

TOBAGO

WHERE THE STREETS HAVE
NO SHAME

Caribbean carnival's image of Copulent costume and smiling faces has launched a thousand ad campaigns. And rightly so: the vibrant festival is the most fun you can have in a feathered headdress anywhere in the world. But there's one tradition that never makes it onto those posters plugging family holidays, and it's a welcome diversion for those who don't like their fun to be clean or child-friendly. J'Ouvert (*ju-vay*) is the 4am opening to the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, where mud, oil and cocoa fights take centre stage. It's a cathartic explosion before two days of bikinis and beads. The legacy of French colonialists – J'Ouvert means 'opening of the day' – it's the twilight moment when the darker side of carnival's history comes out to play.

Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, which takes place annually in the days preceding Lent, goes back thousands of years to early Amerindian settlers and their animal masquerades. Its subsequent incarnations have absorbed other traditions such as masks from European costume balls, rituals of indentured Indians and masquerades held by enslaved Africans, who

disguised their celebrations on the plantation before emancipation took the festival to the streets. It was only by the mid-20th century, that carnival's current character as the place 'where all of we is one' was alive and well.

J'Ouvert is carnival at its most primal. It's freedom, mischief, liberation, honesty and *picong* (playful teasing), and it harks back to the origins of celebrating the usurpation of power. Costumes are *ole mas* (old clothes) rather than the feathers and frills of daytime carnival. Traditional outfits include bats, midnight robbers and badly behaved sailors (complete with bags of talcum powder to coat the uninitiated). Men dress as women and women as men. Grown-ups in baby diapers suck on dummies, while respectable bankers and businessmen drape themselves in chains and torn clothes. Paint and mud-covered devils accessorised with real cow horns menace passers-by. All in good fun: it's a chance to enjoy being wet and messy, and as



the locals say cheekily 'a license to get on bad'. Though J'Ouvert's roots have powerful historical meaning, most mudmen nowadays are just out to have a wild time.

Following trucks bearing large music systems, fun lovers take over the road and the famous are often found in their dancing midst. Cricketer Brian Lara smeared in mud with a messy Dwight Yorke, arm around his shoulder. Lawyer Johnnie Cochran has taken time off from defending the likes of OJ Simpson to come down and high-five the passing throng. And a bevy of dressed-down Ms Universe winners such as Wendy Fitzwilliam, Lara Dutta and Mpule Kwelagobe have also let their hair down at J'Ouvert.

Floating home in the 9am sunshine, the world is dreamlike and you feel changed forever – only the streets, parked cars and walls marked with body prints and exploded talc bombs speak of what passed in the night. That's the best part of J'Ouvert: it's beyond the world of ad campaigns. It must be experienced in muddy person.

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