It's estimated that more than a half million Chattanooga-made Moon Pies will be thrown from floats during this year's parades.

And while the festive spirit of Mardi Gras is evident in Mobile, one will not find nearly as many of the more free-spirited displays by revelers that are such a big part of the New Orleans Mardi Gras scene.

Mobile makes no bones about the fact that its Mardi Gras is a family celebration. While there's certainly alcohol to be found at the viewing parties and select platforms, a family-friendly atmosphere prevails and good behavior rules the day.

Those who plan to get feisty at the festivities by jumping the barricades along the parade route, be warned: If you're caught, you'll be headed to jail -- no exceptions. That strict rule of law is part of what makes Mobile's Mardi Gras such a delight for families.

Off the parade route, there's plenty to keep families occupied.

The Mobile Carnival Museum downtown is an excellent first stop on any trip to Mobile, but certainly during a Mardi Gras visit.

Kids can get up close to an elaborately decorated float, the beautiful costumes worn by previous kings and queens, even the tiny, yet still extravagant, costumes worn by the junior members of the court.

The museum's gift store is full of specialty beads and other Mardi Gras-themed souvenirs -- perfect for a quick hit to get in the spirit.

But for a real wonderland of beads, doubloons and other trinkets, try the 70,000 square feet of Mardi Gras madness at Toomey's, just outside downtown Mobile. It's one of the largest suppliers of Mardi Gras paraphernalia.

An airboat ride through the Mobile Delta (20,000-acres of swamps, river bottomlands and marshes just north of Mobile Bay) is a thrill ride -- especially when Captain Geoff of Delta Airboat Express is determined to show off his favorite alligator, Popeye. He'll navigate his custom-designed airboats into tight spaces to look for the one-eyed beast. This tour is not for those who are squeamish about a run-in with nature. But adventurous kids and their parents will be delighted.

Back along the parade route, the historic Battle House Hotel has been restored to its previous splendor, and a walk through the public areas on the first and second floors is a must.

While the kids may yawn at the beautifully reconditioned stained glass dome in the lobby, they'll be enchanted by the whispering arches (something whispered into one arch can be heard at the other.)

For years, the Battle House was home to the most exquisite Mardi Gras balls, and once again the grande dame of Mobile hotels will be in the spotlight this carnival season. With its location right on the parade route, its fabulous second-floor balcony will be full of revelers lucky enough to be on the guest list for the invitation-only parties.

For those without invitations, there are plenty of spots along the parade route to claim for viewing the parades.

### **If you go: Mobile Mardi Gras**

Mobile is about a six-hour drive from Memphis, via Interstate 55 south, U.S. 49 and U.S. 98 east.

Mardi Gras parades are each weekend through Feb. 5, with parade schedules and routes posted online at [mobile.org](http://mobile.org) -- click on Visitors, then Mardi Gras, or call (800) 566-2453.

Hotel packages for the nights of Feb. 4 and 5 are available at two downtown hotels on the parade route.

The Renaissance Riverview Plaza package includes breakfast for two and special beads, and starts at \$189 plus tax. Call (251) 438-4000 to book; ask for rate code MJQF.

The Battle House Hotel Mardi Gras package includes breakfast for two and special beads, with rates starting at \$229 plus tax. Call (251) 338-2000 and ask for rate code MJQF when booking.

The Mobile Carnival Museum, 355 Government Street, (251) 432-3324 or [mobilecarnivalmuseum.com](http://mobilecarnivalmuseum.com). Open Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$2 for children.

Toomey's Mardi Gras store, 755-A McRae Avenue, (Exit 1 then 1 mile east of I-65 off Government Boulevard) (251) 450-5012, toomeys-mardi gras.com. Open Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Delta Airboat Express, (251) 370-7089, deltaairboatexpress .com. Note: Opens for the season Feb. 1. Tours range from \$15-\$25 per person depending on length and time of day