

Commentary: Mardi Gras madness makes a cesspool of New Orleans

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NEW ORLEANS - The filth flowed along each side of Bourbon Street in murky brown streams, making its way around soaking mounds of beer cans, cigarette butts, discarded wigs and food wrappers.

Sweaty, drunken people, some half-naked, crushed up against each other, squeezing their way through the mob and past sex shops, night clubs and strip bars.

Names like "Topless Bottomless" and "World Famous Love Acts" throbbed in neon lights.

As I walked through this grimy mass, something crunched beneath my feet.

Glancing nervously at the trash on either side of the street, I was sure I had stepped on a scurrying rodent or cockroach.

But as I would learn during three days in New Orleans last week, the crunching underfoot is simply discarded plastic beads that have landed on the street after being hurled toward a scantily clad woman's breasts.

Welcome to Mardi Gras 2001 in a scene like nothing I had ever anticipated, having grown up on stories about exotic parades dominated by elaborate costumes, fanciful masks and some undefinable mystery.

What I witnessed felt like spring break spiraled way out of control. It looked like a giant tangle of uninhibited revelers wriggling around in the sex-crazed neon pigpen of Bourbon Street.

The Mardi Gras I saw had two distinct faces, united only by a backdrop of trash-lined streets.

By day, along nearby Canal Street, families set up sidewalk barbecues, spread blankets, unfolded lawn chairs and enjoyed a parade in the warm sunshine. Children balanced on the shoulders of adults

stretched tiny hands toward passing floats, reaching for free toys and trinkets being tossed through the air.

Some of the smallest sat in rows on top of bus shelters, waving flags and relishing their view. Still other kids sprang from streetside throngs and jumped onto the sides of passing floats.

When limos passed, these same enthusiastic kids darted forward, cupping their hands on tinted windows, hoping to get a glimpse of those inside.

These were the locals, people who filled the streets to enjoy the traditions of Mardi Gras beyond the beads-for-flesh exchange that has come to dominate Bourbon Street and the celebration's national reputation.

Mardi Gras has evolved from a pre-Lenten religious festival of sorts to a garish, bawdy celebration in places like Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans. In colonial New Orleans there were society balls, banquets, roving bands of musicians and processions of ornamented carriages.

Today the processions continue, and the folks who lined Canal Street by day this year were the ones still interested in all that Mardi Gras once meant.

As night falls however, the celebration's grimmer face emerges.

The college students who descend on the city, filling hotels for the week, empty onto the streets en masse, having finally overcome the previous night's hangover.

Bourbon Street becomes the scene of a continuous hustle. Look up and see groups of people filling balcony after balcony of beautiful, historic buildings, surveying the crowd and dangling beads.

Those confined to the squalor of the street gather in semicircles under the balconies begging for favors of the beads or flesh variety.

Two moments stand out distinctly in my mind.

On one evening, after what seemed like endless begging from the crowd on the street, two attractive young girls standing side by side on a black iron balcony two stories up, turned their backs momentarily, bent over, fiddled with their shirts and then spun around simultaneously to show the

world their naked chests.

A raucous cheer erupted and the pale white light of dozens of camera flash bulbs bounced off the girls naked torsos.

As I weaved on through the crowd, I glanced to my right.

There, about 15 men stood in a tight circle, oddly silent. I looked closer and in the center of this feeding frenzy was a short woman unbuttoning her blouse nonchalantly. Meanwhile, a male friend of hers, stood by, arm circling her waist, beaming proudly.

Once the woman opened her shirt to dozens of sets of eager eyes, the show was over and the group dispersed.

That scene played out over and over again. At the same time all sorts of sex acts took place on other stretches of Bourbon Street n in full view of anyone who wanted to watch.

In between these sideshows, students alternately vomited and urinated on the street.

Looking for a breather from the madness, I turned off Bourbon Street and found myself behind a man who was about 6 feet tall, had muscular hairy legs and was wearing nothing more then a pair of shiny gold high heels, leopard bikini underwear and a feather boa.

In the end, I felt grimy from head to toe and overstimulated.

The fabulous food I ate in New Orleans, for which the city is justly famous, and the beautiful architecture, which also abounded, will forever be overshadowed in my mind by sex shops, filth and fantastic costumes. But it's not the parade costumes that remain vivid in my mind. Hardly.

I'm glad to say I've seen it. It was a wild, odorous, shocking trip. But if I ever go back, it will be for the oysters, not the entertainment.

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