



by SARAH GREAVES-GABBADON Photos by JEN JUDGE

THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH STARRING: YOU

Trinidad Carnival isn't only for hard-bodied, hard-drinking young 'uns. Mere mortals can enjoy the bacchanal too.

A Bacchanalist Is Born

I GREW UP IN THE CARIBBEAN, SO BEING A “BACCHANALIST” (A LOVER of soca music, partying and all things Carnival) should be my birth-right. But it never clicked for me. I considered Carnival a too-loud free-for-all for slender figures and big drinkers. Now I’m 45, and my figure has changed, but my opinion hasn’t. Yet I’m going to Trinidad Carnival, the Caribbean’s largest pre-Lenten celebration, to join 200,000 revelers for the ultimate rave. What have I got myself into?

Soca plays in the Hyatt Regency Trinidad’s lobby as guests fist-bump and celebrate their arrival at the party of the year. A crowd gathers around an artist demoing Carnival makeup. Women strut in looking like they’ve stepped out of a music video, all big bosoms, big hair and small shorts. Even the front-desk clerks sport fuchsia feathers in their hair and eyelids heavily spangled with glitter.

Later that evening, at the Soca Monarch competition, flags, glow sticks and bandannas held high move like manic metronomes as each performer takes the stage. Cannons spew clouds of multicolored confetti, which sparkle against the inky night before raining on the frenzied stadium crowd. And as I hear songs I recognize, something small but significant inside me begins to shift. I start to bounce to the beat. And when Kerwin Du Bois trills, “I ready for it,” suddenly I am too. I’m on my feet. “*Bacchanaaaaaal!*”

I’m worried about J’ouvert, a Sunday-night event where painted revelers dance till daybreak. But once I put on my bunny ears and hit the streets, the music works its magic again, and “chippin’ down de road” (a Carnival-specific dancing/marching hybrid) is made easier — dare I say, *fun* — by pre-dawn temps and the camaraderie of my cohorts as we playfully daub each other with fluorescent pigment and chocolaty sauce.

Monday, however, is my day of reckoning. Earlier I’d seen women of all sizes collecting their costumes and noticed that the headdresses were huge but the outfits themselves fit into letter-size envelopes. Now, surveying my own, I understand why; skimpy doesn’t even begin to describe it. At a loss, I arrange it on the bed, take a photo and post it on Facebook, anticipating a flurry of commiserations. But the responses are unanimous: Let’s see you in it.

In my room the next morning, I scrutinize myself in the mirror. I’m wearing a gold monokini, sparkly tights and a feathered headpiece. I look like a pageant contestant and a stripper rolled into one and feel exposed, insecure and tempted to wear my bathrobe. But it’s Carnival Tuesday, damn it, and I’m going to play “mas”!

The lobby is a kaleidoscope of glitter, rhinestones and sequins on costumes so scant they make mine look positively modest. Everyone is relaxed, and I sense neither judgment from women nor predatory looks from men. I realize that the only person hindering my enjoyment is me. Hours later, marching with my section, I don’t worry about whether my tummy jiggles, my thighs touch or my boobs bounce. Strangers “wine on me,” and I don’t even look back, just gamely reverse into the rhythm. I’m swept up in the magical chaos of Carnival, a slave to Iwer George’s commands to “start jumping, keep jumping.” It’s as if I’ve been plugged into an invisible power supply, and I feel I could chip down de road for days.

Flying home, I recall the words of a Trini friend. “You can enjoy Carnival from the sidelines, but eventually you’ll be hooked,” she told me knowingly. “You’ll sway to the music. You’ll dance in the street. You’ll become a Trini.”

She was right. I *am* a Trini. And I have a reservation for next year to prove it.



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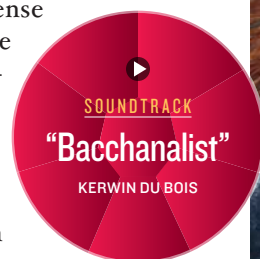
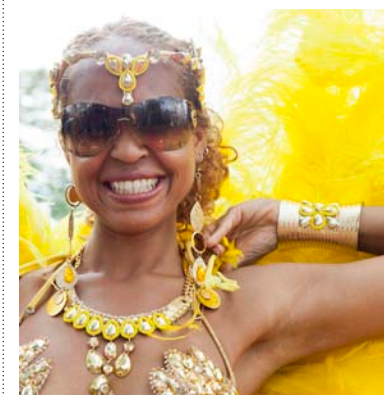
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As you read, listen to Sarah’s socarific soundtrack at caribbeantravelmag.com/carnival.



THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF CARNIVAL

1 Thou shalt leave all body-image hang-ups at home. It's a delightful contradiction of Carnival that while costumes are skimpy, a taut and tiny body isn't a prerequisite. Rubenesque women take pride in their abundant, barely contained curves, and there's no shortage of onlookers who are deeply appreciative. If ever you feel a pang of insecurity, remember: Nobody cares.

2 Thou shalt not be offended when strangers "tief a wine." Soca moves are suggestive, but all that "wining" and grinding is in good fun. So don't be surprised if a stranger approaches from behind, slings an arm around your waist and starts to gyrate. It means nothing. Really.

3 Thou shalt not fall in love. Wining partners come and go, and the hot-and-heavy hip-thrusting won't last. Don't get too attached.

4 Thou shalt not try to keep up with the Trinis. Feting (partying) is a national pastime, and Trinis have been working on their game since childhood. You, most likely, have not. So pace yourself, and be selective about the events you attend.

5 Thou shalt drink.

No, you don't need to be a drinker to have fun at Carnival. But you do need to drink *something*. During the

road march, bar trucks roll along with the bands, doling out hard and soft refreshments. Drink up.

6 Thou shalt sleep when dead. If you're doing Carnival right, you won't be getting much sleep. Fetes last till long past daybreak, and on J'ouvert morning, you won't even start partying until 2 a.m. Crack a Red Bull, and bring on the bacchanal.

7 Thou shalt plan early. Savvy masqueraders book for the following year before they check out, and by fall (six months before Carnival), your chances of scoring a Port-of-Spain hotel room are slim to none. Bands start online costume sales in the summer, so shop early.

8 Thou shalt start saving now. Trini Carnival costs. Between the hotel (budget \$2,500 for five nights, depending on when you book), the

costumes (starting at \$600, including food and drink on Carnival Monday and Tuesday) and the fetes (averaging \$100 each, all-inclusive), you're going to spend a chunk of change. But it's a worthy investment; the afterglow lingers for weeks.

9 Thou shalt get hip to the tunes. Should you "pump yuh flag" or "drop on de ground and roll"? The songs will tell you. Get into the swing by streaming current hits from trinijunglejuice.com.

10 Thou shalt work on thine endurance. You don't have to be an Olympian, but you do need decent levels of fitness and stamina to keep up. Some cardio a few weeks beforehand is well-advised.

SOUNDTRACK

"Miss Behave"

FAY-ANN LYONS



The 5 Days of Carnival

Trinidad's bucket-list bacchanal incorporates a slew of must-do public events. Here's the skinny on what happens when.

1 Fantastic Friday Today's highlight is the final leg of the Soca Monarch competition, featuring live performances from soca's biggest stars in front of an eager, flag-waving audience practically gasping for their soca fix. Two monarchs are crowned, one in the fast-paced Power category, the other in the less frenetic Groovy category. The event is a must in 2013, if only to see whether soca juggernaut Machel Montano repeats this year's controversial sweep.

2 Saturday They start 'em early in Trinidad. See just how early during the Junior Carnival Parade, when pint-size masqueraders don makeup and costumes and, with nary a meltdown, strut their stuff under the blazing sun. In the evening, the annual steel-pan championship Panorama celebrates the traditional sound of Carnival.

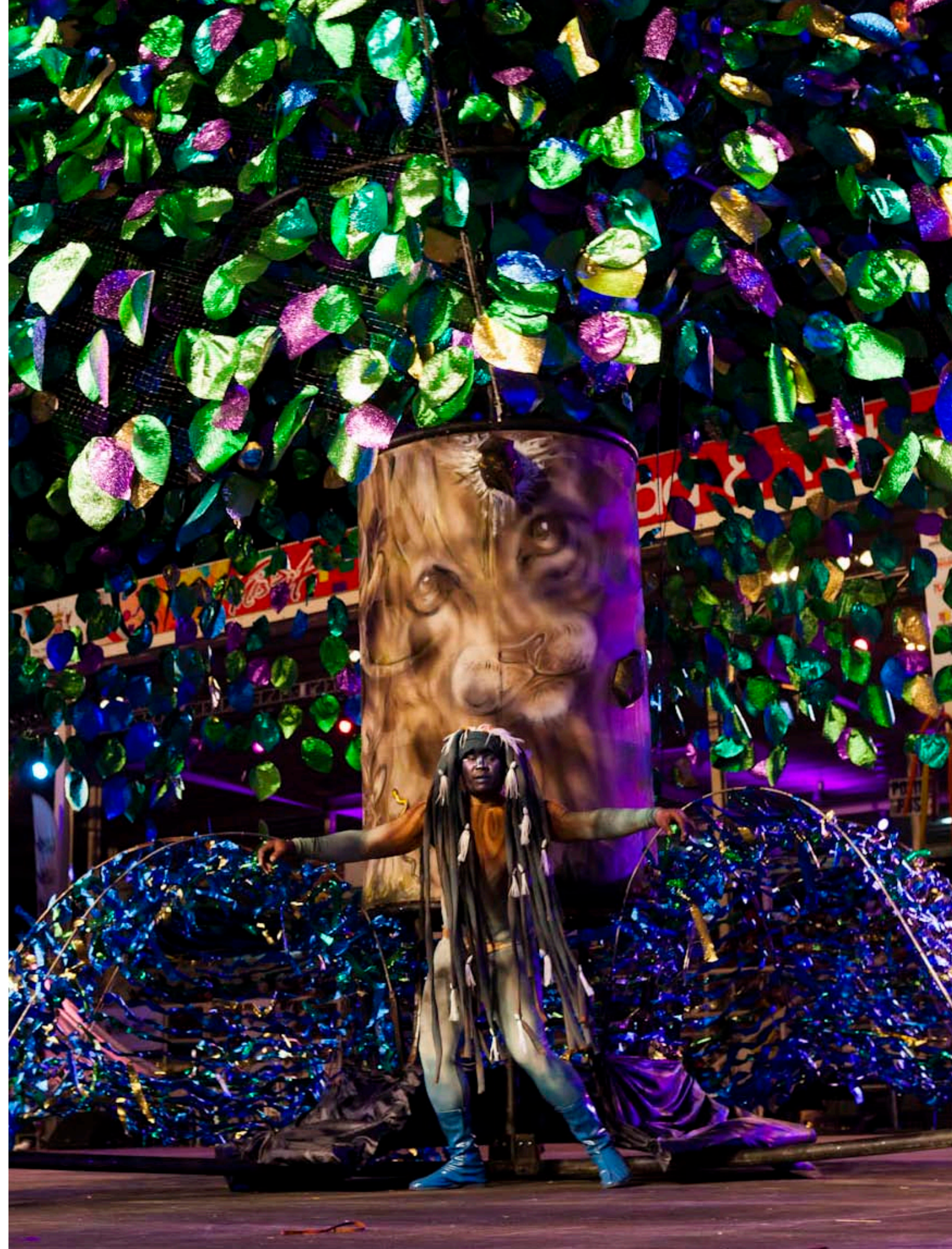
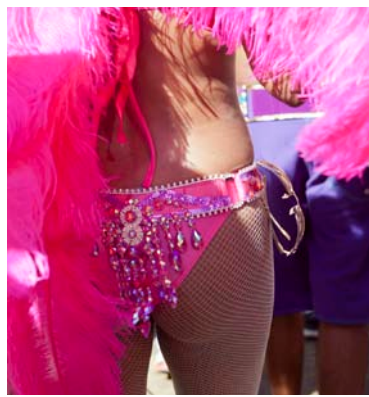
3 Sunday Head to Maracas Beach, where Richard's is the place to fuel up for next week's merriment with a hearty bake 'n' shark. The line can stretch 40 people long,

but the deep-fried and delicious fish sandwich is worth the wait. Back in town tonight at Dimanche Gras (opposite), you'll marvel as contestants propelling glitzy and gargantuan costumes fashioned from aluminum, wire, fiberglass, feathers and papier-mache vie for the title of Carnival King or Queen.

4 Monday In the still-dark hours of the morning, thousands of revelers converge for J'ouvert, a peripatetic paint- and chocolate sauce-soaked street party. Later, the Monday Mas parade is a warm-up for the next day's main event.

5 Tuesday This is it! From daybreak to sundown, Port-of-Spain's narrow streets teem with colorfully costumed throngs wantonly gyrating to an incessantly throbbing beat. Play mas!

SOUNDTRACK
"Vibes Cyah Done"
MACHEL MONTANO



Fashionably *Great*

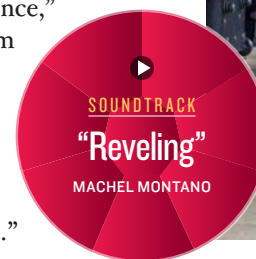
ANYA AYOUNG CHEE HAS BEEN PLAYING MAS SINCE EVEN before she could walk: “I was dressed as a pepper shrimp and put in a giant wok on top of one the floats,” she recalls with a laugh. Little surprise then that the Trinidadian winner of the ninth season of Lifetime’s fashion reality show *Project Runway* ended up designing costumes this year for a section of Tribe, one of Carnival’s most popular bands.

Inspired by a Navajo-influenced collection she created in 2011 and appropriately dubbed *On the Runway*, the design was informed by animals and indigenous cultures and featured sueded fringe, horn trim, animal print — and the requisite skimpy silhouettes. “It was a challenge to shift from ready-to-wear to costume design,” Anya admits. “Costumes need to be flashier yet still sexy and sensual.” And since she divides her time between the United States and the Caribbean, there was the added challenge of collaborating long-distance with the Tribe design team. “We did it all over BlackBerry Messenger: choosing fabrics, trims, shapes, everything.” The result: costumes that Anya readily concurs were by no means demure but that, with clever accessorizing and a few judicious tweaks, flattered everyone from her mother to her younger brothers (there are men’s costumes as well) and even this writer’s less-than-svelte, not-even-5-foot-tall frame.

And when you feel comfortable in what you’re wearing, you’re likely in the proper state of mind to fully embrace the joyous bedlam that is Trinidad Carnival, a raucous mash-up of sight and sound that can be overwhelming for first-timers.

“At its finest, Carnival is a spiritual experience,” explains the designer, now an official tourism ambassador for her homeland. “The key is to engage in the music, to accept the madness and to let it take you over. For me, Carnival is a cleansing and a renewal. But it can also be an opportunity to rinse out and start again for anyone, not just Trinis.”

▶
Costume
designer Anya
Ayoung Chee



1 Headdress Feathers Evoke a Native American vibe, and rhinestones bring the bling. **2 Gold + Glitter** The feather motif is repeated on a gilded torque. Glitter ties the look together. **3 Monokini** This one-piece is heavily embellished yet leaves little to the imagination. **4 Cuffs** Bold brass cuffs adds larger-than-life superhero style. **5 Leg Pieces** Adorned with beads, horn and rhinestones, the fringe sways as you dance. **6 Arm Pieces** Fringe cleverly plays up gym-toned arms while artfully concealing fleshier ones. **7 Eye Shadow** A palette of blue and gold makeup is an integral part of the overall look.

PERFECTLY PACKED

1 Stockings To smooth your jiggly bits and as a barrier between you and the elements and sweaty carousers, you’ll need at least two pairs of rip-resistant flesh-tone tights. Stateside, Hooters sells them for \$6. Or try Micles, Port-of-Spain’s one-stop Carnival shop, which stocks every imaginable shade. **2 Wig** You can wear a bandanna to protect your hair from the paint and mud that accompanies J’ouvert’s

high jinks, but a wig — ideally in a color unseen in nature — is an infinitely more stylish option.

3 Glitter At Carnival, there’s no such thing as too much sparkle. Apply liberally to your face, body and hair. Then apply again.

4 Boots Sneakers are great for hours of dancing in the streets, but they won’t coordinate with your costume. Get a pair of cheap-but-comfy flat boots; grab a glue gun, spray paint, glitter and beads; and fashion your own fun and functional footwear. For bonus points, add cushioned insoles.

5 Super Glue This is a necessity because fringe falls off and stick-on rhinestones don’t always stay stuck. **6 Baby Oil** If you don’t want to be scrubbing J’ouvert goop off your skin for days afterward, apply a liberal coating of oil on all of your exposed parts before you hit the street. The paint will slide right off in the shower — no muss, no fuss. **7 Cross-Body Bag** While you’re marching for hours on Carnival Tuesday, you’ll need something to hold your essentials, so bring a small hands-free bag in a color that goes with your costume.

8 Sewing Kit Because super glue doesn’t fix all costume malfunctions. **9 Earplugs** The first time you experience the ear-splitting volume from the massive speaker boxes that accompany each band on parade day, you’ll be glad you packed these. **10 Bandages** Blisters? Bites? Band-Aids to the rescue. **11 Sunscreen** Apply, reapply and repeat. Or sorely regret it. **12 Shopping Bag** You *will* be taking that fabulous headdress home with you, right? It certainly won’t survive being checked, so carry it as hand baggage in a large tote.