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### **CARNIVAL IN MARTINIQUE 2008 – Feb 2-6**

Carnival celebrations in such Mardi Gras capitals as Rio, New Orleans and Trinidad are sizzling hot right through Shrove Tuesday, but then fizzle out with the arrival of Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Not so in Martinique! While revelers elsewhere in the world are nursing hangovers and having their aching foreheads dabbed with ashes, the people of Martinique are just beginning the final, most exciting day of their celebration. Here Carnival runs at full tilt an extra 24 hours and, with more than 40 marching bands joining the festivities in 2008, Martinique is planning a party of a lifetime!

Mardi Gras connoisseurs from many lands, including the late Truman Capote, himself a native of New Orleans, have praised the uniqueness of the Martinique event. It's "as spontaneous and vivid as an explosion in a fireworks factory," wrote Capote in "Music for Chameleons," describing his visit to Carnival in Martinique.

### **"Rejoice Today, Repent Tomorrow"**

In a good spirit of mischief, and for as long as anyone can remember, the theme for Ash Wednesday in Martinique has been "Rejoice today, repent tomorrow." And to carry the mischief even further, about three weeks into Lent, the island comes up with a dawn-to-dusk reprise of Carnival in miniature, an official holiday known as Mi-Carême (literally "mid-Lent"). Fasting is suspended for 24 hours and the revelry starts all over again.

In 2008, Ash Wednesday is February 6, but Carnival itself begins in January, with parties taking place every weekend. The fete is infused, week after week, with a merry madness in the bigger towns and cities, especially Fort-de-France. In the days just preceding Ash Wednesday it reaches fever pitch.

On Sunday, February 3 (called Dimanche Gras or "Fat Sunday"), the island will be awchirl with daytime parades, the costumed marchers strumming strings, strutting to a Carnival beat. Puppets, called bwa bwa, done up in fantastic dress, are carried about, while nègres-gros-sirop – revelers whose bodies are covered with coal tar and sugarcane syrup – break through the crowds playfully frightening children. A major Carnival caricature is Marianne La Po Fig, garbed in dry banana leaves. "Fig" is the Creole word for banana, and Marianne represents the fragility of the fruit. At night, one

dances the beguine, which was born in Martinique and reveals the island's soul. Its rhythms, and those of the newer zouk, salsa, soca, calypso and reggae, accompany much that goes on over the following days.

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### **“Mock Weddings” on Monday, “Red Devils” on Tuesday**

By Monday, stores and offices are closed. This is the day for Martinican burlesque, for “Mock Weddings,” with men garbed as pregnant brides or blond-wigged floozies, and women done up as reluctant bridegrooms. (“All those men wearing their wives’ white wedding gowns!” exclaimed Capote.) At late-night masked balls, “drag” is the accepted costume de nuit.

Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras, February 5) is “Red Devils Day,” highlighted by glorious parades, with all eyes on armies of tots in brilliant red-devil costumes carrying homemade tridents. A fright mask of animal skin and horns is worn with a red cloth jumpsuit adorned with hundreds of glittering mirrors and small bells that jingle when in motion. The “Red Devils” dance until sundown; then their elders take over in a celebration that may seem like Carnival’s climax but is just a preview of more to come.

For the rest of the Christian world, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, is a time to pray. But in Martinique, it’s a time to play. And play they do. Local rums, reputedly among the world’s best, flow like water. Emotions run high and hot. It is the “Day of the She-Devils” (La Fête des Diablesses), when some 30,000 revelers gather to mourn the end of Carnival and the symbolic death of King Carnival. Only two colors are worn: black and white. “She-Devils,” their faces smeared with pale ash or white flour, traditionally wear embroidered waist petticoats and blouses, a black skirt and headscarf made with a damask white table napkin, mismatched black and white socks, shoes and gloves. For revelers not in mourning attire, any kind of crazy get-up is okay, so long as it’s black-and-white.

### **It’s Fun and It’s Safe**

It’s easy for tourists to take in all the fun of Carnival. They can safely join the parade or watch from bleachers set up on the sidewalks or from balconies overlooking the streets and squares. Truman Capote’s story describes “one marvelous marching group: 50 men carrying black umbrellas and wearing silk top hats, their torsos painted with phosphorescent skeleton bones; old ladies with gold-tinsel wigs and sequins pasted all over their faces.”

Focal point of the final goings-on is King Carnival, a giant colorful effigy known as Vaval, along with his alter ego, Bwa-Bwa, who towers over the floats and dancing procession. By now, humorous death notices of King Carnival have been announced in local media. Festivities continue as his funeral pyre is built. Dusk falls, then flames light up the night sky. As Vaval’s effigy is consigned to the fire, dancing reaches its apogee. Only when the flames die down does a calm settle

over the masses. With the burial of Vaval, they chant “Vaval, pas quitte nous”, which translates into “Carnival don’t leave us.”

Then it is over. At least for the time being. The mischief is revived three weeks later – with a 24-hour reprise of Carnival called Mi-Carême, or mid-Lent. There is no Vaval, but there are costumes and parades again, endless marching bands, plus much revelry and rum -- all in the spirit of Carnival, Martinican-style. In towns and villages throughout the island, there is dancing and dining galore. The favored food everywhere is “matoutou,” or curried crab, a dish that’s also popular just after Lent at Easter Monday beach picnics.

For more information on Martinique, contact the Martinique Promotion Bureau, 825 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10022, Tel: (212) 838 68 87-Fax (212) 838-7855, or on the Internet at <http://www.martinique.org>; e-mail: [info@martinique.org](mailto:info@martinique.org)

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