



How to be part of Carnival in Trinidad

by Mark Rogers, Special for USA TODAY | Published on December 3, 2014



Are you the type of person who's the first on the dance floor at a wedding? The type that's always up for a dare, whether it's ziplining or bungee jumping? If so, the annual Trinidad Carnival is tailor-made for you. It's a deep-immersion travel experience delivering delights for all the senses. Many other Carnivals, such as the world famous one in Rio, limit the fun to watching from the sidelines. That's not the case in Trinidad, where visitors are encouraged to join in the festivities and "play mas (dance along)" with one of the organized bands. The bands have such colorful names like Mas Jumbies, Tribe and Island People, with the largest of them swelling to 5,000 strong.

Trinidad's Carnival revolves around the Lenten Season, and the big dates to remember for 2015 are Monday February 16 and Tuesday, February 17, the last day of Carnival when the reveling reaches its peak. Then it's on to Ash Wednesday, where presumably people make their Lenten resolutions and atone for their Carnival hijinks.

When I visited Trinidad in the days leading up to Carnival, I was so swept up in the heady atmosphere that I searched out a band and plunked down a couple of hundred dollars to have my costumes made in a rush.

As I learned during my stay, there's a lot more to Carnival than the final day-long road march on Tuesday. I recommend getting to Trinidad's capital city of Port of Spain four or five days before Carnival Tuesday, when the whole island brims over with excitement. Each night there are huge outdoor parties, many taking place in Queen's Park Savannah, a huge park in Port of Spain. One of the prime events is Panorama, the annual steel pan competition, in which one exciting band after another takes the stage. This is a far cry from a single musician playing a tuneful "Guantanamera" on a sole steel pan – instead, you can expect a thundering wave of hard charging music from a steel band of energetic players.

Soca is the music that powers Carnival, and the competition is fierce for which song will be designated the top soca tune of the season. I remember watching two cab drivers arguing – I thought there'd been a fender bender - until I realized they were both heated up about which song should win top honors.

The Monday preceding Tuesday's Carnival is called J'Ouvert. On Monday I rolled out of bed in the pre-dawn hours and made my way with others to a vacant lot in town. There I donned my J'Ouvert costume, which resembled an oversized diaper more than anything else. I was then smeared with silver grease paint – my group was called the Silver Mudders. All across town other groups were being slathered with everything from green or red paint to mud or even chocolate. At a signal – still before sunrise - we took to the street, dancing behind a huge sound truck blasting soca music. We were followed by a truck dispensing water, soft drinks and stiff shots of rum. The other groups met us on the road as we danced along the street doing a signature step called chipping, a simple step like a modified march. It had to be simple, since we'd be dancing for five hours straight. As we'd meet other groups representing various colors, we'd rub up against them, giving them some of our silver mud and getting a smear of chocolate or colored paint in return. That was the goal – to end the day's road march with as many different colors on our bodies as possible.

The rest of Monday was a matter of preserving our energy for Tuesday, the biggest day. Local Trinians would probably scoff at this, since many of them go full bore for three days straight. On Tuesday morning, I donned my green centurion costume and joined my group at our designated corner in Port of Spain. Then it was eight hours of forward motion, chipping to soca, knocking back rum and making new friends along the way. Roadside vendors selling food made it easy to fuel up. In addition to chipping there's another signature dance move, called wining, where dancers move their hips and waist in a winding motion, with guys "pulling up to the bumper." There's a definite Dionysian spirit in the air and needless to say, if you're super shy you'll want to steer clear of Carnival.

It was five in the evening when my group finally made it to the final point on the route – a stage on the edge of Queen's Park Savannah, where we all took a turn in the spotlight, in front of hundreds of spectators.

Here are some tips that will make the whole Carnival experience more enjoyable. Wear comfortable shoes – it's going to be a long day dancing on pavement. Make sure you drink plenty of water and monitor your alcohol intake. Bring along some sunblock, enough cash to get you through the day, and your ID. If you're with a group or part of a couple, arrange a meeting place in case you get separated. As far as safety goes, stay to the road march route and don't wander off on your own down dark streets.

If you've celebrated Carnival the way it's meant to be done, come Wednesday morning you're going to be wrung out like a dishrag. Instead of staggering to the airport for your return flight, arrange your trip so you have a chance to enjoy the aftermath Trini style, with a Carnival cool down. A favorite spot is Maracas Beach, about a 45-minute drive from Port of Spain, where revelers stake out a place on the sand to nurse their hangovers and sore muscles. Another option is to take a 2.5 hour ferry ride to nearby Tobago, a super-laidback island where nature and the chirping of birds replace Port-of-Spain's hot pavement and blasting soca.

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