

Mardi Gras in 'The Little Easy'

Mobile opens its doors to unique carnival experience

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If you've an itch to check out a southern mardi gras this february, judi gullede offers some friendly southern advice about "The little easy."

"Try Alabama, and see how we do things here in Mobile," says Gullede, the executive director of the Mobile Carnival Association and director of the organization's fascinating museum. "We're the oldest Mardi Gras in America and our celebrations have a unique family twist."

The genial museum director does come with more than a little bias on the subject, but there's no arguing that historically Mobile kick-started Mardi Gras earlier than The Big Easy, a.k.a. New Orleans.

Just a three-hour drive east on Interstate 10 from New Orleans, Mobile has developed its own family-friendly approach to the traditional street carnival. Special alcohol-free zones along city parade routes ensure families with children can enjoy festivities in comfort and safety.

Not that there's any killjoy 10 p.m. closing during carnival time. In fact, the Mobile Bay region can be "party-central" when she puts on her Mardi Gras costume. Like one Mobile resident here told me by way of explaining the unique characteristics of Alabama's cities: "Each city in Alabama has its own unique character. Visitors to Birmingham are asked what job do you have. In Montgomery, they ask who are you related to. In Mobile, the question is, what do you want to drink?"

Mobile first celebrated Carnival in 1703, when French settlers organized festivities designed to take the hard edge off the ongoing struggles of colonial life.

As the endless tug and pull of colonial wars fought themselves out in the hotly contested strategic region, Mardi Gras celebrations went into a hiatus as French, British and Spanish flags were hauled up and down with alarming regularity.

It wasn't until around 1830 that the modern-day revival of festivities began. That's when the first masked parading organization, the Cowbellion de Rakin society was formed. Today, more than 50 societies -- both marching and non-marching -- have become part of Mobile's Mardi Gras scene.

Mardi Gras (French for Fat Tuesday) is the final day of Carnival, the three-day period preceding the beginning of Lent, the Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday immediately before Ash Wednesday.

For three weeks every February, Mobile vibrates with colourful pageantry, parades and masked balls of Carnival. Mardi Gras in the "The Little Easy" has been called the largest street party in the country.

There's no better place to get an overall flavour of the festivities than inside Mobile's Carnival Museum. As home to the first Mardi Gras more than three centuries earlier, the city has a treasure chest of Mardi Gras traditions among its



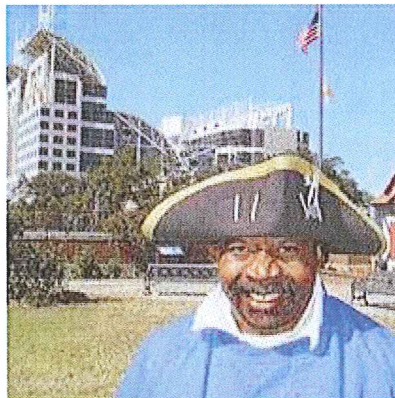
CREDIT: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix

Costumes are a big part of Mobile's annual Mardi Gras parades



CREDIT: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix

Judi Gullede, executive director of the Mobile Carnival Association, shows off examples of the museum's robe collection



CREDIT: Peter Wilson, The StarPhoenix

displays. Set in a historic Government Street mansion, the museum houses a legacy of Carnival times past. Displays of jeweled crowns, intricately designed gowns and lavish robes of Mobile Mardi Gras kings and queens fill the rooms of the old mansion.

Walter Calhoun is a tour guide at historic Fort Conde in downtown Mobile. Calhoun helps keep history alive even as the city has an eye on the future

The trains on some of these ornate regal costumes weigh around 70 pounds and have fitted ball bearings to help them glide along the ball room without strangling their owners.

Museum guides explain the mysteries of Mardi Gras, answering questions such as: what is a mystic society, who is King Felix, and why do Mobile maskers throw coloured beads and moon pies?

Visitors even have a chance to have their own hands-on experience by climbing on a rocking Mardi Gras float and throwing moon pies (marshmallow cookies) into a crowd yelling "Throw me something, mister!"

For Mardi Gras's duration, the streets of downtown Mobile are filled with the din and spectacle of live marching bands, brilliantly coloured floats and shoulder-to-shoulder crowds of revelers. Spectacular floats are manned by masked riders costumed in satin and sequins, who throw beads, moon pies and candy.

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But there's a lot more to Mobile than Mardi Gras.

The city's Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center is home to the gulf coast's only full-scale interactive chemistry lab, the only 3-D virtual theatre and the only domed IMAX theatre. The Exploreum also features six permanent exhibits and is a great place for curious minds of all ages to explore. (www.exploreum.net for details).

For the lowdown on Mobile's past, visits to Fort Conde and the Museum of Mobile should be high on the itinerary. The 18th century fort replica takes visitors on a trip through Mobile's history and relates the story of how six national flags have flown over this city. Across the street, the Museum of Mobile traces the area's history from its first inhabitants to the present. (www.museumofmobile.com for more info)

If you're looking to add a different type of swing to your visit here, Magnolia Grove is one of the courses on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, the largest golf course construction project ever attempted. (http://www.rtjgolf.com/courses/magnolia_grove for more information)

Bellingrath Gardens and Home is a year-round 65-acre garden estate, first opened in 1932. Take a break and stroll along the meandering paths laced with camellias, tulips, pansies, snapdragons, daffodils, poppies, primrose and paper white narcissus. The English Renaissance-styled Bellingrath Home, built in 1935, houses original furnishings from the Bellingrath family, including an "ultra modern" 1935 bathroom and an extensive collection of decorative arts. (www.bellingrath.org for more info)

For More Information on Mobile Bay's attractions and its Mardi Gras, visit www.mobilebay.org

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IF YOU GO

Mobile's 2009 Mardi Gras events begin Jan. 24 and lead up to the main events during the final four days of the celebrations: Feb. 21-24.

If you're planning on taking in Mardi Gras festivities, make sure you book your accommodations early. Two highly recommended places to hang your hat during Mardi Gras:

n The Battle House Hotel. Originally built in 1852, the Battle House is on the parade route and was a cultural icon of the south, hosting legendary Mardi Gras balls, lavish weddings, debutante debuts and numerous celebrities from Ulysses S. Grant to Babe Ruth. A recently completed \$200 million refurbishment has maintained the historic hotel experience while increasing comfort qualities to a very high level.

n The Renaissance Riverview Plaza. Located in the heart of downtown Mobile, the Riverview is in walking distance of museums, historical sites, galleries, restaurants and shops. This four-star property has recently undergone a multi-million dollar renovation and overlooks the waterfront of Mobile Bay

You can check both hotels out at www.pchresorts.com