

Mardi Gras in Mobile — where it started

By Bob Carden

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CORRECTION

An earlier version of this story misidentified Alabama Coasting Magazine publisher David Calametti as Steve Calimetti. The story has been updated.

The cellophane-wrapped sugar bomb hurtled toward us in the Alabama night. Jostling for position, I boxed out the 7-year-old boy to my right, lunged in front of the grandmother to my left and snagged it out of the sky. Yes! In hand, my first Mobile Mardi Gras Moon Pie.

Mardi Gras — as everyone in Alabama routinely reminds you — originated not in New Orleans but in this charming city on Mobile Bay, in 1703 to be exact. And while not receiving the publicity of its sister city 140 miles to the west, it easily rivals New Orleans in intensity and fun. Mardi Gras in Mobile is two weeks of parades, parties, beer, beads, Moon Pies and mayhem. But without the, um, excesses of the Big Easy.

"I've never seen a woman lift her blouse at a Mobile [Mardi Gras] parade," said Stacy Hamilton, vice president of marketing and communications at Visit Mobile.

So, while there's partying in the streets and liberal open-container laws (governing outdoor drinking), it's not likely that a "Girls Gone Wild" video will be shot at the Mobile Mardi Gras anytime soon.

"We know how to have fun here, but still I have to say we're a little more family-oriented than New Orleans," said Judi Gullledge, executive director of the Mobile Carnival Association. "Parents are comfortable bringing their kids here."

Moon Pies are another thing distinguishing Mobile's Mardi Gras from the New Orleans version. You can find Moon Pies (marshmallow sandwiched between graham crackers and coated with chocolate) in New Orleans, but the concept of throwing them alongside the beads originated in Mobile and remains a staple there. About 3 million are tossed each year.

There are 38 parades over the two-week period leading up to Ash Wednesday. And Mardi Gras celebrations in Alabama extend well beyond Mobile. Fairhope, the postcard-pretty town across Mobile Bay, has its own parades, as do the beach towns farther south — Gulf Shores and Orange Beach. Each is about an hour's drive from Mobile.



Gras in Mobile after the Civil War. He would dress as a fictional Chickasaw Indian chief who stood up to Union forces. The locals ate it up and Cain became a legend. Each year, a local man portraying Cain leads the procession, known as the "people's parade." A group of women dress up as the "merry widows of Joe Cain" who show up at his grave claiming to be his wife.

This and the rest of the parades are pretty easy to manage; there are just six routes and most parades travel down the same 2 1/2-mile downtown loop. New Orleans, by contrast, has more than 60 routes, covering 300 miles. Mardi Gras is central to Mobile's heritage, so organizers spend lots of time trying to getting it right. The Mobile parades begin on Jan. 26 and wrap up on Fat Tuesday, Feb. 13.

"We prepare for Mardi Gras the way the rest of the country prepares for Christmas," said Steve Joynt, publisher of Mobile Mask Magazine. "It's really accessible for anyone who comes."

Mardi Gras alone is worth the trip to Mobile, but once here there is a lot more to do than watch floats and grab beads. The city's history is rich, the weather is (mostly) splendid, and the music and nightlife scenes are cranking.

Founded as the colonial capital of French Louisiana in 1702, Mobile was taken over by Spain during the American Revolution; the city finally was seized in 1813 and added to the Mississippi Territory. One of the most significant naval battles of the Civil War took place in Mobile Bay, where Union troops succeeded in capturing the Confederacy's last major port, sealing the rebels' fate. It was there that Union Navy Adm. David Farragut, on the cusp of victory, declared, "Damn the torpedoes."

That military presence on Mobile Bay continues today, in a sense, with the World War II battleship USS Alabama. The 40,000-ton vessel is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Mobile, having received 15 million visitors since it was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1964.

Dauphin Street is Mobile's hot neighborhood. Located in one of the city's seven historic districts, Dauphin Street is a mile of bars, restaurants, galleries, characters and concerts. It has always been the hub of Mobile nightlife, but lately has expanded its musical footprint. The Steeple is a recently converted Methodist church that hosts national music acts in its cozy 450-seat theater. It joins the 90-year-old Saenger Theatre, a 2,000-seat venue that has hosted artists as varied as Groucho Marx, Bob Dylan and Neil Young. Dauphin Street is probably the closest thing Alabama has to musical meccas like Austin's Sixth Street or Memphis's Beale Street.

"The Mobile sound is developing," said Ben Jernigan, a Mobile native and musician. "Everyone in the music business here works hard and plays harder."

Jernigan works at Dauphin Street Sound, a studio founded by Mobile native and former professional baseball pitcher Jake Peavy. Three years ago, the studio launched the Ten Sixty Five music festival, which attracts 40,000 annually to its stages downtown.

Any trip to Mobile must include a stop at Callaghan's Irish Social Club. Callaghan's might not be the best bar in America, but it's close. Esquire magazine did once call it the best, and USA Today declared its cheeseburger the best in the state. A typical stop here features good music, a well-poured drink and a family atmosphere unlike many others.

homes, sheltered by towering live oaks, give the neighborhood a lush feel. But one area where Mobile has shown its waterfront. While surrounded by a wonderful body of water, the area is just about all commercial; there is no bustling Baltimore Inner Harbor or Georgetown waterfront. City officials said that they are working on a plan to open the waterfront to pedestrian-friendly development.

If you're lucky on that walk, you might encounter one of the region's great natural phenomena, the Gulf Coast thunderstorm. Actually, chances are great that you will. Mobile is the rainiest city in America (beating New Orleans by a couple of drops). But it doesn't have the miserable, chilly, endless drizzle of, say, Seattle. Rather, the storms of Mobile are wickedly wonderful creations, Mother Nature at her best. Squalls appear over the bay. Skies quickly darken, thunder cracks and a torrent is released from the heavens. Then, just as quickly, a brilliant sun appears.

"With our humidity and sunshine, you see these rapid pop-up storms; one neighborhood could be drenched in rain, while the other is in the sun," said acclaimed local weathercaster Alan Sealls of WKRG-TV. (Sealls's no-nonsense reporting during Hurricane Nate in October 2017 went viral and made him somewhat of an Internet sensation.)

To the locals, storms are just another day in their private paradise.

"We laugh when the Weather Channel folks come down and get so dramatic," said Steve Calimetti, publisher of Alabama Coasting Magazine. "It's just a storm. If we lose power for a day or two, we all get together and grill whatever's in the refrigerator and move on. Storms bring us together."

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If you go

Where to stay

The Admiral Hotel

251 Government St.

855-213-0582

theadmiralhotel.com

The four-star property is the perfect location for exploring downtown. The hotel occupies a historical building, and the rooms are modern and spacious. Rooms from \$99 to \$225.

The Battle House Renaissance Mobile Hotel and Spa

26 N. Royal St

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[maplehill.com/hotels/travel/mobile](#)

A beautifully restored, pre-Civil War hotel. A spa, fitness center and pool are among the amenities, and it is conveniently located near the USS Alabama. Rooms from \$155 to \$300.

Where to eat

Callaghan's Irish Social Club

916 Charleston St.

251-433-9374

callaghansirishsocialclub.com

Open since 1946, Callaghan's is a storied pub. With about the best burgers anywhere, it's a friendly place with lots of locals and occasional live music. Sandwiches and salads are featured along with a weekend brunch menu. Entrees start at \$10.

Dauphin's

107 St. Francis St.

251-444-0200

godauphins.com

Located on the 34th floor of Trustmark Building, the restaurant overlooks downtown Mobile. The dramatic views lift the dining experience. The seafood and steak dishes are pricey, but good. Entrees start at \$24.

Felix's Fish Camp

1530 Battleship Pkwy., Spanish Fort, Ala.

251-626-6710

felixsfishcamp.com

This is a big, fun place with a huge menu, which includes steaks, seafood and burgers. It has huge windows and overlooks Mobile Bay. Try to get there by sunset for fantastic views. Dinner entrees start at \$14.99.

What to do

USS Alabama

2703 Battleship Pkwy.

251-477-2703

ussalabama.com

Anchored in Mobile Bay, the battleship is Mobile's most popular tourist attraction. The World War II ship led the American fleet into Tokyo Bay at the end of the war. Open 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the summer, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the winter. Admission \$15; \$6 for children ages 6 to 11; free for younger children.

251-436-8901

gulfquest.org

A large, airy museum that focuses on the Gulf of Mexico, with more than 90 interactive exhibits. Located directly on the Mobile River. Open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. Admission \$16, active military members and students \$15, children ages 5-17 \$13, younger free.

Information

mobile.org

mobilemask.com/parade-schedule.html

B.C.
