

Mardi Gras' second home

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The Isle of Capri Casino lobby exploded with color. Mardi Gras swags and ornaments filled repurposed Christmas trees displayed beside a fuchsia sequined dress and ornate shoulder piece with brightly dyed feathers, while a band played zydeco music in the bar. Purple, green, and gold beads draped the neck of every guest.

But I was not in New Orleans, the spot best-known for Mardi Gras festivities. In fact, I never have experienced the pageantry of NOLA during Mardi Gras. The season of celebration had reached full swing — in Lake Charles, La., where the state's lesser-known, but second-largest, Mardi Gras party is held, with half a million people in attendance.

Celebrations in both cities feature elaborate floats and costume shoulder pieces. But raucous behavior in the French Quarter of New Orleans gains much greater media notoriety than the family-oriented intent of the season.

“Krewes” (community groups) in New Orleans sponsor dozens of individual parades, while Lake Charles Krewes participate in several large parades and the magical spectacle called the Royal Gala. With a big focus on family-friendly events and a smaller crowd, Mardi Gras in Lake Charles may seem a bit more relaxed than its larger “cousin.”

As a travel writer on assignment, I get to experience these little nooks and crannies of American life. Events like the Royal Gala in Lake Charles, where spotlights glint off of a highly polished, concrete floor inside the Lake Charles Civic Center. Last year, our group had thrown thousands of beads into the hands of enthusiastic spectators on the gray and rainy afternoon of the Children's Parade while dressed in gloves, ponchos, and boas.

We had danced to zydeco music, decorated king cakes, and gawked at the world's largest Mardi Gras costume display.

We had also savored plenty of traditional Louisiana food, including freshly cooked boudin sausage at a family-run market, and crawfish in the shell at a landmark restaurant. There was crisp fried alligator and flaky crab cakes as well as savory chicken and sausage gumbo, and spicy shrimp étouffée served with pistolettes (rolls).

The Gala recaptured my attention when a teenaged princess swept by in a cloud of tulle, sparkling crown and jeweled train. Seven more young ladies followed. Then the parade of Krewes began.

One queen wore a shimmering metallic dress with a tapestry breastplate and a shoulder piece that soared five feet above her delicate crown, featuring dozens of white and purple feathers and sequined flourishes. She waved her scepter with the benevolence of a fairy godmother.

A white and silver shoulder piece with trailing turquoise feathers enhanced a fringe-filled flapper dress while another woman hurried by in a flurry of gold and black feathers and brocade. Men paired sparkling crowns with beaded and sequined capes, epaulets and knickers. And a bespectacled prince gestured towards his curtseying spouse, resplendent in a brilliant white dress with a broad shoulder piece sporting crimson and ebony feathers.

Although royalty prevailed, an all-male group dressed for and danced to Ray Charles' music. Cowboys and cowgirls sauntered through the spotlight, as did a flirtatious cop and a jester dressed in a smock made from Crown Royal bags. One man resembled Willy Wonka and the Wizard of Oz, combined, in his curly orange wig and oversized bow tie, with sparkling vest and top hat.

All too soon, the magical procession ended. Music that had boomed throughout the Gala, from zydeco and rap to contemporary and jazz, left my ears ringing. As the final spotlight faded and the arena lights brightened, I sadly bid "adieu" to this unparalleled pageantry, and vowed to remember — as hard as the media makes it sometimes — that New Orleans doesn't own Mardi Gras.

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