

6 Tips for Surviving Carnival in Panama

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Carnival may be a year away, but if you're planning to join the festivities, you need to book NOW. Here are six tips for making the most of Panama's biggest party!



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Enjoying one of the biggest parties on the planet takes planning and some expert advice.

The festivities in Rio and New Orleans hog all the limelight in the days leading up to Lent, but the million-dollar Carnival celebration in Las Tablas, Panama should not be overlooked. There are other Carnival celebrations in Panama, but nothing compares to the party thrown in Las Tablas—an affair that dazzles with feathers, floats and fireworks and not one, but two rival Carnival queens.

Like all Carnival parties, the events are free, but hotel rooms and rental cars book up fast so start planning now and keep in mind these tips from our Las Tablas Carnival experience.

1. Start on Friday

Traditionally, Carnival includes the four days leading up to Ash Wednesday: **Saturday**, Palm **Sunday**, **Monday** and Mardi Gras or Fat **Tuesday**, but we urge you to be in Las Tablas by Friday night. That's when the unique **duelling Carnival queens are crowned**. This over-the-top spectacle, which installs one "uptown" (*calle arriba*) and one "downtown" (*calle abajo*) queen will ease you into the scene and set the stage for all of the following events.



Credit: Eric Mohl

2. Assume You Will Get Wet

During daytime events, the main square in Las Tablas will be ringed by 18-wheeler tanker trucks filled with water and armed with hoses that deliver a strong stream (not fire-truck strong, but strong enough) onto the crowd below. Dress appropriately and protect all electronics and cameras. The water trucks disappear at night.



Credit: Eric Mohl

3. Don't Worry About Parking

Safe, free street parking is shockingly easy to find day and night in Las Tablas, and traffic is rarely a problem.

4. Accessorize

You'll want to carry around as little as possible but there are a handful of Carnival accessories you should have with you, including:

- high SPF, waterproof sunscreen and a hat

- a pot of Mentholatum, Carmex lip balm or Tiger Balm to dab under your nose to cut the smell of urine that gets stronger over the course of the festivities
- a bottle of hand sanitizer
- a beer cozy for cans of ice-cold Panamanian beer on sale from street vendors all over Las Tablas for US\$1

5. BYOB

And speaking of beer, it's perfectly acceptable to turn up to Carnival events in Las Tablas with your own beverages. Many people had fully stocked coolers with them and we even saw a few guys pulling full-size wheeled garbage cans full of ice and beverages for the day.



Credit: Eric Mohl

6. Reserve NOW

Las Tablas Carnival takes place in the days leading up to Ash Wednesday, which changes every year. If you want to attend next year, we recommend making your hotel reservations now. If you will have a car, consider [Hostal Villas de Zianit](#) in Guararé (\$20 per person in a private room with bathroom, A/C and parking) which is just a few miles from Las Tablas. In Las Tablas the [Hotel Don Jesus](#) is located a few blocks from the main plaza but maintains a peaceful air and has a pool.

KAREN CATCHPOLE AND ERIC MOHL OF THE TRANS-AMERICAS JOURNEY



In April of 2006, journalist Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl left their jobs and apartment in New York City and embarked on the [Trans-Americas Journey](#), a 200,000-mile working road trip through all 23 countries in North, Central and South America. After many years on the road they are still nowhere near their goal of Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America where the road literally ends. Until then, their slow and steady overland exploration of The Americas continues.

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