

## Living Festivals

### Getting Into the Local Spirit

by Jim Kane of Culture Xplorers



*Families pray in a packed church during Paucartambo's annual celebration in honor of the Virgin of Carmen.*

Mangueira! The shout rose toward us through the dense crowd of Cariocas spilling over the sidewalk and into the street parade. My friend Michael and I were in the middle of it, being swept up by the tide of people in the Ipanema district of Rio, enjoying the city's world-famous Carnival.

"Mangueira!" This time I spotted the Brazilian couple waving to us, calling us over to their sidewalk table outside the popular Sindicato do Chopp beer parlor. They had spotted our bright pink and green shirts, with the name of one of the city's most beloved samba schools emblazoned prominently across the front.

Subtle the shirts were not, but then again neither is carnival. Plus, we wore them for a good reason. Before this trip, I had read Alma Guillermoprieto's book *Samba*, which describes the devotion the city's favela residents have for their beloved samba schools. Each

favela will spend months of preparation on the theme and choreography and each participating resident will spend months of hard-earned wages constructing the elaborate costumes needed to compete in—and win—the samba school parade during the week-long fête. Reading Guillermoprieto's book converted me into a fan of Mangueira, one of the perennial carnival samba school contenders.

On this night, our recognizable garb and knowledge of the Mangueira samba school served as our access pass to the local side of one of the world's most passionate public events. We received invitations for beer and spontaneous samba lessons as a band of musicians passed through the street. It was the catalyst for a spirited conversation with a couple of friendly Cariocas, made all the more lively by our forced mix of Spanish, Portuguese, and English.

Local festivals are a highlight of almost any trip abroad for those lucky enough to plan their visit around one, or just to stumble onto one by chance. These celebrations offer drama, beauty, energy, and, above all, open a doorway into the living culture of the place you're visiting. With research and careful preparation, you can increase your odds of passing through that doorway, into the local side of the celebration.

The following ideas may help in making the transition from observer to participant, in a way that both you and your hosts will appreciate.

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### Know Before You Go

Before traveling to participate in a festival, you should research the customs, history and importance of the event in its current cultural context. This is critical if you are to understand the expectation for behavior and dress that guide the festival. Knowing the meaning and purpose of the celebration within the culture will also make it more personally enriching.

### Arrive Early

If you have time, arriving to town a few days before the celebration begins is a great way to acclimate to the rhythm of the place. It provides a unique perspective on the preparation process, which is often as important to local residents as the celebration itself.

For the Day of the Dead celebration in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2003, I was able to arrive several days ahead of the main festival. As I walked through town each day, I felt the pulse of the city start to quicken.

One of my favorite memories of that special time was an invitation to visit my friend Pati's mother as she prepared her famous mole, a labor of love made only for special occasions. As we talked in her cozy home and drank hot chocolate and ate pan de muertos she showed me the seven types of chilies that she had just

fire-roasted to be hand ground before being combined them with charred bread, a handful of spices, and the dozen or so other ingredients that would be added over the course of two days to create a rich, black, and spicy edible magic.

Although there was a lot of work to be done, there was no hurry in her voice, only a real desire to invite me into their world, to help me understand that for the family, the most important part of the Day of the Dead tradition is indeed the love with which the ceremony is prepared. After all, the food, decoration, flowers, and cemetery visits are all acts that unite the family—both living and dead—for these two days of the year.



*A dancer belonging to the Qhapaq Qolla comparsa pays an annual graveside homage to a deceased member of the group.*

### Photograph for Others

This works best in smaller settings where some rapport and trust has been established between you and a local resident or friend. It should be clear that this advice is only for those situations where photography is widely accepted in the first place.

Often, tourists photograph (or video) a festival in places where access to camera equipment is very limited. If you can form a rapport with a participant in the festival, offer to photograph it for them. This will allow you greater and closer access to the activities, it will be a wonderful contri-

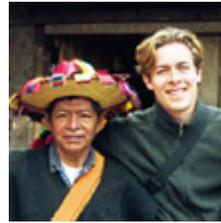
bution to their festival memories, and it will surely open the door to a friendship and connection for the following year.

### Make it an Annual Event

Almost all aspects of experiencing a festival like a local become easier if you return for a second, third, or fourth time. You'll find many advantages to in-depth, firsthand experiences—from building local friendships and trust, to knowing the best streets or balconies from which to watch the procession, to becoming comfortable with the social etiquette during the festival.

In October, I'll return to Mexico for the Day of the Dead celebration. This time, my small group and I will build and decorate our own alter, paying homage to our passed loved ones just as Oaxaca's residents do. This year, returning to

Oaxaca feels less like getting away and more like coming home. ✧



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## Join a Team



Splendid masks and traditional dances, and the stories they depict, are highlights at the Virgen del Carmen festival in Paucartambo, Peru.

There are a several ways to affiliate yourself as a “team member” at many festivals. The examples I’ll give are specific to Latin America.

Many celebrations have multiple groups, comparsas, blocos, or schools, competing for honors, popularity, and prestige. The Mangureira story about the Rio samba school mentioned in the article is one example, but there are many more across the continent..

In Salvador, Brazil, the city’s dozens of blocos attract hundreds or even thousands of fans, each affiliating themselves with a specific bloco—and allowed exclusive access to dance and party with the group—by buying or wearing unique, colorful T-shirts made just for the occasion .

- In Las Tablas, Panama, Calle Arriba (high street) has its annual battle of pageantry and competing street floats with Calle Abajo (low street). The celebration gets national, prime-time television coverage for both its elegance and folklore. Ask any local which team they’re supporting and you’ll hear a clear answer for one or the other.
- In Paucartambo, Peru there are 16 or so comparsas that lead the festive homage to la Mamacha Carmen each July. Although they don’t compete with each other, each comparsa attracts its own supporters, drawn to what the group represents in the unfolding history of the festival or due to ties of family and friendship. Over the course of four days, the comparsas not only dance and parade together, but worship, eat, and drink together, along with family, friends, and sponsors, who help defray the enormous costs of the celebration.

By learning about these different groups, their history and their fans, and by becoming a supporter of your favorite, you will have automatically entered into the celebration—no longer a passive observer but, instead, an impassioned participant. Your enthusiasm and knowledge is sure to be appreciated by other local fans. Don’t be surprised if you’re invited to join them for drinks, food, or dancing.