

It's a season, not a day. From the very first bite of King Cake, this massive celebration is connected to the Catholic faith; it's the feast before the fasting season of Lent. It's common knowledge that "Mardi Gras" is French for "Fat Tuesday," which is always the day before Ash Wednesday on the Catholic calendar.

But Mardi Gras Day is just the grand finale of an entire Carnival season, which officially begins on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany. I recently heard one local say, "In New Orleans, we tolerate the Christmas holidays in order to get to Mardi Gras season."

There are more than 50 historic and homegrown parades. The grand processions march through many parts of the city -- and none of the official Mardi Gras parades goes through the French Quarter. The 12 days leading up to Fat Tuesday are packed with parade options (on most days there are two or three to choose from), so you don't have to be in New Orleans on Mardi Gras Day to partake in the festivities.



Barkus, an unofficial parade of pooches, takes place on February 12 this year.

In fact, families might want to head for the less hectic routes farther from downtown, in neighborhoods such as Metairie, Slidell or Westbank, which often host parades during the two weekends before Mardi Gras.

Seeing at least one "super-krewe" is a must; the glamour and sheer size of parades such as Endymion or Bacchus are unparalleled. But there are also a growing number of grass-roots alternatives that offer a less overwhelming experience for anyone looking

to ease into Mardi Gras mode.

For something really different, check out the [610 stompers](#), an all-male dance troupe with the motto: "Ordinary men. Extraordinary moves." This year they will be marching with the Krewe of Muses (February 16), Orpheus (February 17) and Thoth (February 19).

For the general public, there is no better way to take in Mardi Gras than with a well-planned day or two of parades.

"The Macy's and Tournament of Roses parades may get more national attention, but when it comes to fun, the Mardi Gras march trumps them all," says Arthur Hardy, publisher of "Arthur Hardy's Mardi Gras Guide." For about \$5, his glossy guide offers a wealth of information, including maps and historic background.

Note: if you're planning to attend Mardi Gras 2013, all bets are off when it comes to scheduling, because the Super Bowl will be in town, too, so you'll want to triple confirm all plans before you head to the Crescent City.

It's full of characters, and you should be one, too. Wearing a costume, or even just a mask, is one of the best ways to show your Mardi Gras spirit.



Sometimes we need a mask to come as our true self, says McCree, the New Orleans transplant who has spent the past decade dressing herself and others for Carnival. Her top three costuming rules: "You should feel

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New Orleans transplant Cree McCree creates Mardi Gras costumes for herself and others.

fabulous. You should be comfortable. And you should sparkle."

On the first Sunday of the two weekends before Mardi Gras (this year on February 12), you'll find her at the annual Blue Nile Costume Bazaar on Frenchman Street,

surrounded by a cornucopia of one-of-a-kind creative and affordable pieces. After finding your perfect accent, you may want to walk over to the French Quarter to see how the dogs dress up for "Barkus," an unofficial parade that benefits animal rescue and adoption.

Another option for finding the perfect face: The French Market near Café du Monde holds an annual Mask Market on the weekend just before Mardi Gras Day. You'll find simple feather masks for \$3, intricate, hand-made treasures for hundreds of dollars -- and everything in between.

Cree says there's plenty you can do on your own as well, using face paint, curly ribbon, a glue gun and everyday household items. She remembers one man who put a metal colander on his head and dressed as the "tin man" from The Wizard of Oz.

It's a family affair. Despite the worldwide impression that Mardi Gras is strictly a drunken festival of half-naked people and debauchery, the authentic Mardi Gras is built on tradition and family.

That's not to say that the X-rated version doesn't exist; it does, but that's not the heart of Mardi Gras. This citywide party lets adults feel like kids again, begging for throws from float riders who might be celebrities or simply common folk dressed in magnificent costumes.

The excitement level for kids is equal or greater than what you find at Disney World, and at a much lower price. "Once you get here, it really is not that expensive," says Jennifer Day of the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau. "The parades are free, our dining is known for its value, and cocktails in New Orleans are well below the cost of cities like New York and Los Angeles."

More insider tips

Read up on the history and themes for each parade. For the current parade schedule, go to www.mardigrasneworleans.com. Figure out where you can stay put the longest to see a few top choices. Don't create an obstacle course for yourself; once the parades start rolling, traffic can be a nightmare.

If you opt to cheer at the most popular Uptown parades, go early and find a spot above Lee Circle for better viewing and more manageable crowds. Or pay a nominal fee for a place in an official "reviewing stand." Several restaurants along St. Charles Avenue and elsewhere sell tickets that allow for in-and-out privileges, bathroom access and refreshments -- all critical to a successful day of parade-watching.

Don't plan on driving downtown. If you can, stay in a hotel within walking distance of your selected routes. Otherwise, take a taxi (early!), make arrangements to park at a well-located friend's house or take the streetcar. Another fairly new option for getting around: pedicabs.

If you must, go to Bourbon Street during the day. New Orleans

native Char Thian, whose father was one of the original founders of the Krewe of Bacchus, understands the urge to witness what happens on the city's most famous rue, but insists "Mardi Gras isn't Bourbon Street." She recommends going there early in the day before it gets crowded and raucous, then head out to the parade route to meet up with family and friends.

"Last year I went down to Bourbon Street for the first time in years on Mardi Gras day. It was noon and people were in whimsical and satirical costumes but everyone was in good spirits. As the day progresses, the scenery on Bourbon Street changes, and so does the mood," says Thian. More flesh, less decorum.

Pace yourself and remember to eat! Study the parade routes beforehand so you can find a convenient restaurant, and make a reservation. Thian makes reservations online for 6 p.m. "That gives us enough time to enjoy our meal and then go out and catch the parade." Stay hydrated, especially if it's a warm-weather Mardi Gras.

Secure a bathroom. This is critical to enjoying your Carnival experience.

Don't pick up beads off the ground. You'll learn this the hard way if you don't follow the rule. Not only are the ones on the ground usually broken, but also, there are always more beads coming. For safety's sake, you want to keep your eyes focused on the next approaching float.

Bring a wagon, blankets and plenty of empty bags. Parents, wagons work better than strollers when it comes to navigating the cluttered streets of Carnival; blankets are key for tired revelers; and sturdy bags are needed to make sure your parade loot makes it home safely.

Wear layers. The date of Mardi Gras changes every year, but weather-wise, the Louisiana forecast can go from hot to cold in a matter of hours -- or minutes.

Don't try to do it all. New Orleans would much rather have you leave before you get your fill. Take the Mardi Gras spirit home with you -- and bring it back next year for more fun.








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