

CARNIVAL
SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PANAMA'S & TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO'S
FESTIVAL

Carnival is a festival of life celebrated annually in many countries of the world. It is said to have originated hundreds of years ago in former colonies set up by Catholic Europeans involved in the slave trade. Originally, it consisted of grand balls in which the wealthy European settlers wore masks, wigs and gowns and made merriment until late hours of the night. Simultaneously, slaves would have their own celebrations in their backyards with their own African traditions involving feathers, bones, masks, beads, shells and grasses, mirroring their masters' antics at these balls. Eventually, the African custom of parading and moving through villages in costume became more popular than the masked balls and this is the main form of Carnival celebrated today.

The origin of the word 'carnival' is disputed. One theory states that it is of Latin origin - *carrus navalis* - meaning ship cart such as that used in a religious parade. Another theory states that it comes from the Italian *carne levare* meaning to remove meat which is prohibited in Lent. Nevertheless, this grand festival, traditionally celebrated in Venice, Italy then spread to the Spanish, Portuguese and French who brought the tradition to their respective colonies in the Americas. The period right before Lent was chosen to celebrate since parties, meat and other forms of indulgence were forbidden during Lent.

Panama's Carnival

When you think of Panama, the first thing that comes to mind is the Panama Canal. Therefore, it may surprise you to know that Panamanians anticipate the yearly Carnival activities in much the same way that Trinbagonians do. It was not before 1910 that Panamanians celebrated Carnival formally. By 1913 it became traditional to have a Carnival Queen. In Panama, celebrations take place in the five days preceding Ash Wednesday when most businesses close and droves of people return to participate in water games, witness the parades and fireworks and to dance, drink and simply enjoy themselves.

Carnival in Panama takes place at the same time as in Trinidad and Tobago and two other locations known for their Carnival revelry - Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans (Mardi Gras). In Panama, celebrations take place in all of the interior; however they are best known to occur in *Las Tablas*, *Penomene* and Panama City, the capital.

General customs and rituals

The main arteries of the city are closed for parades and the *mojadera*, where eighteen-wheeler trucks with tanks spray the crowds with water. This is welcomed since Carnival takes place during the February dry season in Panama. These water trucks each play different music and are thronged by masses calling for 'agua' (water in Spanish).

Similar to the Trinidad and Tobago experience, competitions are also an important part of the festivities in the different towns with the Queen of Carnival being the main focus as opposed to our King and Queen of the Year. The Queen is readied in the evening with the floats which travel around the square and masqueraders in elaborate costumes are seen atop the floats.

Visitors to the various towns often pay residents about US\$15 per night to sleep in their houses but this must be pre-arranged in order to reserve a spot. This may involve sleeping with other individuals who also rest up before driving to neighbouring towns to participate in the nightly activities. Huge stages are erected and there are live performances by well-known salsa, merengue and local "típico" artistes like Gilberto Santa Rosa, Juan Luis Guerra, Marc Anthony, Olga Tanon, Oscar de Leon and Wilfredo Vargas who perform for large crowds.

Las Tablas is the centre of Carnival since it is known to have the best party and is therefore the most popular, with parades during the day and night for the entire 5-day period. Here, the competition is between two streets – *Calle Arriba* – High Street and *Calle Abajo* – Low Street which organise very elaborate shows for their queens. The festivities begin on the Friday night with the formal events followed by the crowning of the Queens and a parade. Afterwards, there is a fireworks display and people may hang around the square or head off to various parties; the action continues until the early morning. On Saturday the *mojadera* starts about 10am. A parade of the Queens follow and after 5pm everyone heads home to return for the night parade and more activities. This continues until Tuesday.

Penomene is another town known for its Carnival celebrations. The *mojadera* also takes place here, and though less crowded, it is well known for its floats which travel on the river carrying their Carnival Princess in the evening.

The height of festivities takes place on Carnival Tuesday - Queens Day - and ends in the early hours of Ash Wednesday with a ritual known as *El Entierro de la*

Sardina - the Sardine Burial. This ritual originated in the mid 19th century by students from Madrid who formed a funeral cortège (presentation) presided by a sardine symbolizing the start of fasting and abstinence on Ash Wednesday. In Trinidad and Tobago however, all the festivities end at midnight in preparation for Ash Wednesday's religious services.

The pre-Lenten celebrations, the music trucks, the spraying of water to cool masqueraders from the heat, the queen of Carnival competitions, the music, dancing, the endless street activities, huge stages and the musical performances are all too familiar to T&T. Business shuts down, streets are blocked and competitions abound; these are all associated with the Carnival known to both Panamanians and Trinbagonians.

Both countries share many historical similarities than is immediately evident. The difference in language is probably the main 'challenge' to overcome as we attempt to forge stronger links between the two countries. As developing countries *and* neighbours, both nations stand to gain tremendous benefits through increased co-operation.

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