

## **Bringing the world to carnival**

There is much to commend in the creation of a tourist industry centred on carnival, not the least of which is the development of local business interests to support it. However, there are many sceptics whose doubts run a gamut - from questioning the value proposition of the infrastructural costs associated with seasonal tourism, to probing the method by which we will effectively sell our cultural wares to the world, and on to the damning critique of whether we currently have 'mas' worthy of sale.

### **What Mas?**

Critics of today's carnival point to the increasing lack of artistry involved in costume-making and the loss of traditional mas characters on the stage as evidence that the carnival of Trinidad and Tobago, or more particularly the carnival of Port of Spain, has lost its soul. These critics may also hold little hope for the return of the carnival of yesteryear, as the numbers of mas-playing participants and profit-making enterprises who 'like it so' seem greater than the numbers of spectators who wish for more.

If a utopian carnival can be described as a festival which caters both to those who welcome the joyful street party of modern-day mas and those who value the traditional artistic details, a way to create such a utopia could be to further commercialise carnival. This may seem counter-intuitive but it can be achieved by actively drawing "creative tourists" to our shores.

Creative tourists seek immersive, participative travel experiences, where they connect to a place and its people via interactive learning in the arts, heritage or unique character of their destination. The coastal city of Nelson in New Zealand is a centre for arts and crafts and its artists host year-round activities where tourists can meet them, visit their workshops and create their own art or for example, make their own wine. In Nelson, local art includes Maori carvings, glass bead making and ceramics. In Trinidad and Tobago, we have wire bending and costume-making, leather and wood craftsmanship. We have stick

fighting, pan playing, limbo dancing and tassa drumming. We are rich in possibilities for the provision of a participative travel experience.

However, in order for the tourist to have such a travel experience, we must first restore and cultivate that which is dying. There will need to be recruitment drives dedicated to finding those who can teach these skills as well as those who wish to learn them. The development of a labour force with these skill sets will have benefit beyond that of catering to the desires of a tourist base. It will charge citizens with skills from which they may make a profession and from which they can build a business. They can be the human resource that the carnivals of the diaspora look towards for authenticity and creativity in the mas.

Just as importantly, however, the increased presence of these skilled artists and the knowledge that their work is in demand and appreciated by others, will help to grow pride in our local culture so that the average citizen sees value in what they may have previously taken for granted. This pride could then flow into an increased trust and willingness within the private sector, to invest in and cultivate local enterprises surrounding the business of carnival.

### **Closing the Sale**

The annual influx of visitors for the season is made up of migrants, other citizens of the Caribbean carnival diaspora and those with the linkages of friends and family. The Tourism Development Company and all its earlier incarnations has either lacked the inclination or the budget to create international recognition of the Trinidad and Tobago carnival.

The conservative marketing of carnival, along with the comfortable cushion provided by an energy-based economy, has resulted in a festival which is best enjoyed in the company of a local. There are very few guidelines or signposts for the tourist who arrives in Port of Spain to experience carnival without the support of someone already 'in the know'. The likelihood of such a stranger experiencing a re-enactment of the Canboulay Riots or registering themselves in a J'Ouvert band is slim.

Full support of the agenda to “sell our mas”, will require not just a considerably weightier advertising budget, but significant capital for infrastructure. At present, Port of Spain simply does not have enough rooms to accommodate any greater influx of tourists than we are accustomed to. That said, should this become a real demand, it is undoubted that a thriving bed and breakfast, guest house or boutique hotel industry can develop to fulfil accommodation needs and in so doing create another avenue by which local business flourishes under a commercialised carnival.

An example of a public-private sector initiative could be the development of an online portal whereby a carnival visitor can look at the offerings of all the carnival bands, check the schedules of all events, from the fetes to the Monarch competitions all the way to Champs in Concert; and when they're ready, pay online.

However, other elements required for a basic infrastructural foundation fall squarely in the remit of public sector initiatives, such as more tourist information centres and a less arcane public transport system because though creative tourists seek immersion, they're not looking to get lost.

### **Luring Them In**

Once we succeed in welcoming the world to Trinidad and Tobago carnival, we can pique their interest in our many year-round festivals and events, both religious and cultural in nature. Most of these events seem tailor-made for experiential tourism, such as Tobago's crab and goat races, the celebration of Phagwa and Siparia's La Divina Pastora.

We have much to offer the world beyond carnival but it's an impressive place to start.