

## It's All About the Beads

by

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“You bought beads?”

Our friend, Joe, a long-time resident of New Orleans, was incredulous; his shock written on his weary face. He had just spent the last eight hours preparing for, then walking in a Mardi Gras parade yet my confession woke him up.

“Well, I didn’t want to get them the ‘traditional’ way.” I had thought all Mardi Gras beads won by women involved baring their breasts. “Since everyone was wearing them, we didn’t want to be left out.”

Not only did we buy beads, we bought outlandish hats to go with them.

My husband, Glen, and I landed in New Orleans on the Friday before Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) with the idea of attending events throughout the holiday weekend that ended with the beginning of Lent (Ash Wednesday).

We caught an airport shuttle bus expecting a half hour ride into the city. Little did we know everyone in Louisiana was descending upon New Orleans. Police had blocked off roads into the French Quarter and the Uptown parade route along St Charles Avenue essentially cut off access to many hotels. At one point, our bus ended up at the beginning of a parade. Fortunately, police let us scoot down a side street but not before a hot dog vendor happily lowered his awning so we could pass. Our driver apologized profusely.

“Hey, it’s Mardi Gras,” we said when we reached our hotel, *The Courtyard by Marriott*, two hours later.



Our hotel was within blocks of the Mississippi River and not far from the famous Cajun restaurant, *Mulates*. There we enjoyed a feed of frog's legs, alligator, and catfish washed down with Louisiana's Abita Beer while listening to La Touché, a local Cajun band. Many customers danced to the lively music. Some wore outlandish hats, others sparkling Mardi Gras beads while some women giggled behind masks festooned with feathers. "First thing tomorrow, we buy beads and a hat," my husband said as a man draped in purple, green, and gold beads the size of

coconuts inched past our table.

The Riverwalk Mall hugs the Mississippi River across the street from *Mulates*. Originally this area was New Orleans' railyards but it was razed in 1984 so the city could stage a World's Fair. Now a conference center and mall occupy this space. Riverwalk Mall has many shops geared to the tourist looking for good quality souvenirs. It didn't take long for my husband to find a hat. The moment I saw the sparkling green alligator with a huge yellow eye displayed in *The House of Masks and Gifts*, I knew he would want it. So while I admired the view of the river from one of the mall's balconies, he excitedly put it on.

"I love your hat, man!" a young tourist said, taking my husband's picture. "I so want one."

Little did we know this hat was unique and would become a magnet for attention. All who saw it, loved it and those who could, bestowed strings of Mardi Gras beads upon



us. Of course, that was after we had bought our own in the colours of Mardi Gras (chosen by Rex in 1892)--purple (justice), green (faith), and gold (power). Had we been better informed, we would have known the Krewes (non-profit organizations who create the parades) of Mardi Gras floats toss out 'throws' to spectators. This throwing of trinkets (doubloons, cups, and toys) began in the 1870s but it was the Rex Krewe who tossed the first glass beads in the 1920s. Our friends, Joe and Bernie, told us this was so we, the people, could feel like royalty with stands of beaded jewelry around our necks.

After buying our beads, we had lunch at *Crescent City Brewhouse* enjoying their Pilsner (brewed on-site) with a crab cake salad and great jazz. We heard many things about Bourbon Street, most of them unfavourable, but we felt we should see it for ourselves. The street was crowded with people making merry. Folks hung over the Spanish-style balconies for which New Orleans is famous, tossing beads to passersby. Only a few women lifted their shirts and Glen got several strands for wearing a goofy hat.



We quickly learned the culture of getting beads. First, the more noise you make, the greater your chances of being seen and having beads tossed your way. Second, anyone in



costume or wearing a silly hat could also attract attention. Children are loved by those who ride in the parades and

receive most of the stuffed toys, cups, and beads. However, these were not the tactics I used to snag my first 'free' beads.

As we sauntered down Bourbon Street, I spotted an older man dressed in a black tux with a top hat wearing hundreds of pink beads.

"Those are different," I said to him after explaining I was new to Mardi Gras. "I thought Mardi Gras colours were gold, purple, and green."

"We started wearing pink beads about ten years ago," the Krewe of Mid-City man replied.

"Can I have a string?" I boldly asked.

"It will cost you. What are you willing to give me?"

My heart sank. I was *not* baring my breasts. Besides, I wore too many clothes. A cold snap had hit New Orleans that week so I had on several layers to keep warm.



“Will a kiss do?” I asked.

“It would be perfect.”

I gave the man a peck on the cheek and a hug, thanked him for the beads, then scuttled back to my husband.

“I never thought you would be so bold,” he said.

“And yet you wear an alligator on your head,” I replied as we walked toward Canal Street to view our first parade.

The Krewe of Tucks parade has a risque element to its floats. We stood on a corner and began chatting with our parade-buddies as we waited for it to begin. They advised us on which beads were good and which were ho-hum. We didn’t care. We took what we were thrown and clambered for more. So did they, even though they confessed to having boxes of beads at home.

An hour later with hundreds of strands of beads weighing down my neck, I told Glen it was time to go. I had a nerf football in one hand and a plastic cup in the other. My pockets were stuffed with doubloons. I couldn’t catch more beads even if I tried.



“No, don’t go!” our new friends said.

“Just get a bag. See, they toss them to the crowd.”

Each parade has its thousands of beads stored in plastic bags.

As each Krewe

member empties them, they throw the bags away. Her son scrambled over the police barricade and nabbed us one. I gladly removed most of my beads then we were ready to scream for more.

The Mardi Gras parades are more than just floats and beads, we saw horse clubs, motorcycle clubs, and high school marching bands. Each band had drum majors, baton twirlers, at least 30 musicians, flag wavers, and dancers. The talent we witnessed was incredible as was the size of each band. Very few Canadian high schools could amass such a showing. It reminded me of my first Mardi Gras celebration in Québec City when I was a teen. There it is called Carnaval de Québec and bands from all over North America marched in the parades.

After standing three hours watching the Tucks parade, I was ready to kick back and enjoy some of the food for which New Orleans is famous. Not far from our hotel, we found a local restaurant, *Grand Isle* (named for an island off the coast of Louisiana), that served incredible raw oysters. We also enjoyed a tasty crawfish étouffée. We lingered over supper listening to the live music show in the park outside. We had hoped to meet our friend, Bernie, at the M.O.M. (Mystick Krewe of Orphans) ball but the traffic downtown meant travel to the venue was next to impossible.

Sunday morning, we watched the Knights of Babylon mask-themed Parade (founded by The Jesters Club in 1939) go down Canal Street then had a crab cake (Glen)





and seafood taco (me) lunch at the *Gordon Biersch* restaurant where a Scottish pipe band from the parade serenaded us. We then caught beads tossed from Krewe of Thoth (Egyptian god of wisdom) as it turned down Poydras Street. This krewe is often know as the ‘Krewe of Shut Ins’ as its route passed institutions for the disabled when it began in 1947.

After a brief stop at our hotel, we walked to the Hilton Hotel to meet Bernie for supper at the famous *Drago* restaurant. We all had their signature dish, Charbroiled oysters, and did not regret it. She then told us we’d been invited to see the Krewe of Bacchus night parade from a friend’s third floor balcony on St. Charles Avenue.

“You won’t get beads from up there,” she warned us.

“Not a problem. We have too many already,” I replied.

“Oh, I’ll get beads,” Glen said.



As the brightly-lit  
Bacchus floats  
drove beneath us,  
he made it his  
mission to attract  
the attention of the  
young men tossing  
beads. He felt  
he’d inspire them  
to test their  
throwing skills.



They rose to the challenge and soon the kids sharing our balcony view had more beads than they could wish for.

Monday, or Lundi Gras, is the calm before the party that is Fat Tuesday. We met Bernie and her son at their hotel for a pre-breakfast drink then had eggs benedict and fried oysters at the



*Stanley*, a restaurant on Jackson Square. Mardi Gras celebrants drink all day but we never saw any brawls or lewd behaviour. Of course, we did avoid Bourbon Street at night.

“You must try a

Hurricane,” Bernie said after breakfast so we wandered through the Quarter to *Pat O’Brien’s* Pub to sample their famous rum drink. After enjoying a jazz quartet and tap dancer busking, we walked along the river and met the Zulu Rascals. These men, dressed in leopard skins and grass skirts, announced that the arrival of the Zulu King would take place at Spanish Plaza so we headed to a Canal Street pharmacy to buy beer. Much to our chagrin, security guards turned us away when they saw our beer cases. Bernie was shocked.

“They even changed the laws in Miami so people from New Orleans could feel at home while taking in the Superbowl,” she said as we stashed the beer in our Mardi Gras bead-bags.

The week before, the New Orleans Saints had won the Superbowl and many were still celebrating by wearing Saints’ jerseys or hats. “Who Dat” was the phrase on everyone’s lips.

Not long after getting settled on a wall surrounded by friendly, beer-drinking southerners, we heard the mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, welcomed the Zulu King and Rex. These men represented the two oldest Mardi Gras Krewes. Mr. Nagin reminded the crowd how far New Orleans had come since the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 then we all applauded the fantastic fireworks that lit the Mississippi River.

To Glen the night was young so while I tumbled into bed, he headed out to watch the Orpheus parade (founded by Harry Connick Jr. and others in 1993). He had to see the Imagination Movers, a group of talented children entertainers. He scored some beads from them for our grandsons.

Mardi Gras day began early with us watching Joe, Bernie's husband, walk with Pete Fountain's Half-Fast Walkers. They lead the Zulu parade so we had to stake out a spot so Joe could see us. A couple of young men arrived shortly afterwards to set up step-ladders on the sidewalk. Fixed to the top step were wooden boxes designed to seat young children.

"What a great idea," Glen remarked, "The kids can see and you don't have to worry about them."



"They are as essential to parade-watching as the beer cooler, we'll be bringing later."

Not long after, a woman in a gold leather jacket asked if she could stand beside me at the

barricade. We had learned that southern and western hospitality are not very different so of course, we let her wriggle in beside us.

After Joe walked by, we shared the two bags of beads he gave us with the children on the step-ladders. They were thrilled. The mother of the woman in the gold leather jacket also benefited from our generosity. This was her first Mardi Gras, too.

“I could so get into giving away beads,” Glen said.

The Zulu parade was impressive. I have never seen so many feathers used in so many different ways to such a wonderful effect. The splash of colour lit St. Charles Avenue as did the costumes of each krewe member. All had painted their faces black with white eyes and mouth, and most wore grass skirts. During the 1960s, this was seen as demeaning but now is embraced. Although most of the krewe were African-Americans, many whites joined the group.

And, our barricade buddy with the gold jacket knew them all. Soon she was draped in beads and began gifting them to us. She also received more coconuts than anyone else on the parade route. These coveted prizes for Zulu parade watchers are often called Golden Nuggets. They are hand-painted in gold or black and decorated, usually with a ‘Z’. Glen, wearing a Saints hat, caught one with “Who Dat” written on it.

“You must know everyone in this parade,” I said to the woman in the gold jacket as she





handed me a string of voodoo beads.

“Well, I was a Zulu Queen five years ago. The Krewe members see my gold jacket and give me the best beads.”

“So we stand in the presence of royalty,” I said and Lisa Crinel beamed.

After watching the parade for four hours with no end in sight (the Rex parade followed the Zulus), Glen and I decided to have lunch. After saying goodbye to our barricade buddies, we headed back to our hotel with a bag full of beads, coconuts, nerf footballs, frisbees, cups, and doubloons thanks to Lisa.

“How am I going to pack all this?” I asked Glen as I poured the beads onto our king-sized bed.

“We could give them away.”

“If we had a Mardi Gras party every year, maybe in ten years, we’d be finally rid of them all.”

“Mardi Gras is all about the beads!”