

# The New York Times

## Travel

CARNIVAL ROUNDUP

### A Party to Remember, an Island at a Time



Sa Rothmer/Splash News, via Newscom

Celebrants in Trinidad, site of the largest and most elaborate of all Caribbean carnivals.

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WE all have exultant moments: memories made to be bottled up, then uncorked and sniffed during dimmer times. In mine, I am in Trinidad. The sun is rising. I am drinking rum, dancing my way through the streets of Port of Spain during the staple of all Caribbean Carnivals, J'Ouvert: a dawn-till-lunchtime parade during which revelers smear themselves in many things — paint, oil, cocoa, mud. Vanity and identity are replaced by unadulterated joy in simply, magically being there during a sublimely over-the-top ritual.

because Carnivals are held throughout the year from island to island, which means that — oh, how this glorious fact brings solace during stressful times — whatever month it is, odds are it's Carnival, or soon-to-be Carnival, somewhere.

The traditional season is February, coinciding with Lent, the 40-day penitence period before Easter. That's because most Caribbean Carnivals share a history that stretches back to the 18th century. As European colonizers heralded Lent with sumptuous masked balls, African slaves staged their own versions of such reveling, lampooning lascivious masters and incorporating West African traditions — drumming, stick fighters, stilt dancers known as moko jumbies — into the mix.

Today, Carnival is a nexus of past and present: the gravitas of historical rituals and classic Carnival characters collides with modern-day hedonism. Its climax is a parade during which celebrants “play mas” (or masquerade), which involves dressing up, joining a mas band and dancing down the road all day. This is typically preceded by weeks of festivities, including J'Ouvert (from the French for “day opens”), children's Carnivals, calypso competitions and king-and-queen competitions displaying handmade costumes and floats.

But the similarities end there. Just as every island basks in its own vibe, every Carnival is a singular bacchanal, complete with distinct rituals and island-specific soundtracks. It's a rare time when the line between being a local and a tourist grows magically thin.

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Andrea De Silva/Reuters, via Newscom  
A steel-band player at Port of Spain in Trinidad.

## **BAHAMAS**

**Dec. 26 and Jan. 1**

Why should you do Christmas and New Year's — *again* — when you can do Carnival? In fact, you can do all three in the Bahamas. The celebration, known as Junkanoo, is staged on various Bahamian islands (Nassau hosts the

biggest) and kicks off before dawn on Dec. 26, then resurfaces in the wee hours of New Year's Day. What began as a slave holiday during Christmas time is now an all-out extravaganza. The sights are dazzling: floats, masks and feathers more vibrant than the Caribbean Sea, itself a brilliant backdrop. Sounds, though, steal the show. Traditional instruments like conch-shell horns; "goombay" drums made of goatskin and oil barrels; cow bells; scrapers made from washboards and spoons serve up Bahamian "rake and scrape" music, which sounds like the Caribbean version of, well, a hoedown.

**STAY** The Sheraton Nassau Beach Resort ([sheratonnassau.com](http://sheratonnassau.com)) is convenient to the parade route, and it offers a stunning stretch of beach and modern rooms. Rates start at \$263.

**DO** The Junkanoo Expo, (242) 356-2731, on Nassau's waterfront is a little slice of Carnival behind glass: a museum devoted to the history of the festival.

## **TRINIDAD**

**Feb. 11 and 12**

The Trinidad Carnival, the largest and most elaborate of all Caribbean carnivals, might as well be an Olympic sport: how many sleepless, liquor-fueled nights can you withstand? How many miles of dance can your thighs endure? How gleefully immodest can you allow your costumed self to be? Oh, but it's worth it; the concerts, the steel pan performances and the parties are sumptuous. Most famous among them are the cricketer Brian Lara's event, held on the majestic grounds of his house in Port of Spain, where tickets hover around \$200 and are generally sold out before you can say "wicket." You'll see classic Carnival characters everywhere — the Pierrot Grenade performs rhymed political speeches; jab jabs (from French patois for "devil") come in red or blue; the Dame Lorraine costume caricatures 18th-century aristocrats. The best part? You can forever boast that you did it.

**STAY** The gleaming Hyatt Regency Trinidad ([trinidad.hyatt.com](http://trinidad.hyatt.com)) is Carnival central. Anything you need, whether it is a post-parade masseuse, a costume tailor or hangover eats, you can find it there. Rooms from \$429.