

Aruba's Carnival

Mention the Caribbean island of Aruba, and most of us think of a peaceful haven of beautiful white sand beaches bathed in year-long sunshine. But during the winter months of January and February, this lovely small island is transformed into a vibrant world of color, music and dance, when it hosts one of the most magical carnivals in the Caribbean.

It's easy to forget your winter blues as you get swept into the atmosphere of the brightly colored street parades, where streams of exotically costumed adults and children dance by to the sunny beats of local bands. At night there are magical light parades and street parties to join and a constant supply of delicious street cooked BBQ dishes to keep you in the party spirit.

The Carnival started to become popular in Aruba after the arrival of Trinidadian immigrants in the 1940s, but over time the festival has grown into a truly world class event. Aruba is only 21 miles long, but boasts a dazzling 79 different nationalities who call it home, and these cultures have added their own special touches to the festival, which has embraced South American rhythms, West Indian steel bands, local folklore and even a touch of Europe in the sound of Dutch 'um-pah-pah' music.

Festivities span the whole island, with all the major attractions being held in the capital Oranjestad and San Nicolas, 10 miles to the south. Our Bluegreen La Cabana Beach & Racquet Club, located in Oranjestad at Eagle Beach, is a perfect location for you to catch the best of what the carnival has to offer.

The parades are the lifeblood of the festival and really are 'not to miss' events. They include the exotic night time Tivoli Lighting Parade, where revelers wear huge headdresses and vibrant costumes covered in small lights. During the Children's Parade, hundreds of children dance along the streets in color coordinated troupes, often in the traditional colors of bright yellow (celebrating a bountiful harvest) and red (representing fire), enhanced with glitter, beads, sequins, and feathers. There is also a Balloon Parade in San Nicolas, where children ride bikes and co-karts, decorated with balloons.

The largest of the parades is the Grand Parade, held on the last Sunday before Lent. Dozens of beautiful women dressed as exotic birds dance by, along with Mexican dance troupes, men with butterfly wings, steel bands, marching bands, all carried along in the throng of bodies and feathers by extraordinarily decorated floats adorned with thrones, huge wings and massive colorful animal and bird effigies. The sheer amount of color and energy takes your breath away.

A key feature of the carnival is also its tradition of the 'jump up' street parties, where locals spontaneously set up stalls and music spots along the streets. The largest of these is called the "Pajama Party" or Jouvert Morning. The fun starts in the early hours of the morning and features local music bands.

Live music is also central to the festival and is featured in a host of contests. Calypso composers compete to create the most provocative social commentary, Roadmarch and Brassband musicians entertain with upbeat carnival music and Tumba musicians play traditional, drum-driven sounds.

The biggest competition of all however is the election of the Carnival Queen. Contests are held to choose finalists well before the start of the festival and many hours are spent making beautiful, extravagant dresses for contestants. The Queen is elected at the beginning of the carnival and on

election day tourists are also given the chance to vote. The Queen can be seen leading the street parades in all her finery.

Festivities are ended on the eve of Ash Wednesday, with the midnight burning of King Momo, a life-size effigy of the spirit of the Carnival, signaling the end of the carnival.