

Mardi Gras



Lent is nearly upon us, but before we think about what we should give up, there's one last party to be celebrated in many parts of the world, including our own German-speaking countries:

'Mardi Gras'. Find out more about this crazy festival ...

Where does it come from?

There were many pagan festivals based around fertility and chasing the winter away which were integrated into Christian festivals. The last day before Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, is *Mardi Gras* (or Fat Tuesday!), although the celebrations usually last more than just one day in a lot of places. The name comes from the tradition of eating anything rich or fatty to use it up before the start of the Lenten fast. Today, *Mardi Gras* usually involves carnival processions with decorated floats, costumes and dancing.

There is some discussion as to how *Mardi Gras* came to the US, but the most popular belief is that it had been celebrated in many towns and cities in France since the Middle Ages when the French explorer, Iberville, arrived in what is now the city of New Orleans on 3rd March 1699. This was the day *Mardi Gras* was being celebrated in France and in its honour he named the landing site the 'Pont du Mardi Gras' and introduced the idea of processions to the city.

Where is it celebrated?

The most well-known celebrations take place in New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro and Venice. The first recorded *Mardi Gras* street procession took place in 1837, after Louisiana became part of the United States of America. In the preceding years, the festival had been banned under Spanish rule. Today, Louisiana is the only state which has a legal holiday on *Mardi Gras*. The street processions are extremely popular, with many visitors coming from all over the world to see them.

The processions across Brazil, and in Rio de Janeiro in particular, are world famous and combine European, African and native traditions in colourful dancing groups and carnival floats. There is fierce competition for the prize for the best Samba School. The Venice 'Carnevale' dates back to the 13th century and is famous for its masked balls.

Some important words to know about *Mardi Gras*:

Bauta:	The full-face mask worn in Venice at carnival. Traditionally, this mask was also worn by citizens of Venice when they were required to remain anonymous (such as during voting).
Carneval:	The word comes from the Roman 'carnelevarium', meaning 'to remove meat'.
King cake:	A cake with a small trinket hidden in it. The person who find the trinket is the 'king' for the day. This is eaten at carnival in the USA, usually on Mardi Gras. A similar cake is eaten on 6th January (the Epiphany) in most European countries.
Krewes:	Groups of people who organise a float or who march in a carnival procession, especially in New Orleans.
La Maschera pui bella:	The competition held on the last weekend of the Venice balls for the most beautiful mask.
Sambadrome:	The place where the Samba schools hold their traditional Mardi Gras procession in Rio de Janeiro.

To find out **more about Mardi Gras** around the world, go to:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mardi_Gras

<http://www.venice-carnival-italy.com/>

<http://www.ipanema.com/carnival/>

<http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/>

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