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## CARNIVAL SEASON

Rio de Janeiro hosts one of the largest carnival celebrations in the world. Unfortunately, a huge fire swept through the Rio Carnival center in early February 2011, destroying thousands of costumes and floats. Three of the top 12 samba groups that perform in the famous parades suffered incredible losses with one group alone losing more than 3,000 costumes.

Called "Mardi Gras season" in New Orleans, carnival has historic roots in the Roman Catholic religion and its schedule follows the holy calendar. The main events of the festive season usually occur in February and lead up to Lent. In dozens of countries where Catholicism was prevalent among early colonizers, carnival is the biggest public celebration of the year.

Carnival celebrations go back hundreds and perhaps even thousands of years. In Roman Catholicism, the six-week period immediately before Easter is called Lent. The 40 days of Lent represent the time that Jesus spent in the desert before his ministry. Traditionally during the Lenten period, no parties or celebrations were allowed—instead the time was marked by fasting, self-denial and prayer. People abstained from eating rich foods like meat, sugar, fats and dairy products.

Scholars dispute the origin of the word "carnival," but it may have come from the Italian phrase, *carne levare*, or "remove meat," which refers to refraining from eating meat during Lent. People partook hardily of rich foods and drinks in preparation for the start of Lent.

While the festive event indisputably is linked to the Christian calendar, it may also be related to pre-Christian ancient Roman festivals or even to more secular medieval pageants. Some of the first recorded carnival celebrations were in medieval

Italy where people paraded and danced at masquerade balls. They wore masks to hide their identities and therefore social classes, so that all could share in the celebration. Venice hosted an extremely famous carnival that began in 1268 and today sees 30,000 visitors a year to the celebration.

Carnival traditions spread from Italy to Catholic communities in France, Spain and Portugal. France gave the final day of carnival its modern name "Mardi Gras," which means "Fat Tuesday" in French. Fat Tuesday refers to the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, the day Lent begins and most celebrations end. Fat Tuesday is the biggest day of celebration in New Orleans' Mardi Gras.

From France, carnival traditions spread northward to the areas along the Rhine River in Germany (also called the Rhineland and mostly French-dominated) and westward to the French colonies of North America. As Spain and Portugal colonized the Caribbean and Latin America, carnival traditions also arrived in those regions.

In the United States, New Orleans, which was once in French Louisiana, became the site for the largest Mardi Gras in the country. This festival dates back to the early 1800s. In New Orleans, societies called "krewes" organize elaborate parades. One of the largest, the Krewe of Rex (Krewe of the King) has been marching in the Mardi Gras parades since 1872.

The New Orleans' Mardi Gras is a time for people to escape daily life. The celebration normally includes a public celebration

or parade, which has elements of a circus. Festivalgoers often wear masks and elaborate costumes, sacrificing sleep for all-night parties.

Carnival celebrations evolved differently depending upon the culture of the area. Rio Carnival dates back to 1723 and is the largest in the world. There, one purpose of the celebration is for samba schools to compete against one another in parade demonstrations. The samba is a popular dance that African slaves brought to Brazil. Each samba school spends months building expensive, elaborate floats and costumes in their pursuit to be the best group. Each group has a band and may have as many as eight floats and thousands of participants, including dancers and float riders.

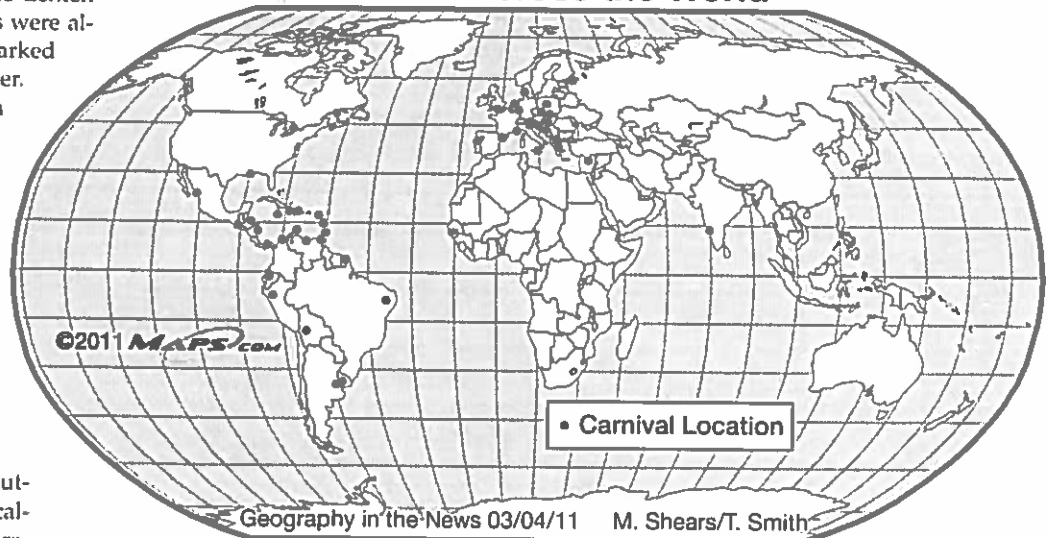
As examples of other carnivals, Winter Carnival in Québec, Canada, is the third largest in the world behind Rio and New Orleans with over a million participants. Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean also host a notable carnival with West African roots.

Carnivals draw people of all traditions and religions from great distances to join in. Once a year, a carnival is a cause for celebration and "a good time is had by all."

And that is *Geography in the News*™, March 4, 2011. #1083.

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### Carnivals Across the World



Sources: <http://news.travel.aol.com/seasonal/history-of-mardi-gras/>; and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/07/us-brazil-carnival-odd-idUSTRE7163WK20110207>