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Carnival Parties On in Trinidad

By BAZ DREISINGER



A scene from Carnival in Trinidad. — LisaMarie Stewart

I am a reasonably rational, inimitably hard-working woman. So why, when this time of year rolls around, do I suddenly find myself inhibiting unruly urges to drop everything and rearrange my life so I can hop a flight to **Trinidad**?

Carnival.

The Caribbean's biggest, most sumptuous Carnival—which erupts on the streets of Port of Spain this today

and Tuesday—is perhaps less an event than a cult, annually attracting devotees from as near as Jamaica and as far as Japan. For about a decade, I have been one of them. I missed 2013's festivities and thus imagined myself capable of sensibly sitting out this year's jamboree, too. Grand blunder. A quick jaunt to Trinidad earlier this month—at the peak of Carnival season, when vivacious warm-up fetes and local concerts dot the country's calendar—foiled my plan, reigniting a zealous love-affair with all things Carnival.

Indoctrination into the cult begins shortly after Christmas, as the party schedule is rolled out and the new soca—short for “soul of calypso,” it's the frenetic, fast-paced soundtrack to modern-day Carnival—is released by local stars like Machel Montano and Bunji Garlin. Thus the jubilant brainwashing begins: hear these tunes often enough—you'd have to exist in a soundproof bubble *not* to hear them at every turn—and You. Shall. Love. Them. They're musical Red Bull.

This year there was a new pre-Carnival fete named for such a phenomenon: Soca Brainwash, staged on Saturday. These annual fetes—many of them lavish all-inclusives featuring live performances, open bars and as many local delicacies as there are beats per minute in a soca song—constitute one big tease: titillating, sweat-inducing build-ups to the big event. The most eminent ones come days before Carnival; perhaps the *crème-de-la-crème* is at the home of renowned Trinidadian cricket player Brian Lara, where about \$250 buys a dazzling outdoor setup, delectable food and possibly the best people-watching in all of the Caribbean. Less rococo but no less elite is D'Original Vale Breakfast Party: a massive, all-inclusive outdoor affair held Saturday morning from 4 am until noon, when an exhausted crowd gets hosed down, keeps on dancing, then gleefully stumbles home; tickets to this fete are in such high demand that I have personally witnessed all manner of deals with the devil made in hopes of obtaining one.

Carnival attracts increasing numbers of celebrities each year; in recent years everyone from actors Will Smith and Dule Hill to model Selita Ebanks and even Richard Branson have been seen indulging in Trini revelry. The supreme Carnival celebrity, though, is home-grown: Trinidad-born, New York-based designer Anya Ayoung-Chee—2008 Miss Trinidad and Tobago, 2011 “Project Runway” winner, current co-star of Bravo's reality series “Project Runway: Under the Gunn.” Her new online and pop-up cANYAval shop peddles all the necessities of bacchanal, from bling-heavy costume adornments to hot pants made for, as Trinis say, *wining one's waist*: a form of dancing that makes this “twirking” business utterly tame. Ayoung-Chee also throws a fabulous red-carpet shindig —“The cANYAval Fete”—on Carnival Saturday, portions of its proceeds going to her TallMan Foundation, which trains youth in traditional and new media arts; she designed a section in the grand parade, too: “Cheyenne,” as its called, beckons with the opportunity to sport a scanty, purple, feathery concoction for all eyes to ogle.

Does the prospect of such ogling intimidate you? Get over it. Unlike Brazil's, Trinidad's Carnival is less about standing on the sidelines than participating in the parade. If you can afford it, of course; *playing mas*, as its known—short for “masquerade”—is a matter of shelling out upwards of \$500 to join a band, which covers your costume, security, food and drinks for two full days of dancing behind mobile music trucks. It is indeed a good thing that modesty is not my virtue, because Carnival costumes range from skimpy to chillingly skimpy.

When it comes to bands, by the way, size matters. Tribe is the largest and most sought-after one—some 5000 people avidly sign up every year, many of whom have all but sold their first-borns to nab one of those coveted slots—and that means plenty of bacchanalian energy but the occasional wait—*five whole minutes?*—for a rum and coke. This year Tribe along with three popular bands have joined forces to erect a “Socadrome” during the parade: a contained street venue and stage for masqueraders, aimed at alleviating some of the congestion on the road and inspired by Brazil’s “Sambadrome.”

Simply by upsetting the status quo, the “Socadrome” has incited local controversy; all things related to the Sacred Entity that is Carnival tend to incite controversy and ceaseless chatter. Such is Carnival’s irony: Throughout this season, joy practically grows on Trinidadian trees, yet the festivities also engender many a Carnival Grinch, delighting in Jeremiads: *Woe unto a great historic tradition having devolved into the three B’s—beads, booze and bikinis!* Carnival throughout the Caribbean is, after all, swathed in history, dating back to the 18th-century, when European colonizers staged elaborate masked balls during the pre-Lenten period and their African slaves followed suit. Lamponing the lascivious conduct of their masters, slaves also incorporated West African traditions into the festivities: drum rhythms, feathered masks, stick fighters, stilt dancers.

But to the Grinches I say: Bah Humbug! In Trinidad glorious older traditions live on, alongside the newer ones. The steel pan—born in the early 20th century, when Port of Spain locals in poor communities made music from discarded oil drums—is given prominent homage during grand Panorama competitions. Calypso tents, where local singers parody politics in lively tunes, still dot the country; at the annual Dimanche Gras procession, ornate hand-made costumes, traditional Carnival characters and cutting-edge calypsonians take center stage.

Then, of course, there is the tradition that is J’Ouvert, from the French “day opens”: an overnight street party just before Carnival Monday, during which celebrants smear themselves and each other in everything from paint and oil to chocolate. This year Mr. Lara, the cricketer, launches his own private J’Ouvert band, which will march through the streets and conclude in a on the grounds of his home. Whatever one ends up coated in, whomever one ends up dancing a little too closely with, J’Ouvert is the essence of Carnival and as traditional as it gets: pure elation, sheer abandon, an out-of-body experience that lives right here, right now.

Until, of course, next year—when the cult calls all over again.

TIP: When it comes to Carnival hotel options, Port of Spain has several strong options. They all pale, however, in comparison to the 428-room Hyatt Regency, whose Carnival offerings are utterly fabulous: an outdoor shower station following J’Ouvert—complete with DJ booth and breakfast—specialized carnival cool-down treatments at the Spa Esencia, daily parties at the infinity pool and a staff on hand to make last-minute costume adjustments.