

Mardi Gras in Small Town Southwest Louisiana
By Suzanne Wright

It's 6:30 a.m. and I have a choice to make: will it be beer, Bloody Mary or Jack Daniel's to take the edge off the nip in the air? I opt for JD.

I'm in Elton—a long way from New Orleans, closer to Texas—for the *Courier de Mardi Gras*, AKA the chicken run, and it seems everyone is already indulging out on this scrubby patch of land. Several communities have these runs, where costumed revelers go house to house “begging” for the ingredients for gumbo: rice, cracklings, corn, potatoes and chicken. The ritual recalls mid-winter festivals when masked riders visited isolated farms on horseback and entertained families with singing and antics. To show their appreciation, the family would release a live chicken to be captured by a quick-footed, sure-handed fellow.

The colorful two-piece costumes look like PJs festooned with rick rack, fringe and sequined. One guy's outfit is made completely of Crown Royal bags; his mom made it. Most are also wearing *cabochons*, pointy dunce-like hats, and have a mesh mask that obscures their face. Although a few runs are co-ed, this one is strictly for the men, though the women get into the fun, too. One gal, sipping beer from a red plastic cup, has an anatomically correct anatomically correct plastic shot glass hanging around her neck. She gives me a t-shirt when I compliment its lifelike depiction of the male genitalia and offer to snap a picture.

Even though prodigious amounts of alcohol will be consumed through mid-afternoon, the whole thing manages to be wholesome family fun. A priest blesses the proceedings and the drinking and music momentarily stops. Then we're off, spectators on rolling flatbed trailers, riders on horseback. At the first stop, an impromptu band plays Cajun music on a squeezebox, a washboard, a fiddle and a triangle. The owners of the farm are cooking venison sausage and *boudin*, a rice-stuffed pork sausage, on small charcoal braziers, the skins pleasingly puckered and charred. They are both delicious chased with JD. There's good-natured rough-housing as the guys dive into the mud, wrestling an old red hen, feathers flying and a cheer goes up from the crowd as the victor emerges. Everyone hoists a cup.

As anyone who has visited Louisiana knows, the locals have a contagious zest for life. And there's no better time to see that joyfulness in action than Mardi Gras season.

The Jefferson Davis Tourist Center is a replica of an Arcadian cottage. A quick history lesson: in 1755, the French Acadians were deported from their Nova Scotia homeland to Louisiana. It is their traditions that have enriched and informed the culture here for centuries. Listen to a native-born Cajun speak: the language has a certain musicality.

In spite of the massive importation of Asian crawfish, “mudbug” farming has increased in these parts, as sugar, cotton and rice have declined. The food is legendary in these parts and even the most modest storefront turns out great plates: shrimp or crawfish

etouffee smothered in chopped vegetables and served over rice; savory crawfish pie at Cajun Tales in Welsh; oyster, shrimp or crawfish po boys, hearty sandwiches tucked into perfect baguettes at Neptune's Café in Elton; catfish lightly battered and fried; fried gator; flour-dusted, pan-seared and crabmeat-topped redfish meuniere at Lake Charles's Pujos St. Café (also try the mayhaw shrimp and oysters Pujos); fat breakfast biscuits and gravy at the Majestic Grocery in Lake Charles; and, of course, gumbo—sometimes called Cajun chili—a thick soup made with a thickened roux base of flour, oil and butter and served over rice. And king cake for Mardi Gras: a twisted, oval-shaped, brioche-like dough stuffed with cream cheese or praline, slathered in green, purple and gold icing topped with beads or trinkets; stop at Delicious Donuts & Bakery in Lake Charles.

There are more than 40 krewes, the organizations that host parades and balls, in Jefferson Davis Parish and Calceuseau parishes. Mardi Gras season runs nearly a month starting on January 6; Christmas trees remain up and decorated with Mardi Gras themed ornaments. At the Mardi Gras Museum in Jennings, six rooms are filled to the brim with feathered, furry and bejeweled costumes for children and adults.

Someone has pulled some strings and I am going to get to ride on a float in the Jennings Mardi Gras Parade. The boom box blasts out a zydeco tune with the refrain: "Go on mama, better get your gun, we've got a chicken on the run" as I ready my beads. It's fun to throw the cheap, brightly colored necklaces—maybe more fun than catching. There's a strategy: first make eye contact with an individual, then fling them so they land at the target. There seem to be three types of bead-seekers along the parade route: the duckers, who seem scared of flying objects and usually lose their treasures to a more aggressive nearby participant; the pros, who catch your eye, nod and coolly execute a one-armed catch, expending nearly zero energy; and the cheaters, who are posed atop trucks or in trees for a better vantage point. It's a frenzy of fun (though you won't find breasts flashed in these towns) and I'm working up a sweat flinging the necklaces. It's over far too soon.

Lake Charles's 1,000-room L'auberge Du Lac Hotel & Casino sits on 227 acres and offers the best accommodations in the region; it's a great place to wind down from the festivities. I'm not a gambler, but this is the perfect casino resort for non-gamers, with a spa, shops, an 18-hole golf course and fine dining at the Snake River Grill. The rooms are generously sized and have touches like leather-topped tables and cowhide chairs. There's a large contingent of Red Hatters, over-50 females who have bussed in from Texas to ride in the Fat Tuesday parade.

I'm off to the Lake Charles Gala at the Civic Center. I wander backstage where the krewes are getting into costume. I stop to admire one plumed headdress and inquire about the weight of the costume. Before I know it a smiling, beefy-cheeked man hoists it up and over my shoulders, lashing it onto my waist. It's heavy—about 50 pounds—but I'm queen for a moment. I have him take my picture.

Out in the darkened auditorium, excitement is mounting as I take my seat in the bleachers. Krewe come boogying out to raucous music, excited family and friends snap pictures, flashes momentarily blinding the “royals” as they pose. The youth princesses are seated in front of the stage, in gleaming rhinestone tiaras and ermine-trimmed gowns. One seven-year old, hair perfectly curled, her train prettily fanned around her feet, drops her tired head and begins to doze, obvious to the photographers and noise around her. No one wakes her, though her fellow court members smile slyly or shake their heads in wonderment at her napping abilities.

I lift a red plastic cup to her majesty: surviving Mardi Gras requires spirit, stamina—and sleep.

If You Go: The good folks at www.visitlakecharles.org will help you plan your perfect Mardi Gras weekend.