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Galicia Carnival

Carnival time

If the grey skies of winter are getting to you, head for Spain which this February will be exploding into a riot of colour and excess while the rest of Europe hibernates

CARNIVAL, FOR most people, probably conjures up images of cavorting, semi-naked men and women in wildly extravagant costumes, dancing to pounding, relentless rhythms. We might also think of exotic, walk on cut glass destinations like Rio de Janeiro, and the sensuously sinister Mardi Gras of New Orleans, originally a Spanish settlement, later taken over by the French. They in turn, flogged it to the British Crown in 1803 for 80 million gold francs, thereby proving that Napoleon Bonaparte, in spite of his jibe about Britain being a mere nation of shopkeepers, was pretty clueless when it came down to solid business transactions. When we think of Carnival in Europe, the Baroque splendour of Venice probably springs to mind, with decadent masque balls, big hair and odd characters with huge, beak-like nasal extensions. So what about Spain? The story goes that the Carnival spread throughout Europe, thanks to the expansion of the Roman Empire, and was Christianized by the Byzantine period, receiving the name *Carnestolendas* from the latin *Domenica ante carnes tollendas* meaning the Sunday before giving up meat. By the mediaeval period it was known as *Carne Levare* or to abandon

meat before *La Cuaresma* or Lent. An end of winter celebration has existed in Europe, in one form or another, for centuries. In a lot of countries, these celebrations have either disappeared entirely or are hanging on for dear life. Not so in Spain, where the relatively modern, glitzy, twentieth century Carnival peacefully co-exists alongside a far more ancestral and at times, savagely primitive affair.

Tenerife

The Carnival of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, voted the world's number one last year, is a month long riot of pre-lenten lunacy. The programme is divided into three main segments and is usually themed; last year's being *Tribumantía*, a journey down the ages, from our violent troglodyte beginnings, to the equally violent urban tribes of today. The first segment, the *Cabalgata*, announcing the start of the festivities, has been described as a huge multi-colour serpent, made up of tens of thousands of *Mascaras* and musical groups. The *Cabalgata* slowly makes its way around the streets, sending out an unequivocal message to the *Tinerfeños* that on the streets the Carnival has already begun. Phase two is the *Coso*, a second *Cabalgata*, even more

outrageous than the first, a true avalanche of colour and rhythm where individual groups show their boundless creativity and ingenuity. The last and final phase comes with the *Entierro de la Sardina* or Burial of the Sardine. The whole town swaps sensuality and provocation for abject grief and strict mourning attire. Thousands upon thousands of widows, widowers, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks and nuns, and even the odd pope, drag themselves miserably through the streets, moaning weeping and wailing inconsolably at the death of yet another Carnival. What makes Tenerife very different to other Carnivals around the world is the fact that by attending, you wouldn't be taking your life into your hands. The *Tinerfeños* say that the true Goddess of the Carnival is the irreverent practical joke and our ability to take it onboard with a laugh and smile. Some people might accuse Tenerife of aping the Brazilian Carnival, but the conquest of the Canary Islands predates Portuguese King John III's settlement of the Americas by nearly 100 years. In the end, both creativity and ingenuity know no borders and it's probably more a case of each one feeding off the other in the search for inspiration and ideas.



Cádiz Carnival



Cádiz

Meanwhile, back on the Peninsula, the word Cádiz can be said to be synonymous with Carnival. For this one, we have to go back to the 15th and 16th centuries, when this lovely city was one of the most important, if not *the* most important port, in the world. Fabulously wealthy from its flourishing trade with the Spanish colonies, the city also became home to a thriving Genovese community that set up shop there after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. Cádiz also had strong commercial ties with Venice and it is believed that the three cities traded Carnavalesque influences throughout this period. The people of Cádiz are noted for their bawdy sense of humour and this clearly manifests itself at Carnival time in the guise of *Chirigotas*, roving bands of musicians/singers that sing biting satirical songs that lampoon local, national and international personalities. The *Comparsas*, with up to 15 members are probably the most serious minded of all the participants. Playing a variety of instruments, their speciality is the *Pasadoble*. Next up are the *Coros*, up to 50 chaps, all in mediaeval garb and playing all manner of stringed instruments, including lutes, *bandurrias*, mandolins and guitars. Their heady repertoire includes *tangos*, *cuplés* and something called *popurrí*. Last, but not least are the *Cuartetos*, who, as their name implies, are groups of between three and four strolling players. The only instruments they are allowed to use are a pair of *Palos* or sticks, used mainly for the purpose of timing and co-ordination. They have the exclusive and unenviable task of making the crowds laugh and are specialists in scathing parody. In spite of centuries of repression at the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities and more recently, during the long winter of discontent of the Franco regime, the Cádiz Carnival still reigns supreme in the Spanish peninsula.



The Pyrenees

High up in the Pyrenees an entirely different Carnival draws thousands every year. Bielsa, set in the most stunning mountain scenery, is host to an ancient primeval affair which has to be seen to be believed. As in other Carnivals the action revolves around a group of specific characters. In Bielsa, pride of place goes to *Cornelio Zorrilla*, a dummy made up of rags and old clothes who observes the ensuing insanity dangling from the town hall balcony. At the end of the festivities, the mob head in the direction of the town hall and, in an attempt to expurgate their sins, poor old *Cornelio* is put on trial, tortured and finally burnt at the stake. Sinister figures called *Trangas*, dressed in animal skins, horned headdresses and





Bielsa, Aragón

with cowbells tied to their waists, leeringly prowl the streets in search of *Madamas*, young girls between the ages of 16 and 25 dressed in beautifully ornate costumes. These poor girls are constantly harried by the priapic *Trangas*, who, unsurprisingly, are said to symbolise fertility. *Onsos* are bear-like creatures, led through the streets by their sadistic tamers who beat them savagely on the back again and again with clubs and sticks. One of the oddest characters is the *Agueleta*, a whip bearing grandmother that runs amok carrying a man on her back. Who or what she actually represents is anybody's guess. Bielsa offers the perfect opportunity to witness some truly ancient rituals in a setting that will take your breath away.

Galicia

Tucked away in the now not so remote Celtic northwest, in the province of Ourense, Galicia's Carnival or *Entroido*, to use its local name, is a mixture of the lewd, the savage and the downright bizarre. The tiny village of Laza has become famous or probably infamous in recent years, with TV crews from all over Spain turning up to film the mayhem and very often, unwittingly, getting dragged into the proceedings. Characters called *Peliqueiros*, very scary individuals wearing garish masks bearing the images of totemic beasts such as wolves, eagles, bears, lions and tigers, announce their arrival with cowbells strapped to the waist. Anybody foolish enough to cross their path is whipped mercilessly across the back of the legs or shoulders. Some anthropologists believe they are meant to represent the hated tithe/tribute collectors from nearby Monterrey Castle. Parades of hay carts, drawn by donkeys and piled high with angelic, grubby faced children, straw in their hair, wind their way up the main street, while the half crazed men leading them hurl purposely starved wood ants and cow slurry at fellow revellers. A wild, drunken and almost rarefied atmosphere



Tenerife Carnival



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bubbles away under the surface and, for some inexplicable reason, most of the tourists and camera crews leave before nightfall...

The oldest in Spain

Entroido in Xinzo de Limia is probably the oldest in the peninsula, with *Pantallas* being the key players. These mask-wearing chaps tear around the streets, ganging up on fellow citizens and those daft enough not to be in fancy dress, forcing them to stand a round of drinks in the nearest bar. At the same time, *Charangas* march around the town playing a hideous cacophony of sounds from seemingly out of tune trombones, saxophones, clarinets and trumpets. Viana do Bolo also dates back to pagan times; here the principal figure is the *Boteiro*, another mask-wearing individual whose shirt alone is made up of over 1000 metres of coloured silk, all forming different geometric patterns.

In Viana do Bolo the accent seems to be on who can make the loudest din, with villagers beating on drums and ploughshares simultaneously in a ritual known as the *Folión*. A mule led by a *Maragato*, an ethnic group that monopolised the haulage business in days gone-by, also makes an appearance. Traditionally the *Cacique* or lord of the manor rode his mule through the village, kindly inviting his minions to join the feast. In the village of Bande, the people to steer clear of are the *Troteiros*, grown men who cover their faces with lace and wear tall

INFORMATION & CONTACTS

■ TENERIFE

www.carnavaltenerife.es/default.php?optMenu=Organizacion

Photos: Tenerife Tourism Corporation.

■ CÁDIZ

www.cadizturismo.com

Photos: Patronato Provincial de Turismo de Cádiz.

Photographer: D. Carlos de la Calle

■ BIELSA

www.turismosobrarbe.com

www.bielsa.com

Photos: Archivo de la Comarca de Sobrarbe.

Photographer: Jon Izeta

■ GALICIA

www.turgalicia.com

Photos: Turgalicia

hats made up of photos and postcards received from friends and family. Also attached to the hats are small mirrors, supposedly to ward off the evil eye and other 'dangers' they might happen to encounter. Throughout the fiestas they hold a form of diplomatic immunity, and are free to hassle pensioners, tease children, and with their canes, licentiously lift the skirts of the womenfolk as they charge down the streets.

Over on the coast, the fishing villages of San Adrian and Santa Cristina de Cobres on the beautiful

Ria de Vigo hold something which can only be described as Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters meet the Pearly Kings and Queens. These two fishing villages explode into colour in late February. *Galáns* and *Galanas* are the protagonists here. Groups of couples dance in front of their neighbours' houses, encouraging them to come out and donate a little money to help share the costs of the festivities. The fiesta ends with the *Sermon do Entroido*, where a false preacher recounts, in jocular fashion, all the events that took place in the village over the previous year. There is also something called the *Corrida do Galo*, or cockerel running, which locals say has lost something of its former splendour, due mainly to the objections of local ecologists. It has to be said though, that unlike other famous animal running events in Spain, the little red rooster of Cobres always lives to run another day.

Carnival time in Spain is an unforgettable experience and not long after Christmas, the fiesta will already have begun in earnest. On the streets, the face of God may well appear. Rest assured he won't be a vengeful, merciless God, but more likely a mischievous, playful deity, given to partying all night and sleeping all day. Whichever carnival you decide to attend, you'll be positively enthralled at what goes on before your eyes. A word of warning: Carnival is much more enjoyable as a participant, so get cracking on that costume now and whatever you do, don't forget those new boots and an earring of gold (or big hair and stilettos if you are Tenerife bound). ■