

Half a Year of Fantastic Festivals



Welcome to 2013. With the arrival of a new year, we've picked out our favourite festivals for the first six months. Isn't it time you celebrated?



Carnival, Brazil

Carnival, often taking the Portuguese spelling, Carnaval, is celebrated in towns and villages throughout Brazil as well as in other Catholic countries, but Rio de Janeiro has long been regarded as the Carnival Capital of the World. With flashy outfits, wild dancing and associated revelry it is easy to forget that Carnival is associated with Easter and abstinence.

Held 40 days before Easter, Carnival officially starts on Saturday and finishes on Fat Tuesday with the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday.

During lent, adherents abstain from all bodily pleasures. Carnival is a last hurrah; an act of farewell to the pleasures of the flesh.

Rio's Carnival starts with the crowning of King Momo, traditionally a tall, rotund man, the King of Carnivals. The king is presented with a giant key by the city's mayor; signalling the launch of festivities. Then, Carnival takes over. The streets and squares, the bars and clubs, the neighbourhoods and community venues are all part of the revelry. The culmination is the Samba Parade, where neighbourhood groups compete for the title of best samba school; flashy floats and scanty clothing featuring prominently.

If you are planning on attending Carnival, it's too late for 2013. The dates for 2014 are February 28 until March 4.

Semana Santa, Guatemala

Semana Santa, or Easter week is a spectacular event in Antigua, Guatemala where thousands of people line the streets to watch the processions and other religious festivities. This is no ordinary procession, but rather a spectacle unlike any other:

The highlight of each procession is an enormous wooden float depicting a scene from the gospel accounts of the Passion of Christ. The elaborate floats are paraded through the streets for up to eight hours. Weighing several thousand pounds, this is no mean feat. The largest floats need around 80 carriers, who are replaced every 10-15 minutes, meaning more than 2,500 carriers are required for just one float. Luckily it is considered an honour to participate in the processions, so there's no shortage of manpower to carry the load.



On Good Friday participants dressed as Roman soldiers appear in the streets. They read the charges against Jesus in various parts of town and precede some of the processions. Clouds of incense perfume the streets and a band follows each major float, playing religious songs. The musicians don't get replaced, making their role one of the most physically demanding. Residents along the route create carpets of pine needles, flowers and sawdust in the street for the processions to walk over; a 16th Century tradition designed to make it easier to pass by on the cobbled streets. Great effort is put into these carpeted works of art, destroyed in minutes by the processions.

The main festivities begin on Palm Sunday and reach their peak on Good Friday. In 2013 this will be March 24 – 29.

Holi Festival, India

Once upon a time in Hindu mythology, the demon King Hiranyakashyap demanded the kingdom worship only him. His son, Prahlad rebelled and became a devotee of Lord Vishnu, so in retribution Hiranyakashyap asked his sister Holika to use her fire-resistant

powers to enter a blaze with Prahlad in her lap. Prahlad was saved by the lord for his extreme devotion, while Holika was burnt to ashes, discovering too late that her powers worked only when she entered the fire alone.

This is just one of the stories associated with the Holi Festival, observed primarily in India and Nepal. While participants light a bonfire, called Holika, on the eve of Holi to celebrate the victory of good over evil, the Hindu festival is predominantly a celebration of the beginning of a new season – Spring. It is one of the least religious holidays, yet possibly one of the most exhilarating, and certainly the most colourful.

The Holi festivities vary by location, but the vibrant colours remain



the same. The main day of Holi is celebrated by people throwing coloured powder and perfume and smearing each other with paint. For this brief period, the strict rules of separation between castes are abandoned, and people come together in a kaleidoscope of colour and caste. Expect paint balloons, water guns and underhanded paint-splattering tactics, as well as a lot of fun.

Holi starts on March 27th and runs for a few days. The Indian temple towns of Mathura and Vrindavan, four hours from Delhi are auspicious places for Holi as this is where Lord Krishna was born and raised.

Songkran Water Festival, Thailand

After being doused with paint during Holi, get clean at the Songkran Water Festival in Thailand. This festival celebrates the Thai New Year. The date was originally determined by astrological calculation, but it has now been fixed, right at the hottest time of the year in Thailand. Somewhat ironically, the end of the dry season is observed with a man-made wet season.

The most obvious rite of Songkran is people throwing water on each other.

Water guns, buckets, hoses - whatever participants can get their hands on becomes a sidearm. Locals roam the streets looking for prey, or post themselves at the side of roads with a garden hose, drenching each other and passers by. Everyone is a target.

Traditionally Songkran is a time to visit and pay respects to elders, including family members, friends, neighbours, and monks. Songkran has a Buddhist aspect with many revellers visiting a wat (temple) to pray and give alms. Buddha also gets a bathing, with the devout gently pouring fragrant water over the temple effigies to bring luck and prosperity in the New Year. Originally the water poured on the statues was collected and gently poured on the shoulder to show respect and offer good fortune to elders. It is a short leap from here to an all out, country-wide water fight.

Songkran officially lasts for three days, from April 13 - 15. The wettest place to celebrate is Chang Mai in northern Thailand.

San Fermin Festival, Spain

The fiestas of San Fermin may not sound familiar, but the city of Pamplona is a byword for the running of the bulls, an event at the heart of



the San Fermin festival. San Fermin is the patron saint of the region of Navarra, but the religious aspect takes a secondary role, as most things do when you are being chased down cobbled streets by 1,100 pounds of angry beef.

The *Encierro*, the running of the bulls, was born from need, the aim being to get the bulls from outside the city into the bullring. The run starts at the corral in Calle Santo Domingo. The runners, just a few metres away from the corral where the bulls impatiently snort, raise rolled newspapers and chant to an image of San Fermin, requesting blessing and guidance. No doubt survival is also high on the list of demands. The chant is repeated three times before the 8am start – at the five-minute, three-minute and one-minute to go marks.

Adrenalin peaks as the corral gates open, leaving the bulls free to charge behind the runners for a heart-pounding 825 metres, the distance between the corral and the bullring. After the extensive build up, the run is over before you know it, lasting between three and four minutes on average, unless an unruly bull loses its way.

The festival of San Fermin runs from July 6 – 14, with the running of the bulls held daily from July 7. Don't wear red.

