

The life in Dominican Carnival

The origins of the carnival in Dominican Republic date back to 1520, the country's colonial period. Some researchers say the first carnival events took place as a celebration of a visit by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, when its inhabitants disguised themselves as Moors and Christians.

The tradition of wearing costumes during religious festivities almost disappeared during the period of Haitian occupation between 1822 and 1844. However, these costumes returned after the country achieved its independence on February 27, 1844 and were no longer associated with religious celebrations. They evolved into actual carnivals, celebrated during the three days prior to Ash Wednesday and established the month of February as the carnival month in Dominican Republic.

Now, every Sunday during the month of February —some extending through the first week of March — different cities within the country celebrate the carnival with colorful parades. La Vega carnival is the most popular and known internationally. Meanwhile, the National Carnival Parade, held in the capital of Santo Domingo, on the first Sunday of March along the Boardwalk (malecón), bring together all the characters and troupes nationwide for a great and last parade.

CHARACTERS

There are many major costumed characters in the Dominican carnival, along with a variety of groups presenting unique music and dance skits based on a festive theme or traditional Dominican culture.

Among the most popular carnival characters we have:

El Diablo Cojuelo, is carnival's most famous leading character. He wears a colorful caped suit with small mirrors, rattles, ribbons and cowbells meant to parody pretentious medieval gentlemen. A mask with large horns covers the devil's face. The people call him "diablo cojuelo," because it mocks the devil.

Roba la gallina, or The Chicken Thief, is a costumed character – a man with a big chest and posterior, and carries an open parasol. He goes to the "colmados" (small bodegas) begging for his chicks -the town's young people- who follow along with him in the parade.

Se me muere Rebeca, or Rebecca is dying, is a character representing a desperate mother who goes shouting along the parade route that her daughter is gravely ill. She begs for sweets for her daughter, which instead she distributes among the children.

Califé, dressed in a black tuxedo and followed by a group, is a poet who playfully criticizes personalities from the political, social and cultural scene in rhymes.

La Muerte en jeep, or Death in a Jeep, is represented by a character dressed as a masked skeleton, who escorts the diablos cojuelos.

Los Indios, or The Indians, is a group that portrays the island's first inhabitants, the Tainos, wearing body paint, feathers, bows and lances.

Los Tiznaos, also known as Los Africanos or The Blackfaces or The Africans, are characters whose bodies are painted black with coal and burned car oil. They portray black slaves and dance along the streets.

Los Alí Babá, or The Ali Baba, is a group with Oriental themes, whose main characteristic is a synchronized choreography.

Taimascaros, Puerto Plata's main carnival character, is a particular version of the diablo cojuelo, mixing in its outfit three cultural influences, where the mask represents the Taino gods, blouses and coats exhibit Spanish style, and handkerchiefs, symbols of African deities.

Guloyas, masters of music and striking dance, represent the English-speaking blacks who migrated to San Francisco de Macorís, and are the main character of this city.

Lechones is a character whose costume consists of a colorful romper with bells and bows. Its mission is to maintain order in the street during festivities and among the pilgrimages of the population. This is the main character in the carnival of Santiago de los Caballeros.

To enjoy the colors and joy of Dominican carnival season, there are several agencies that organize tours, mostly to the city of La Vega. Some also include a tour of the Santiago and Bonao carnivals.