

# FESTIVAL fever

In the Caribbean, festivals come in many shapes and forms. Some are based on religion, others celebrate bacchanal and good times, many attract the biggest names from the world of entertainment. **Liesl Harewood** explores a cultural phenomenon

**T**he Illustrated Oxford Dictionary defines the word festival, somewhat succinctly, as “a day or period of celebration”. In the Caribbean, that’s a description that covers a lot of ground. And a lot of countries. And a whole lot of festivals. This is a part of the world where we have much to rejoice over. Our festivals range from religious celebrations that take participants back spiritually to the countries and continents their ancestors left centuries ago (not always willingly, it has to be said), to bacchanalian orgies of music and dance to concerts that feature some of the biggest names in the entertainment world.

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Dressing up for Trinidad Carnival;  
Left: The festival of Holi sees  
people throw coloured water, oils  
and powder on each other





**“Carnival is the other C for us to be passionate about, along with Cricket and Christmas”**

## FESTIVALS



Some, like Trinidad's Carnival, are world-famous. Others are relatively obscure, but no less important to the people who participate in them and to the history and culture of the islands where they take place.

A few – Barbados's Landship is perhaps the best-known example – aren't even festivals at all but have become such cherished embodiments of the creativity and resilience of a country's people that any story about this aspect of Caribbean culture would be incomplete without acknowledging them.

It almost goes without saying that there's no known comprehensive list of Caribbean festivals, and that's largely because we're a region that pays more attention to the actual celebration than to its documentation. So be warned that the following smorgasbord of festivals great and small is far from definitive, but rather a sampling of what the Caribbean has to offer.

First, for no other reason than they're what we're best known for around the world, there are the carnivals. Just about every island has one, and they attract vast numbers of visitors to the region every year.

Some, like Trinidad's, are Lent-based. Others, like Barbados's Crop Over, go back to the days when sugar dominated Caribbean economies and celebrate the end of the back-breaking harvest season.

A few are timed to attract visitors and provide an important economic shot-in-the-



COAST CARIBBEAN IMAGES

exponents of the island's most famous art form would ply their trade in the weeks and months leading up to Carnival, have been yielding ground for years to dancehall-style rhythms, "all-inclusive" parties headlined by the latest big-name artists and jump-and-wave parades featuring the skimpiest of costumes and the most exuberant – to put it delicately – of dancing.

With the increasing commercialisation of festivals, the individuality and significance of each event is undoubtedly being eroded. But the more cultural aspects of carnival have not disappeared entirely.

**It is our ability to let ourselves go that enhances our quality of life. A certain spirit sweeps across the countries as festival approaches. Everyone seems to be far happier and more engaging – a sense of camaraderie exists, in which you greet strangers and embrace them as if they were long lost friends**

arm during months when the tourist season is at its lowest ebb.

Increasingly, and particularly over the past couple of decades, the historic and cultural roots of many carnivals have been virtually overwhelmed by the bacchanalian nature of the carnival beast.

In Trinidad, where Carnival is celebrated with a fervour perhaps unmatched anywhere else in the region, traditional "mas" (elaborately costumed masquerades that often parody and mock elements of society the masses would normally have been subservient to), and calypso tents, where

In tiny St Kitts, the "mother colony" of the English-speaking Caribbean, traditional Christmas Sports featuring the Mocko Jumbie, Clowns, Big Drum ensembles and Wild Mas, are still celebrated in conjunction with a thoroughly up-to-date Carnival, similar to the modern Trinidad model, that climaxes on New Year's Day.

Carnival goes back a long way. Music festivals are comparatively recent, and they've multiplied so rapidly over the past couple of decades that it would be impossible to cover them comprehensively here. Suffice it to say that festivals in Tobago,

Barbados, Antigua, St Lucia, Dominica, St Kitts and Jamaica, to name just a few, have lured a wildly eclectic mix of international superstars to the Caribbean, as well as providing a high-profile showcase for regional artists.

A handful of those big names give a pretty good indication of the sort of business music festivals have become. The likes of Sir Elton John to Diana Ross; Kenny Rogers to Stevie Wonder; and Hugh Masekela to Rod Stewart have all appeared at one Caribbean festival or another. And that's on top of the region's own formidable array of superstars, including Bob Marley (for the record he headlined Reggae Sunsplash 1979 – his final live performance in Jamaica), Sparrow, Kassav, Calypso Rose and Burning Spear.

They may not have the highest of profiles, but perhaps the most intriguing of the Caribbean's celebrations of culture and history are those that connect modern generations with their ancestors. In the English-speaking Caribbean, where the majority of our people have their roots in Africa or India, these celebrations include Ramleela, Phagwah, Diwali, Hosay and La Woz/La Magwit. Each is unique in its own way – some to a single Caribbean island, others the Caribbean embodiment of a religious celebration that is celebrated in dozens of countries globally.

Most definitely unique to a specific island are St Lucia's flower festivals. La Woz and La Magwit (patois for La Rose



LEFT: Crop Over in Barbados  
 ABOVE: Party time at Carnival  
 RIGHT: Beating out a rhythm at Mardi Gras



and La Marguerite) are held in August and October respectively. The participants are members of two 'rival' societies, dating back to the days of slavery and originating in co-operative work groups, which were created to provide mutual support, particularly in times of trouble. The rose and marguerite flowers – the latter a form of daisy – are their respective emblems. Their festivals are characterised by music, dance, song and characters like the king, queen, princess, judge, chantwel, joker, policeman, nurse and doctor – all dressed in appropriate costumes.

The songs are generally in patois, praising their own society while poking fun at its rival. One of the most intriguing elements of La Woz and La Magwit is that in many cases the roles are hereditary – a particular family may produce a king, another a queen, another a judge, so that the tradition is passed along through generations.

Equally unique is the Barbados Landship, and while it may be a stretch to categorise it as a "festival", it is rich in history and tradition. Essentially, the Landship is a navy that never goes to sea, and, like so many Caribbean cultural traditions, it has its roots in rebellion.

The Barbados Landship, which dates back more than 140 years, used costumes that were distinctly European and naval so that the colonial masters of its early days would approve of its dances, which, however, were very African. Members of the Landship wear British naval uniforms, with female crew members usually dressed as navy nurses, and at least part of the objective is to poke fun at British pomp.

For example, in one popular dance the crew members march with the right hand and foot advancing simultaneously. Other dances imitate the movement of a ship and crew at sea. The Landship, marching and dancing to the music of a traditional Tuk band, is a staple at major gatherings in Barbados.

Among the Caribbean's major religious festivals are Phagwah, Divali and Ramleela. Phagwah, also known as Holi or the Festival of Colours, is a popular Hindu spring festival observed in the Caribbean countries of Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad where there is a large Hindu diaspora.

The festive season can last up to 16 days, with the main day celebrated by people throwing coloured powder and water at one another. The festival is celebrated at the end of the winter season on the last full moon day of the lunar month, which usually falls in February or March.

Divali, the Festival of Lights, is centred around the new moon day of the month of Kaartik in the Hindu calendar, and symbolises

the lifting of spiritual darkness with the lighting of *diyas*, small clay pots containing oil and a cotton wick. It is celebrated by Hindus worldwide, and Divali Day has been a public holiday in Trinidad for more than 40 years.

Another major Hindu celebration is Ramleela - also known as Ramlila – which in Trinidad is known as the longest-running street theatre in the Caribbean. The name of the festival, which takes place in September or October, means, in a literal translation, a play of the story of Lord Ram, a Hindu god. The story is acted out for nine days at more than a dozen venues around the island, with texts read to music and brightly costumed dancers performing. Its climax is the burning in effigy of the villainous Rawan – the triumph of good over evil.

Hosay, a street festival in which multi-coloured mausoleums are paraded then offered up to the sea, is celebrated in parts of Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica, while Kumina – also known as Cumina – is a cultural form indigenous to Jamaica that combines religion, music and dance influenced by the Bantu-speaking people from the Congo-Angola region of Africa.

All of which could hardly be further removed from Sir Elton John serenading a well-heeled festival crowd in Tobago with *Benny and the Jets* or *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*.

And that sort of diversity, after all, is what the Caribbean is all about. ●