



*Happy Mardi Gras! Laissez Le Bon Temps Rouler!
May your day be blessed, the beads plentiful, and the king cake tasty.*

What is Mardi Gras?

Mardi Gras is a tradition that dates back thousands of years to pagan celebrations of spring and fertility rites. When Christianity arrived in Rome, religious leaders decided to incorporate these popular local traditions into the new faith, an easier task than abolishing them altogether. As a result, the excess and debauchery of the Mardi Gras season became a prelude to Lent, the 40 days of fasting and penance between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Along with Christianity, Mardi Gras spread from Rome to other European countries including France, Germany, Spain, and England.

The first American Mardi Gras took place on March 3, 1699, when French explorers Pierre LeMoyne d'Iberville and Sieur de Bienville landed near present day New Orleans, Louisiana. They held a small celebration and dubbed their landing spot Point du Mardi Gras. (Some argue the port city of Mobile, Alabama was actually the first to observe the event.)

In decades that followed, New Orleans and other French settlements began marking the holiday with street parties, masked balls, and lavish dinners. When the Spanish took control of New Orleans they abolished these rowdy rituals, and the bans remained in force until Louisiana became a U.S. state in 1812.

On Mardi Gras in 1827, a group of students donned colorful costumes and danced through the streets of New Orleans, emulating the revelry they'd observed while visiting Paris. Ten years later, the first recorded New Orleans Mardi Gas parade took place, a tradition that continues to this day.

In 1857, a secret society of New Orleans businessmen called the Mystic Krewe of Comus organized a torch-lit Mardi Gras procession with marching bands and rolling floats, setting the tone for future public celebrations in the city. Since then, krewes have remained a fixture of the Carnival scene throughout Louisiana. Other lasting customs include throwing beads and other trinkets, wearing masks, decorating floats, and eating king cake.

New Orleans plays host to some of the holiday's most famous public festivities, drawing thousands of tourists and revelers every year. Louisiana is the only state in which Mardi Gras is a legal holiday. However, elaborate carnival festivities draw crowds to other parts of the United States during the Mardi Gas season as well, including Alabama and Mississippi. Each region has its own events and traditions.

When Is Mardi Gras?

Mardi Gras season starts 12 days after Christmas and is traditionally celebrated on “Fat Tuesday,” the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and the day before Lent. In many areas, however, Mardi Gras has evolved into a week-long festival. Mardi Gras 2026 will fall on Tuesday, March 17th.

What Does Mardi Gras Mean?

Mardi is the French word for Tuesday, and Gras means “fat”. In France, the day before Ash Wednesday came to be known as Mardi Gras, or “Fat Tuesday.” Traditionally, in the days leading up to Lent, merrymakers would binge on all the rich, fatty foods – meats, eggs, milk, lard, and cheese – that remained in their homes, in anticipation of several weeks of eating only fish and different types of fasting.

Fun Facts About Mardi Gras:

More than 70 krewes parade through New Orleans on Mardi Gras after celebrating the two weeks of Carnival with invitation-only balls and supper dances.

Rex, one of the oldest Mardi Gras krewes, has been participating in parades since 1872 and established purple, green, and gold as the iconic Mardi Gras colors. Purple stands for justice, green for faith, and gold for power.

The idea of throwing beads was to toss the beads to those in the crowd who exhibited traits of the justice, faith, and power; the people who caught them were said to get good luck for the coming year.

Beads were originally made of glass, but nowadays they’re made of plastic, and are one of the most popular Mardi Gras traditions.

Among the most coveted of Mardi Gras parade “throws” are Zulu coconuts, the round, painted, glittery orbs thrown out by members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club.

The blazing torches lighting the way for parade-goers during nighttime Mardi Gras festivities are called flambeaux (French for torch). Crowds lining the parade route would toss coins to the flambeaux carriers, a tradition that continues today.

King Cakes began in celebration of the Three Kings, who brought gifts to the baby Jesus on Twelfth Night. The most popular is a braided Danish pastry laced with cinnamon and iced in the Mardi Gras colors of purple, green, and gold. The “baby” figurine (meant to represent Jesus) was baked into each king cake. According to custom, whoever gets the baby in his or her slice must buy the next cake.

There are over 70 parades covering 134 miles during the Mardi Gras season. That’s farther than the distance between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Over 12,500 tons of beads are thrown per year.

Typically, around 1,000 to 1,200 tons (2 to 4 million pounds) of waste is collected during the 12-day celebration. Mostly consisting of plastic beads, cups, and other throws.

Mardi Gras injects nearly \$900 million in direct and indirect economic impact into New Orleans annually, representing over 3% of the city’s GDP, millions in state taxes, and offering a strong \$2.64 return for every \$1 invested, boosting hotels, restaurants, and small businesses across the region.

Mardi Gras is the biggest free party on earth. If you haven’t attended a parade, be sure to watch the festivities on the television this upcoming Mardi Gras season. Let the Good Times Roll!