

What is Carnival?

Carnaval is a pre-lenten Mestizo festivity once widely celebrated in Northern Belize. The celebration features songs, dances, and theatrical performances in the community streets. Carnaval marks the transition from the norms of every day community life, to the more somber, penitential practices of the Lenten season. Carnaval continues to be celebrated in communities of the Orange Walk and Corozal Districts and in San Pedro Town, Ambergris Caye.



History of Carnaval in Belize

The traditions of Carnaval were brought by Maya and Mestizo refugees who migrated from the Yucatan region of Mexico during *La Guerra de Castas* or the Caste War 1847-1901. They settled and established communities particularly in Northern Belize. Though many no longer practice the tradition, some communities have been able to maintain the practice and it survives as a marker of their origins and heritage.

A Three Day Celebration



During the final three days of Carnaval, various carnival groups go from house to house performing a repertoire of *comparsas* or theatrical songs and dances. The songs are a form of satire about social issues, community gossip and recent events. Many of these songs were composed by local musicians. The older *comparsas* are believed to be a fusion of Yucatec Maya, Mestizo and African heritage. Popular *comparsas* include *el torito* (the bull), *la culebra* (the snake), *el papalote* (the kite), and *la cinta* (the maypole).

Celebration Prelude

Carnaval activities begin at least one week before Ash Wednesday with *Los Enmascarados*. *Los Enmascarados* is a group of performers who wear masks and other disguises as they go from house to house. They perform various skits and dances which depict the conflict between good and evil. For this reason, one person is dressed as *El Diablo* (the Devil) and another as a priest.

This is followed by *La Pintadera*. It is a tradition where the ashes of the burnt calabash is used to paint revelers, however, the use of water paint and the playful throwing of eggs has become more prevalent.



Don Juan Carnaval and the Reading of the Will

The public display of Don Juan Carnaval means Carnaval season has begun. The life-size effigy of Don Juan symbolizes the last days of revelry before Lent begins. Traditionally, Don Juan is burned on the Tuesday night before Ash Wednesday. Community members gather for the reading of his final will or *testamento* – a fun-filled satire addressing social issues and events affecting the community. It is also used to criticize the misdeeds of individuals within the community.

