

DEMYSTIFYING

MARDI GRAS

A look at the history and traditions of New Orleans' grandest celebration

BY TRACEY TEO

The first thing I learned after accepting a coveted invitation last year to the Rex Organization's Mardi Gras Ball, the dazzling conclusion to New Orleans' Carnival season, is that my husband's tuxedo would never do.

This was a formal white-tie affair, and gentlemen must wear a coat with tails, a shirt with a collar starched within an inch of its life, and white gloves—attire Wesley could wear again should he ever pursue a career as a Victorian butler. (Tea, milady?)

The second discovery was that I needed my own gloves—elbow-length white opera gloves, no less—to complement my floor-length velvet gown.

And lastly, it may be Mardi Gras, but I found I would not need a mask for this gala; masking is for parades. The Rex parade, incidentally, has been the highlight of Mardi Gras day since the organization (which is also known as The School of Design) held its inaugural procession in 1872.

In an era so casual that some people consider flip-flops and baseball caps appropriate for nearly any occasion, it was refreshing to attend an event with a strict dress code that contributed to a resplendent evening fit for a king.

Of course, that was the whole idea. Every year, the Rex Organization, which includes some of New Orleans' most influential residents, names a prominent community member and a debutante as king (or "Rex," which means "king" in Latin) and queen of Carnival. I was privileged to get a behind-the-scenes peek at the glittering

The Rex Organization's Mardi Gras Ball and parade brim with pomp and pageantry.



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The Rex Organization annually selects a civic leader and debutante to reign as king and queen of Carnival (above). Immersive exhibits at Vue Orleans shine a light on the city's culture and traditions, including Mardi Gras (below).

pageantry of the king and queen of Carnival and their court.

A highlight was the presentation of the season's debutantes. Traditionally, debutante balls were meant to introduce young ladies into society with the goal of landing an upper-crust husband, but these modern white-gowned debs were college seniors being recognized for their academic achievements and volunteer service.

Afterward, the fashionable crowd swirled around the floor of the Sheraton New Orleans Hotel in a kaleidoscope of color and a cloud of old money, wringing out the last bit of Carnival revelry before the fairy tale ended at midnight.

This elegant evening was not what my Indiana friends pictured when they learned I was traveling to the Crescent City for Mardi Gras. "Isn't that the party with all the drunken debauchery on Bourbon Street?" they wondered. They couldn't get their heads around a formal ball, even though dozens are held during Carnival season each year.

When I recounted the magic of my last Mardi Gras experience—throwing around terms like "Orpheuscapade" (a fun dance party at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center hosted by the Krewe of Orpheus) and reliving the thrilling moment when I caught a prized Zulu coconut at a parade—they appeared confused. It was the same look I used to give my nephew when he toddled around in his space helmet proclaiming he had just wrestled dinosaurs on the moon.

I realized that one of America's biggest celebrations is one of the most misunderstood, partly because it sprang from a culturally unique pocket of the country with ties to France, which has celebrated Carnival since the Middle Ages. The

city holds many keys to unlocking the mysteries surrounding Carnival season, which takes place between January 6 and February 13 this year. You just have to know where to look.

IN THE KNOW

I started with a crash course in New Orleans history at Vue Orleans, which opened in 2022. This cultural attraction occupies the top 2 floors, as well as an observation deck, of the 34-story Four Seasons Hotel. In addition to providing panoramic views of this Mississippi River port city, the attraction uses immersive state-of-the-art technology to spotlight the rhythms and flavors that contribute to the city's famous joie de vivre, including Mardi Gras.

At the interactive Confluence of Cultures wall, sections come to life when you point at them, including one that details how the city became the birthplace of jazz. You can watch a video of the Preservation Hall All-Stars band and one about Mardi Gras Indians—Black residents whose proud parading traditions, dating to the late 1800s, are believed to have originated as a tribute to the American Indians who helped protect slaves who had escaped. You can even create your own virtual Mardi Gras costume. Be sure to check out the elaborate Rex ball invitation on display, a miniature work of art much like the one I received. *Adults, \$24.95; Louisiana residents, \$19.95.*

Next, head to The Presbytère, just steps from the historic St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square. This museum (adults, \$7) takes a deep dive into Mardi Gras traditions with the permanent exhibit "Mardi Gras: It's Carnival Time in Louisiana." You'll see photos of past celebrations, decorations, posters, ball favors, and a host of other artifacts;



FROM TOP: ©KATHY ANDERSON; COURTESY VUE ORLEANS

COURTESY LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM



The Presbytère's Mardi Gras collection includes a gown with details evoking flames that was worn to a 1964 ball themed "Descent into Hades."



Tour Mardi Gras World to see where artists produce hundreds of elaborate floats (above). The 8-car Smokey Mary float thrills Krewe of Orpheus parade spectators with its lights and working smokestack (below right).

you can even climb into a float.

One of the biggest misconceptions about Mardi Gras is that it's just an excuse for a big party and bad behavior. It is a big party, and there will always be French Quarter revelers who seem to have little appreciation for moderation. But the city's historically French Catholic population respects the celebration's religious roots.

A panel in the exhibit called "Mardi Gras Equation" explains why the date of Mardi Gras changes every year and how it is tied to Easter. Some visitors mistakenly believe Mardi Gras is a single-day celebration. Yet it actually marks the close of the weeks-long Carnival season that kicks off on January 6, a Christian holiday known as Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, which commemorates the moment the 3 kings brought gifts to baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, is the last day of over-indulgence that precedes Ash Wednesday, which ushers in Lent—a period of penance before Easter.

UNCOVERING KREWES

The exhibit also partially lifts the veil of secrecy surrounding krewes—organizations that stage parades and balls. There are more than 70 of them in New Orleans, and each has its own history and theme, often derived from Greek and Roman mythology.

They're all very different. There are all-female krewes, gay krewes, and even one dedicated to *Star Wars*. What they have in common, though, is the desire to impress parade-goers with their extravagant and highly wrought costumes.

The museum's extensive collection includes

a gown of "flames" that was worn to a Hades-themed ball (pictured on page 31). There's also an ensemble in purple, green, and gold—the traditional Carnival colors—from the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the krewe that stages the city's oldest African American Carnival parade.

PARADING AROUND

More than 50 float parades roll in and around New Orleans during Carnival season, and to the surprise of many outsiders, they are mostly family-friendly. The stereotype of inebriated women flashing body parts for beads may be the stuff of Bourbon Street, but anyone showing too much skin on most parade routes would incur the wrath of local parents.

Kids in the know come with big bags to haul home their booty of "throws," trinkets like strings of beads, stuffed animals, cups, and doubloons (coins that commemorate various krewes) that float-riders toss to the crowd. Among the most treasured items is the Zulu coconut, often painted with a whimsical face. My coconut has pride of place on a shelf in my home office.

Find out what it takes to create the floats at Mardi Gras World, home to Kern Studios, where artists work year-round building these outlandish pieces of rolling theater. A larger-than-life gorilla wearing oversize pink sunglasses, a somber Cleopatra, and a laughing Bacchus (the Roman god of wine) greet visitors on a guided tour of the 200,000-square-foot "den," a working warehouse where floats and props are stored. *Adults, \$22.*

Approximately 600 parade floats are built here every year.

Float design has come a long way since Roy

Kern designed his first mule-drawn float on the back of a garbage wagon in 1932. Blaine Kern (1927–2020), Roy's son and founder of Kern Studios, was a dynamic force who revolutionized the city's biggest bash, earning him the moniker "Mr. Mardi Gras." His creative designs were so innovative, incorporating lights and animatronics as early as the 1950s, that he was often compared to Walt Disney.

The late 1960s ushered in the era of the "super krewe" (organizations with at least 1,000 active members), and Kern Studios helped catapult their parades to the next level with supersized signature floats that are practically a parade on their own.

The 9-section "Then and Now" float, an ode to a defunct New Orleans amusement park, was created in 2013 for Endymion (pronounced en-dem-ee-on), a super krewe that hosts one of the most elaborate Carnival parades. The megafloat stretched 365 feet, which is 5 feet longer than a football field.

Another showstopper is the Krewe of Orpheus' "Smokey Mary," an 8-car illuminated train complete with a smokestack and whistle that always rolls on the night of Lundi Gras (the Monday before Mardi Gras).

For those looking to celebrate Mardi Gras with a local krewe, the inclusive Orpheus is your best bet. Unlike the invitation-only Rex ball, the black-tie Orpheuscapade party is open to the public for \$200 per person.

After a day rolling through city streets, the gleaming, raucous spectacle that is the Orpheus parade is led by celebrity monarchs (past monarchs include Quentin Tarantino and Sandra Bullock) through the convention center as revelers cheer them on. The masked riders include out-of-towners willing to pay \$1,500 for this bucket-list experience.

No matter how you celebrate Mardi Gras, discover the method behind the madness by checking out some of the city's key attractions. You'll go home with more than just a bunch of beads; you'll have a deeper understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary tradition.

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Randazzo's king cake

A ROYAL TREAT

BY KIM HILL

If there's a party, there must be cake, and for Mardi Gras, it's cake fit for a king. The origins of king cake can be traced to Saturnalia, an ancient Roman celebration, though the tradition is more closely associated with the Christian celebration of Epiphany, also known as Three Kings Day, on January 6. Starting sometime in the Middle Ages, European Catholics would eat king cake on that day, 12 days after Christmas, to commemorate the 3 kings revealing baby Jesus to the world.

European immigrants to New Orleans brought their tradition of king cake—a ring-shaped brioche topped with fruit and containing a small trinket, like a bean. Over time, the fruit became colored sugar or icing in the Mardi Gras colors of green, gold, and purple, and a tiny plastic baby replaced the bean. Whoever finds the baby in their slice must provide the king cake or host the party the following year.

Today, dozens of New Orleans-area bakeries make an astounding variety of king cakes: iced, braided, cream cheese-filled, cinnamon-spiced, and even ones made of sushi. Try several at a Carnival-season pop-up like **King Cake Connection**, a marketplace featuring treats from local Black-owned businesses. And **King Cake Hub** offers dozens of different kinds from more than 20 area bakeries. "We give ourselves permission for excess during Carnival, and king cake is one of the ways we do that," says Jennifer Samuels, co-founder of King Cake Hub.

Just make sure to get your sugary fix from Epiphany through Fat Tuesday, or you'll have to wait until next year.