



Carnaval (Brazil) Cheat Sheet

Carnaval is a festive season that is celebrated immediately before lent. It typically involves a public celebration or parade, combining masks, costumes, music, and dancing. The Brazilian Carnaval is one of the best known celebrations today, but many cities and regions worldwide celebrate with large, popular and multi-day events.

In Rio de Janeiro, Carnaval is officially just five days of revelry – from Friday to Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. But, partying begins months in advance. There are three primary components to the celebration in Rio: parades, balls, and street parties. Each will be explained below.

History of Carnaval in Brazil

Many believe Carnaval originated as a celebration of spring's arrival by the ancient Greeks and was passed to the Romans. The Roman celebration was marked by debauchery. All social order broke down as citizens and slaves, men and women partied in masks and costumes with no regard for law. Sadism, masochism, and prostitution were the order of the day, followed by a period of recovery and introspection. An ox was sacrificed, and its blood was believed to wash away the sins of the people.

The early Catholic Church did not appreciate this tradition, but after trying unsuccessfully to suppress it, the church eventually incorporated the spring ritual into the Christian calendar. It came to be known as *carnevale* (farewell to flesh), whereby the Catholic population would give up meat during the 40 days of Lent.

A theatrical version of Carnaval emerged in Venice, Italy by the 1600's. Citizens masqueraded as characters from comedic theater and ran rampant on city streets. The festival thumbed its nose at social convention suggesting that the holiday's non-Christian origin had not been forgotten. This theatrical form of Carnaval spread to France, Spain, and Portugal.

The Portuguese then brought the celebration to Brazil. There, it took on a local flavor by adopting Indian costumes and African rhythms.

The first festivals in Rio de Janeiro involved locals dancing through the streets in colorful costumes and throwing mud, flour, and various suspect liquids at one another. In the 1800's, Carnaval meant attending a lavished masked ball or participating in a dull, European-style parade.

Rio's poor citizens, bored by the finery but eager to celebrate, began holding their own parades dancing through the streets to African-based rhythms. Then in the 1920's, the new sound of samba emerged in Rio. It was the music full of African flavors, brought to the city by former slaves and their poor descendents. It was a sound that would forever be associated with Carnaval.

Since those days, Carnaval has grown in leaps and bound, with elaborate parades spreading from Rio to other parts of Brazil. It is now a huge commercial enterprise, with the city spending in excess of \$56 million to throw the party each year.

Samba-School Parades

Samba schools are very large groups of performers that work year round in preparation for Carnival. They are financed by respected organizations. Samba schools perform in the Sambadrome on all four nights of Carnival. (The Sambadrome is a long outdoor venue flanked by bleachers.) The schools are part of an official competition in which a single school is declared the winner according to costume, flow, theme, band quality music, and performance.

This video provides a good overview:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3mYDwRTALo&feature=player_embedded

Bandas: Carnaval on the Streets

Block parades are organized by local residents and are an important part of Carnival in Rio. Almost all neighborhoods will have a banda (or bloco.) They consist of a procession of drummers and singers, followed by anyone who wants to dance through the streets. To join in, all you do is show up. These parties offer a hint of what Carnival was like before it become regulated and commercialized.

Carnaval Balls

Carnaval balls are surreal and erotic events. They are formal affairs beginning around 10 pm. The continual samba beats supplied by live bands drive the festivities into the new day. The most famous ball is held at the Copacabana Palace. Tickets go on sale roughly two weeks beforehand and the balls are held nightly for the weeks preceding and all through Carnival. They range from \$400-\$1000 per person.

Costumes

Like music, the costumes are influenced by African heritage. Natural objects (bones, grasses, beads, shells, fabrics) are used to create masks and costumes. Each object or combination of objects represents a certain idea or spiritual force. For example, feathers were frequently used by Africans in their motherland on masks and headdresses as a symbol of our ability as humans to rise above problems, pains, heartbreaks, and illness.

Food

No Carnival is complete without the Brazilian national dish, Feijoda, a pork and bean stew. Streets are full of food, cooked either in houses or restaurants. The cuisines differ from place to place with each adding its unique flavor to its Carnivals. Drinks are equally important to beat the heat. Brazilian soda (Guaraná) and beer are the preferred choices.

A Uniting Force

Carnaval is:

- a time for self-expression and exploration,
- a time to seek out one's roots,
- a time to develop new forms of looking at the world and its cultures,
- a time to unite the world and discover what we all have in common, and
- a time to celebrate what makes us different.