

Mardi Gras

in New Orleans

New Orleans, the great city at the mouth of the **Mississippi** is one of the most colorful, most cosmopolitan and most European of American cities.

Though very few people in the city now speak or understand much French, New Orleans prides itself on its French heritage. The historic center of the city is known as the French Quarter, and the city is famous across the United States for its restaurants and its "Mardi Gras" celebrations.

It is still one of America's great ports, where goods that have traveled down the Mississippi valley by barge or by truck or by train are offloaded and trans-shipped, to be exported all over the world.

Open cloze. Write only one word per blank



Mardi Gras, meaning literally "Fat Tuesday" was first celebrated in Louisiana by French colonists in the eighteenth century. It was, in _____ days, a day of feasting before the start of *Lent*, the 40-day period leading up to Easter.

As the last "normal" day before the austerity of Lent, "fat Tuesday" was a day **to make the most of**, a day of carnivals, eating, drinking

and **revelry**. It has remained a day of carnival _____ since; but the original French celebrations are just a small part of today's festivities. Mardi Gras, New Orleans style, owes as much to Afro-Caribbean **customs** and the Latin American carnival tradition as it _____ to the French colonists who established it in their new city.

The Mardi Gras celebrations actually **last** for several weeks. About a month before the main carnival, a season of elaborate balls and parties begins: the official Mardi Gras program is published, and shops start _____ the very sweet and colourful "King Cake", a delicacy that can only be found during this holiday season.

In other parts of Louisiana, the first Mardi Gras parades actually take _____ three to four weeks before the big carnival in New Orleans, and even in the city itself, smaller parades begin two weeks before the big day.

My first Mardi Gras party _____ place in a friend's apartment in New Orleans a few days before the parade. The apartment was decorated out in the season's _____ colours of green, gold and purple; the hi-fi system pounded out carnival music, _____ the guests danced, talked, and ate King Cake, washed down with "Blackened Voodoo Beer", another specialty **brewed** in

a local brewery.

On Fat Tuesday itself, I joined the hundreds of thousands of local people and visitors, to watch the processions **wind their way** through the streets of New Orleans. The processions are organized by groups called "Krewes", which _____ have mythological or historic names, _____ as Proteus, Endemion, or Bacchus. The one I liked best was Zulu, a parade organized by members of the city's black community, **resplendent** with its colourful ornate **floats** and costumes based _____ African themes.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Zulu and other parades was the "throws". As the floats move slowly through the crowds, tradition has it that those on them should throw all kinds of **trinkets** into the crowd — plastic necklaces, engraved plastic cups, plastic medallions (a **coveted** prize) and other souvenirs. Most parade-goers do _____ they can to catch these materially worthless items, and I found _____ quickly caught up in the **frenzy**, scraping on the sidewalk among the **surging** spectators to proudly pick up my plastic prize. In the heat of the moment, it's hard _____ to be caught up in the madness of this ritual, in _____ of the worthlessness of the prizes!

Traditionally, people in New Orleans use the "throw cups" they pick up, and decorate their cars or homes with the other souvenirs they take home.

As a Yankee spending my first Mardi Gras in New Orleans, however, I _____ some mistakes in planning my time. There is so _____ going on at Carnival time, that you can't see everything, and I was disappointed not to see more of the city's famous Dixieland **jazz** bands parading through the streets, but obviously I was often in the wrong place at the wrong _____.

After a year, I know that I still have a lot to learn about the customs, cultures and traditions of Mardi Gras in New Orleans. This year, I'll try and restrain myself during the throws, _____ that I won't come home with a bagful of plastic objects that I simply have to recycle. I'll let someone _____ have that pleasure!

WORDS:

to make the most of : to take maximum advantage from, to enjoy - **revelry**: partying, fun **customs** : habits, traditions - **to last** : to endure, to survive - **to brew**: to make beer - **wind their way** : move and turn - **resplendent** : shining, colorful - **floats**: wagons, carts - **trinkets**: kitsch, worthless objects - **coveted**: desired, wanted - **frenzy**: excitement - **surging**: all moving together

Comprehension exercise

Answer these questions

1. What does Mardi Gras literally mean?

2. What is the name of the 40-day period leading up to Easter?

3. Historically speaking, how was the last "normal" day before this period spent?

4. Nowadays, when do the Mardi Gras celebrations start?

5. What is the name of the delicacy specific to this holiday season?. Where is the big carnival held?

7. What are the season's traditional colors?

8. What is the name of the special beer people drink in New Orleans?

9. Who organizes the processions?

10. What are "throws"?
