

**The History of Mardi Gras**

Mardi Gras is a Christian holiday and popular cultural phenomenon that dates back thousands of years to pagan spring and fertility rites. Also known as Carnival or Carnaval, it’s celebrated in many countries around the world—mainly those with large Roman Catholic populations—on the day before the religious season of Lent begins. Brazil, Venice and New Orleans play host to some of the holiday’s most famous public festivities, drawing thousands of tourists and revellers every year.

**When is Mardi Gras?**

Mardi Gras is traditionally celebrated on “Fat Tuesday,” the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. In many areas, however, Mardi Gras has evolved into a week-long festival.

Mardi Gras 2021 will fall on Tuesday, February 16. The full schedule of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, home of the Mardi Gras parade, can be found here.

**What Is Mardi Gras?**

Mardi Gras is a tradition that dates back thousands of years to pagan celebrations of spring and fertility, including the raucous Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Lupercalia.

When Christianity arrived in Rome, religious leaders decided to incorporate these popular local traditions into the new faith, an easier task than abolishing them altogether. As a result, the excess and debauchery of the Mardi Gras season became a prelude to Lent, the 40 days of fasting and penance between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday.

Along with Christianity, Mardi Gras spread from Rome to other European countries, including France, Germany, Spain and England.

**What does Mardi Gras mean?**

Mardi is the French word for Tuesday, and gras means “fat.” In France, the day before Ash Wednesday came to be known as Mardi Gras, or “Fat Tuesday.” Traditionally, in the days leading up to Lent, merrymakers would binge on all the rich, fatty foods—meat, eggs, milk, lard and cheese—that remained in their homes, in anticipation of several weeks of eating only fish and different types of fasting.

The word carnival, another common name for the pre-Lenten festivities, also derives from this feasting tradition: in Medieval Latin, carnelevarium means to take away or remove meat, from the Latin carnem for meat.

**Mardi Gras Around the World**

Across the globe, pre-Lenten festivals continue to take place in many countries with significant Roman Catholic populations.

Brazil’s weeklong Carnival festivities feature a vibrant amalgam of European, African and native traditions. In Canada, Quebec City hosts the giant Quebec Winter Carnival. In Italy, tourists flock to Venice’s Carnevale, which dates back to the 13th century and is famous for its masquerade balls.

Known as Karneval, Fastnacht or Fasching, the German celebration includes parades, costume balls and a tradition that empowers women to cut off men’s ties. For Denmark’s Fastevlan, children dress up and gather candy in a similar manner to Halloween—although the parallel ends when they ritually flog their parents on Easter Sunday morning.

**Yvonne**