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Brazil's carnival: how to celebrate and survive

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil | Everyone knows Rio de Janeiro's carnival is supposed to be the greatest party on Earth, but to many, the hordes of sweaty, scantily clad bodies on display can be as intimidating as they are inviting.

The city's reputation for violence and the difficulties that arise from not speaking Portuguese make it even more important that tourists get some guidance about how to jump in.

The locals have barely recovered from their New Year's hangovers and are already preparing for the five-day-long, no-holds-barred pre-Lenten bash that sweeps over this seaside city like a tidal wave.

Foreigners in the know are flocking to the hillside shantytowns, where the city's top carnival groups hold weekly rehearsals to polish this year's theme songs and to the Sambadrome stadium where free technical rehearsals offer a taste of the Samba parade with none of the glitter or glitz.

For the carnival itself, which takes place the first five days of February this year, there are basically three ways to celebrate: party in the street, watch the Samba parade from the stands or — for the truly fleet-footed and daring — dance in the parade itself.

Most of the larger samba groups allow tourists to join their contingents as long as they wear the costumes, known as "fantasias." The groups sell them to revelers over the Internet and at the city's larger hotels, delivering them to the customer's doorstep.

The elaborate costumes can cost anywhere from \$282 to \$1,412, and provide revelers with a very different perspective.

The upside of parading is the thrill of singing and dancing under the stadium's bright lights before a huge crowd.

The downside: Once the parade is over, revelers are left standing outside the stadium in a brilliant, slightly silly-looking getup, with few options aside from returning to the hotel to watch the rest of the parade on TV.

"In my opinion it's one of the most fantastic celebrations on earth. If you've seen anything about it on television or in print, it's all that but 20 times better," said Arthur Martinez, a retired U.S. Postal Service executive from Indio, Calif. "It takes about seven minutes to get into the mood. The samba is just so infectious."

"You don't have to learn to samba, but it's a good idea if you do," explains Martinez, who got his first taste of Rio's carnival back in 1978.

Brazilians like foreigners to at least try to dance. Of course, they laugh at all the misguided footwork, but it's better if foreigners loosen up than be wallflowers.

A capacity crowd of 88,500 watches from the stands of the Sambadrome stadium, where top-tier samba groups present their elaborate parades, the centerpiece of Brazil's annual carnival celebrations.

But most of the dancing goes on down below, on the stadium's nearly half-mile-long runway, where the city's top 12 samba groups each mount 80-minute long spectacles featuring hundreds of drummers, thousands of dancers and about a dozen over-the-top parade floats.

For tourists, the biggest problem with trying to watch the celebrations is that the Sambadrome is in a tough part of town, and parade tickets usually sell out months in advance. There are still plenty of tickets available through travel agencies and scalpers, but at a hefty premium.

Coimbra Sirica, a public relations executive from Northport, N.Y., chose to go through a travel agent, who provided transportation to and from the stadium, because she wanted her young children to experience Rio's carnival without worrying about security.

"The most exciting thing was to watch my children start the evening with their bodies slightly stiff and by the end of the evening they were dancing wildly, unreservedly," she explained. "I love the country, I love but music but I have some concerns about safety."

Sirica and her family, who visited last year, also followed local advice to leave valuables behind and bring only a bit of pocket money to the parade.

An easier and cheaper way to celebrate is to take part in Rio's street carnival.

No tickets or costumes are required to fall in behind one of the many "bandas" and "blocos" that ply the city's streets during carnival time.

"Bandas" play hits of carnivals past, while "blocos" write a new song for each carnival which they repeat endlessly.

The Banda Ipanema — one of the most famous carnival bands and a favorite of the city's gay community — parades along Ipanema beach on carnival Saturday and Tuesday - this year Feb. 2 and 5.

Fans of the Carmelitas bloco like to dress as nuns — though habits are not required. The group parades on Friday night, attracting a good-sized crowd to the hilltop Santa Teresa neighborhood.

And the Cordao de Bola Preta, one of the city's most traditional carnival bands, packs the city's center on Saturday morning, making it a favorite for families with young children.

Some of the bigger blocos have become victims of their own success in recent years, attracting crowds so large that even the musicians have trouble breaking through the gridlock.

If all that sounds like too much trouble, there is always the path of least resistance: stay on the beach and wait for the party to come to you.

TRAVELER'S CHECK | Brazil Carnival

Musical celebrations and other events typically start Friday, Feb. 1, and run through Tuesday, Feb. 5. Contact www.braziltourism.org/carnival.html or 800-727-2945.