

CARNAVAL DE ORURO



Wara Vera Haydee



Carnival is a European tradition, initially frowned upon by the Church but gradually integrated by the Catholic Church. The carnival is celebrated seven weeks before Lent, the fasting time before Easter. The colonizers brought this tradition to South America. For the natives to maintain their traditions, they camouflaged their celebrations under different Catholic festivities. Still, in the rural areas, they build a “Mojon,” a high stake decorated with the first agricultural produce of the harvest. They dance around the stake venerating “Pachamama,” Mother Earth, and every year they compose new music, forming a symbiosis between the Andean beliefs and Catholicism.

El Carnaval de Oruro takes place in Bolivia, it's a religious and cultural festival celebrated in the mining city of Oruro since the 18th century. It's one of the biggest carnivals in the world. The carnival has become a popular tourist destination, especially since it's a symbol of Bolivian culture and named a masterpiece in the Oral and Intangible Heritage of UNESCO. Today the carnival is one of the most important events in Bolivia, followed by more than 400,000 spectators, over 28,000 dancers, about 10,000 musicians in 150 music bands.





The dance choreographically highlights the jumps and expanded movements. The devils represent the battle between good and evil.

The dance of La Diabla was the first dance in the carnival. The miners of the city worshiped the Virgin dressed up as devils.









For two days, fifty dance groups dance day and night in the three-mile-long dance parade that crosses the city.



Among the groups, you can distinguish 15 different traditional rhythms and dance styles, representing other regions of the country.

It takes months of preparation to make the custom-made and spectacular costumes, ornaments, and masks to perfect the fantastic choreographies.



Dancers of all ages participate in the carnival; children to retired people. The majority are Gen Z's and Millennials.





The carnival is important for the economy of Oruro. The rehearsals start in the beginning of November. Every Sunday the dance groups hire music bands and rehearse their dance steps and choreographs on the streets. Many of the musicians come from the countryside, obtaining an important income.



The fabrics, colors, materials, embellishments and appliques come in endless alternatives. The custom-made costumes and handmade masks provide plenty of work for designers, seamstresses, shoemakers and artisans.



During carnival time they have almost two weeks of continuous work in the different activities that take place. Every year all dancers wear new costumes, the designs are based on the dance style that their respective groups perform.

The craftsmanship of the masks is incredible. The masks not only cover the face; they are art creations; the masks can be up to three feet and weight up to 10 pounds, made of metal with numerous details.





Being part of the carnival is very popular among young Bolivians. The carnival means time for celebration, joy and entertainment. Young Bolivians are proud of their culture and traditions, and for many the carnival is the most important festivity of the year.



Like any other youngster, they listen to the latest pop hits or dance to reggaeton at the club but there is always a place for carnival rhythms and it's common for the DJ to put some carnival classics to hype the audience up.



Why do you dance in the carnival?

“I dance for devotion to the Virgin but also because I love to dance. I am proud of my roots and my culture. It is nice to represent my country and show our tradition dances and costumes.”

Laura Machicado

Carnival is very popular amongst the young people, why do you think?

“I believe because it’s a big national party, you meet lifelong friends, family members, you share the traditions and at the same time, you dance with faith asking the Virgin to make your wishes become true. It’s good for the body and soul!”

Adriana Blanco Usseglio



How much does it cost to participate in the carnival?

“It depends on which group you want to be part of. For example, my group, San Simon is one of the most expensive, the costumes cost between \$ 100 to \$ 300, plus the fee about \$200. Other groups are even more expensive with costumes that cost up to \$ 700, plus fees of \$300. But the good thing is that there are groups for every pocket and if you don’t have a lot of money, you can rent your costume for a cheaper price and be part of groups that have a fee of \$20.”

Geraldine Osinaga



Do you miss the carnival?

“I just want to see the beauty, the textures and the colors again. Listen to the melodies that sing ancient rhythms. The carnival is a festival full of faith, hope and joy. It’s a festival of traditions, music and dance that celebrates life.”

Paola Llosa Mejia



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Mariana Camacho Beltran

For the first time ever the carnival was suspended due to the pandemic, what are your thoughts on that?

“I’ve danced 20 years in a row, the carnival is part of my life. All of a sudden, no rehearsals, parties nor gatherings. San Simón (the name on the dance group) is a family to me and I haven’t been able to see them in over a year! We lost many group members due to covid and it breaks my heart that I’ll never see them again.”

Luis Colpari Perez



After four exhausting hours, dancers and musicians end the parade before entering the sanctuary. It is important to mention that Oruro's carnival is not a dance group competition. Every faithful dancer makes a promise to the Virgin to dance for at least three years in a row. After finishing the parade, the dancers enter the sanctuary; they kneel in front of the image of the Virgin Mary, where a priest awaits the groups to bless them and pray together.



PHOTOS

Alejandro Lopez

People interviewed

Laura Machicado

Geraldine Osinaga

Mariana Camacho Beltran

Adriana Blanco Useglio

Paola Llosa Mejia

Luis Colpari Perez