

Tourists not only contributors to Mardi Gras success

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | February 23, 2011 | 0

Imagine a Mardi Gras without trinkets, plastic beads, stuffed animals and enough plastic cups to fill your cabinets.

No Zulu coconuts or Muses shoes, Tucks plungers or Rex doubloons to carry you through the summer.

Much is said about how crucial tourists are to the success of Mardi Gras, with their hotel reservations, restaurant and bar spending, souvenir shopping and word-of-mouth advertising. And while the tourism dollars this time of year are vital to our city's economy, don't forget about the contributions of the thousands of members of the parading organizations.

Mardi Gras had a \$468 million economic impact in 2010, according to a recent University of New Orleans study. Without krewe members and the hundreds, perhaps thousands of dollars they spend every year, there wouldn't be much of a reason for tourists to fill our city this time of year.

Many say riding in a parade is a waste of money or only for the wealthy. That's fair. Break it down and it's literally throwing your money away. But those people do it for the pure excitement. For some, it's a hobby for which they save year-round.

After 29 years of watching from the sidelines, I'm finally riding in my first parade. The \$500 for dues hurt at first, but I'm offsetting that mostly by throwing beads that have been collected and stored in the garage over the past year. I spent an extra \$100 on special throws for family and friends and another \$200 on tickets to my organization's ball.

At \$800, I came in on the cheap end of what many people spend. Some organizations charge between \$700 and \$1,000 for dues, and many riders spend between \$500 and \$1,000 on throws and several extra hundred on other odds and ends.

Krewe members fund the parades that roll on the streets. They get local residents out of their homes, which helps local restaurants, stores and bars along the parade route. The city even gets in on the fun with a bump in parking fines.

Parade dues cover work on floats and costumes, which keeps artists, designers and seamstresses busy. They provide jobs for tractor drivers, which in turn helps the government collect more taxes on all the diesel fuel used to tow the paper mache creations throughout New Orleans.

Formal wear businesses anticipate this time of year as Carnival balls and parties create an influx of rentals and purchases. Hotels, bars and restaurants see a bump from these events, too.

The list of ancillary benefits goes on, but what's amazing is that parade riders have for the most part continued to shell out money even as times have become tough. Their beads may not be as big as they struggle to stay on budget, but take a moment this year to think about the ripple effect that cheap plastic string of pearls actually has.

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