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Galveston, Texas

Mardi Gras for All

Destinations where PG-rated good times roll

BY JENNY WISNIEWSKI

To most Americans, Mardi Gras is synonymous with New Orleans. The Big Easy puts on one heck of a party, but it can get a touch bawdy, particularly for younger folks.

Luckily, there are several destinations beyond New Orleans with their own, more family friendly multiweek celebrations, complete with parades, costumed revelers and beads galore.

THE ORIGINAL MARDI GRAS, MOBILE, ALABAMA

Mobilians cherish their city's status as home to the oldest Mardi Gras celebration in the United States, a tradition started in 1703. One much-anticipated event, Joe Cain Day, honors the man responsible for resurrecting the festival following a pause during the Civil War. >



Mobile, Alabama

ROGER VELAZQUEZ/VISIT GALVESTON; VISIT MOBILE

The day kicks off in the cemetery where Cain is buried, complete with a second line band, spectators in masquerade and a secret group of Cain's wailing widows shrouded in black veils, each claiming to be Joe Cain's favorite. The unique tradition is followed by The People's Parade, open to anyone who wants to march along.

Mobile hosts 40 parades throughout Carnival season, beginning Jan. 9 and featuring floats and costumed members of mystic societies. In addition to catching beads and trinkets, kids love snagging Mobile's signature throw — Moon Pies, soft treats of marshmallow fluff sandwiched between two cookies.

Another popular event is the King Cake-Off, where bakers go toe-to-toe with their secret family recipes. Tasters of all ages are invited to sample and vote for their favorite.

"Families are inherently part of the tradition," says Ashley Rains, senior public relations and communications manager for Visit Mobile. "So you are not going to see the balcony debauchery. ... You are going to see different ages, different generations, all in one place sharing food, sharing stories and just celebrating together."

Be sure to visit the Mobile Carnival Museum, which features interactive displays including floats that kids can stand atop and the world's largest collection of trains worn by Mardi Gras royalty.

LONE STAR MERRYMAKING, GALVESTON, TEXAS

With intricate wrought-iron balconies adorning Victorian buildings along the parade route, Mardi Gras! Galveston shares the look and feel of New Orleans' Mardi Gras, but it is much more mellow, says Mary Beth Bassett, senior public relations manager for Visit Galveston. As they make their way to the downtown entertainment district, many of the roughly 24 parades flow along the seawall, a nod to the city's island setting.

One parade standout, the Funky Uptown Umbrella Brigade, features revelers with custom-decorated umbrellas marching together, stopping along the way to dance the Hokey Pokey. The romp has even broken world records for parades with the most decorated umbrellas.

Other entertainment includes live music and a street circus with aerialists, fire performers and sword masters.



Jefferson Parish, Louisiana

While many of the parades and events are suitable for people of all ages, Galveston also hosts Family Gras, scheduled for Feb. 7, 2027. The event offers children's bands and a parade hosted by the Shriners Hospital for Children and Sunshine Kids. An annual pet parade, run by the Krewe of Barkus and Meoux, is another highlight of this fun-filled day.

NEXT DOOR TO NOLA, JEFFERSON PARISH, LOUISIANA

In the Magical Krewe of MadHatters' annual parade, you wouldn't expect anyone less than Alice in Wonderland to reign as queen. But Alice isn't the only star during Jefferson Parish's Family Gras celebration. Local marching bands, ranging from elementary school age through college, thrill the crowds as they battle in the Rhythm on the Route competition.

Family Gras takes place the first weekend of Jefferson Parish's Mardi Gras season, which begins on Jan. 29, 2027. In addition to the much-anticipated parades, it includes a 5K run, a shorter run for kids, an array of local and national musical talent, kids' activities, and plenty of mouthwatering food.

Other festivities throughout the Mardi Gras season also maintain a family-friendly vibe. In all, 10 parades make their way through the parish on both sides of the Mississippi River. Bring your appetite. There's plenty of authentic Louisiana cuisine — including king cake for dessert. With nearly three dozen bakeries producing the sweet treat, Jefferson Parish considers itself the "King Cake Capital of the World." ■