



10 Great Places for Pre-Lenten Bacchanalia

[FINAL Edition]

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Whether you call it Carnival, Festival, Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras, the merry-making before (and sometimes after) Lent is celebrated in one form or another throughout the world. Want to party? Michael MacNair, President of MacNair Travel Management in Alexandria, Va., shares domestic and international suggestions for this centuries-old celebration with USA TODAY's Shawn Sell.

Mardi Gras - New Orleans

In addition to the costumes, music and the many parades, spectators take to the streets covered in body paint and feathers competing for strings of beads. "At night, parades feature flambeaux (burning torches) carried by figures in white robes. This commemoration is not complete without the appearance of Rex, the King of Carnival, who reigns over the city on Fat Tuesday." Dates: Through Tuesday. www.mardigrasneworleans.com

Jamaica Carnival - Jamaica

"Conceived by reggae great Byron Lee (in 1989), Jamaica Carnival's pageantry and revelry unites the island's people through music, culture and social events." It brings together calypso, reggae and soca for three months' worth of musical fetes. Dates: Through April 26. www.jamaicacarnival.com

Carnival of Binche - Binche, Belgium

"Belgium's Lenten Carnival, complete with parade and fireworks, begins officially at sunrise on Shrove Sunday, but Fat Tuesday is the big day for Binche, as social groups dress up as traditional Carnival characters. Binche's favorite traditions (processions, dancing, drumming and creative dress) keep revelers celebrating early into the hours of Ash Wednesday." Dates: Sunday-Tuesday. www.visitbeigium.com/bepres08.htm

Trinidad Carnival - Port of Spain, Trinidad

"Colorful, theatrical celebrations of calypso music, steel-drum bands, rum, theater and masquerade awaken Trinidad to rejoice in Carnival. This two-day festival (the largest and oldest in the Caribbean) not only boasts musical performances, it also stages 'calypso dramas,' short musical skits that combine story, pantomime and songs with audience participation." Dates: Monday-Tuesday. www.carnaval.com/cityguides/trinidad/trincity.htm

Carnival - St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

"Drawing on African and European customs, including music, dancing and masquerades, St. Thomas hosts one of the largest spring Carnival celebrations in the Caribbean. A month-long event of tradition, the city showcases calypso food, parades, queen pageants and steel pan shows." Dates: April 1 -May 1. www.vinow.com/general_usvi/carnival

Nice Carnaval - Nice, France

"Celebrate Carnaval on the French Riviera with flower parades, floats and a fireworks display lighting up the entire Baie des Anges. This year marks the return of the Grand Charivari, a tradition that harks back to the 17th century." Dates: Through Tuesday. www.nicecarnaval.com

Carnival of Venice - Venice, Italy

What better place to masquerade than in mystical Venice? "The nights are filled with masked balls and joyful parties and the narrow streets, bridges and squares are crowded with traditional masked and costumed revelers. Street performers entertain on every corner. The partying ends at midnight on Shrove Tuesday when an effigy of Carnival is burned at the Piazza San Marco during the Concert of Ashes." Dates: Through Tuesday. www.carnivalofvenice.com

Mardi Gras! Galveston - Galveston Island, Texas

"The island comes alive with a Mardi Gras celebration featuring bands, dances, costumes and parades. This year's festivities -- including nine parades and processions, 15 masquerade balls and more than 50 live bands -- salute the rain forests of the world." Dates: Through Tuesday. www.mardigrasgalveston.com

Carnival - Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Dubbed "the world's greatest party," Carnival in Rio is the largest of the pre-Lenten celebrations and a unique experience. "Complete with samba music, costumes and grand parades, Rio comes alive during this celebration with nighttime balls, parades, strolling bands and scantily dressed men and women." Dates: Saturday- Tuesday. www.brazilcarnival.com

Carnival in Cologne - Cologne, Germany

"It may not be Oktoberfest, but Carnival in Cologne is almost as old as the city itself. The colorful spectacle is abundant with beer, costumes, food, dramatic plays and music." Don't miss Rose Monday, the official parade (this year's theme is "Taftle and Prattle, Cologne Style") featuring thousands of people "in fancy dress." Dates: Through Tuesday. www.koein.de/karnevall/karneval-eng_body.html

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