

Party colours

Saint Lucia is beloved for its peaceful vibes, but come carnival time it erupts into an all-island party of epic proportions, discovers **Alice Barnes-Brown**

If the synchronised stomping from spangled revellers didn't make the tarmac quake, the bass from the speakers certainly does. A gravelly voice comes on the mic, repeating the mantra that rejuvenates any wilting Saint Lucia carnival-goers: "Jump in the road! Jump in the road!" It's long been my dream to take part in a Caribbean carnival, so it's impossible not to move my feet and get swept up in the spirit.

Many islands, including Trinidad, Puerto Rico and Dominica, hold their carnivals just before Lent, reflecting the celebration's Christian roots. However, in 1999, Saint Lucia moved its festivities to July to avoid competing with better-known carnivals and making the event more appealing to international tourists.

And judging by the hype that I witnessed on my flight –

fellow passengers were playing soca music in the aisles as we waited to disembark – the strategy has worked.

PARTY PLANNING

Saint Lucia's first official carnival was in 1947, when a few islanders threw together homemade costumes and swept through the streets of capital Castries. It's got bigger and better since then, with 18,000 visitors arriving in Saint Lucia over the carnival period in July 2024.

The carnival is a fantastic selling point for visitors who are looking to come to Saint Lucia during the low season. Some clients will be content to simply watch and enjoy the atmosphere – I saw guests of Sandals Halcyon Beach come out to admire the costumes and clap as we marched past – but others may want to be part of the action. This year's carnival

Saint Lucian influencer
Tiah Arnold at carnival

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | SAINT LUCIA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Dressed to impress; parading in glorious colour; Tiah Arnold joins the party; Sandals Grande St Lucian

PICTURES: Ronald Raoul; CK Photography; Luke Forsythe



season runs from July 1-23, when there will be events, concerts and parties happening around the island. The two parade days will take place on Monday, July 22, and Tuesday, July 23.

In Saint Lucia, Monday is the bigger day, when groups of masqueraders (called 'bands') in sparkly costumes dance past a panel of judges. Tuesday is a more relaxed affair, with loosely themed – yet still daring – outfits.

FESTIVE ISLAND

Advise clients to arrive at least a week before the main parade, so they can take their pick of the lead-up events (tickets often sell fast, so book ahead). One of the most famous is Colour Me Red, held on Pigeon Island – a heritage-filled spot also known for hosting the Saint Lucia Jazz & Arts Festival. It sees a rush of colour on the Friday before carnival, with partygoers dressed top-to-toe in rouge to watch Saint Lucian soca and fast-paced Denner segment (a new genre influenced by electronic music and unique to the island) artists take the stage.

There are also plenty of official events to put on your clients' radars. On a warm Saturday night in Castries, the stalls of a sports ground become the stands for the Calypso Monarch final, in which Caribbean calypso artists take 10 minutes of stage time to win the audience's (and the judges') favour.

Calypso can be a form of satire, some of it very on-the-nose: last year's carnival was close to the start of the Paris Olympics, so a man in a blue shell suit

used a spoof of the Eiffel tower and Olympic rings as props. Another artist, Saint Lucia's own up-and-coming Gumption, quipped about a loss of faith in politicians and soon had the crowd singing along with him.

GET THE PARTY STARTED

On Monday, as the Carnival approaches its climax, lorries carrying sound systems, carts hauling champagne and clusters of costumed dancers gather at a roundabout north of Castries to begin the three-mile parade route. Amid the sea of feathers, I eagerly look out for people dressed in the pastel colours that my band, Legends, has picked to reflect its 'sweet fantasy' theme.

As I sip the first of many iced rum punches – drinks tokens form part of the essentials provided with costume kits, along with coolers, snacks and even paracetamol – a delightful cacophony competes for my attention. One band's MC gets his troupe to step in time with the music, while our hype man encourages us to get involved: "When I say Legends, you say carnival!"

The truck moves at a steady pace along the scenic coast road, past calm seas and sandy beaches perfect for capturing carnival selfies. It's quieter at this end of the route, so if your clients simply want to spectate, they will have a prime viewing point at Choc Beach. We turn inland at Vigie Beach, where the George F L Charles airport runway touches the road; resourceful dancers cling to the chain-link fence and use it to twerk in time with the drums.

Speaking of twerking, another highlight of the route ➤

ASK THE expert



"We've been selling Saint Lucia for more than 40 years. Carnival has become more well known since the pandemic and we've seen an increase in bookings. We get a lot of enquiries from groups and friends who love the idea of a vibrant festival where they can have fun, be safe and experience the culture. Most people stay for at least two weeks, which gives time to enjoy the festivities, parties and parade days, and then some time at the end to relax. My advice when selling the carnival to first-timers would be to encourage them to book as far ahead as possible. We'd also recommend that they select only one or two private events, so they can make time for the official events and explore the beautiful island."

**Laverne Walker, director,
Sackville Travel**

BOOK IT

Sandals sells a seven-night all-inclusive stay at Sandals Grande St Lucian from £2,699 per person, based on two sharing. Includes flights from Gatwick departing July 16, premium drinks and island transfers. sellingsandals.co.uk

Saint Lucia Carnival has an official website with a list of all participating bands and their contact details, which agents can use to plan. Expect prices of £400-plus to participate. carnivalsaintlucia.com



is the 'Bum Bum Wall' – a flat-topped wall featuring murals of the island, including its famous Pitons. Bikini-clad partygoers clamber onto the wall to shake their stuff for their moment of carnival fame, accompanied by red-and-gold confetti glinting in the sunshine.

CARNIVAL CHARACTERS

At the foot of the mural, two women with costumes crafted from old plastic bottles and shimmering chocolate wrappers catch my eye. Their cardboard signs, which

“Partygoers shake their stuff for their moment of carnival fame, red-and-gold confetti glinting in the sunshine

use Saint Lucian Creole terms, highlight the damaging waste that's left behind once carnival is over.

Campaigner Sherween Gonzales explains: “Malpwòp means nasty. We are campaigning to encourage people to dispose of their garbage properly. But it's not just Saint Lucians – we have seen tourists come and drop their rubbish. As much as we love them, this is our home and they need to respect our beaches.”

When we get to the end of the parade, the cheers from the crowds in Castries reach a crescendo. Bands



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FROM LEFT: Rodney Bay; writer Alice Barnes-Brown; *Game of Thrones* star Nathalie Emmanuel (middle) in costume; Sandals Grande St Lucian

PICTURES: Ollie Jones; Michael Shawn Marcellin; Saint Lucia Tourism Authority

in front of us sprint towards the stage, getting their last burst of adrenaline before facing the judges. Though my feet are tired, the atmosphere is electrifying. I give it my all, stomping and shaking until I'm unable to hear the whistles and whoops. Legends comes fourth in two categories, including 'Spirit of Carnival'. We return home proud and, as I put my aching feet up and watch the sun setting later in the day, I appreciate the sky paying tribute to the orange, pink and lilac hues that defined our glorious carnival costumes. **TW**



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