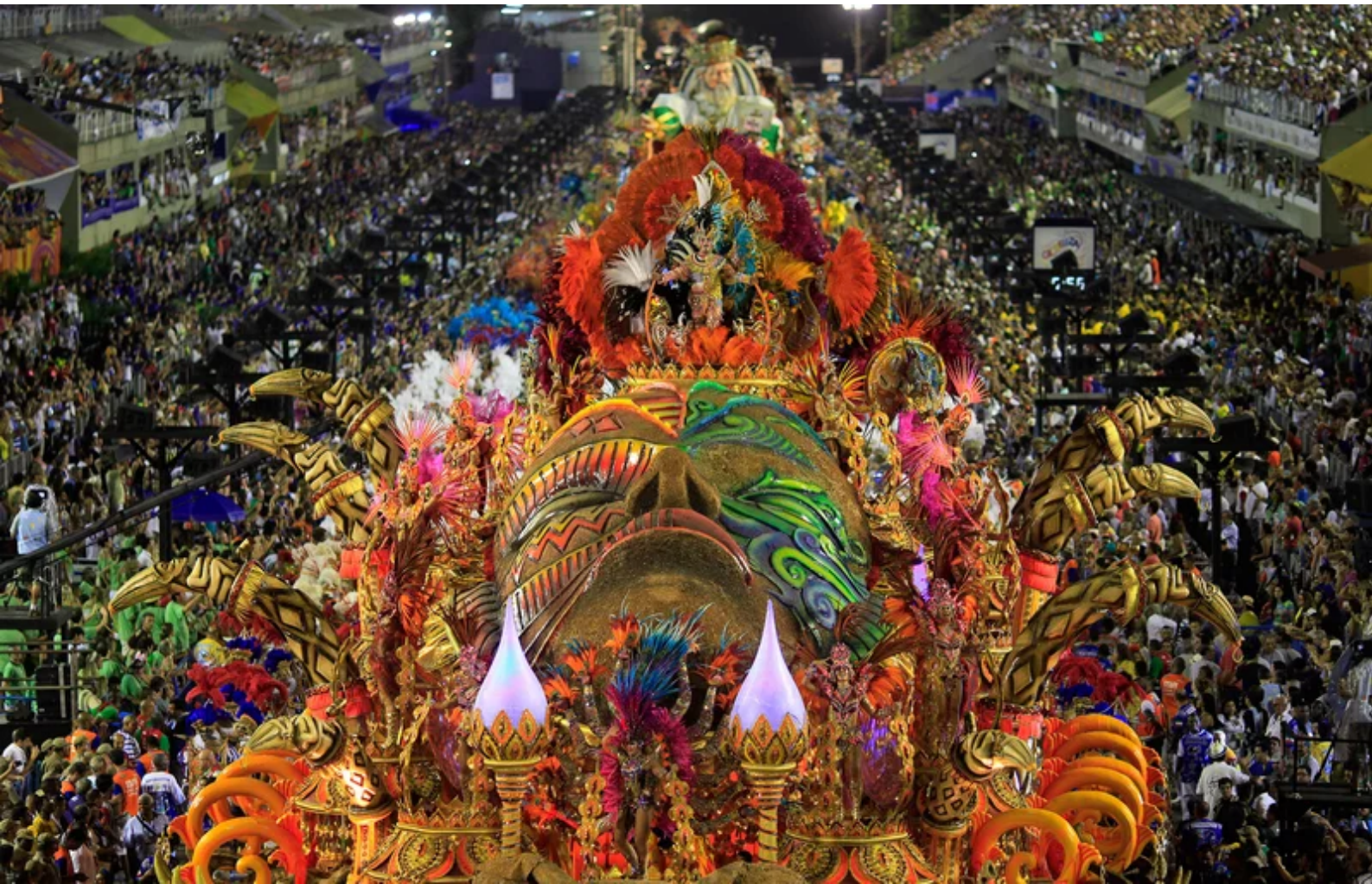


TIME

These 12 Facts Explain Why Rio's Carnival Is the World's Biggest Party



The Beija-Flor samba school parades during the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro on Feb. 17, 2015. Ricardo Moraes—Reuters

BY MATT SANDY / RIO DE JANEIRO FEBRUARY 5, 2016

Rio de Janeiro's carnival, which will be celebrated this weekend, is the biggest in the world. Here are 12 facts that you never knew about it:

- Its origins can be traced back to the 18th century. Introduced by Portuguese immigrants to Brazil and called the Entrudo, it was celebrated by lively crowds who threw lime-scented water at each another. It was mainly enjoyed by working people, whose costumes would mock the clothes and mannerisms of the rich.
- Carnival begins on the Friday when the mayor of Rio hands over the keys to the city to King Momo, a mythical figure who is said to lead the festivities.

The tradition goes back to 1933. The current incumbent, who received the keys on Friday, is like his predecessors, a jolly, fat man with a crown.

- There are no less than 587 street parties – or “blocos” – held in the city from mid-January to mid-February, which typically involve bands, costumes and revelers going wild. The largest, called the Cordão Da Bola Preta (Big Cord of the Black Ball) takes place in the city center on Saturday and draws about one million people.

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- Carnival has blocos for everyone, from those for geriatrics to those that cater to people with mental health problems. Among the blocos are the “Band of the Shrimp,” “Half a Dozen Crying Cats,” and “I am Normal, but the Coconut is Crazy.”
- Thousands of liters of beer are drunk during carnival but authorities are clamping down on those who urinate in the street. This year, the fine has increased from USD44 to USD131 and the city says there will be more than 25,000 portable toilets.
- Last year Brazil welcomed nearly a million tourists to the city for carnival, who are said to have spent US\$782 million, according to officials. Hotels and restaurants have long profited from spectacularly increasing prices in carnival season.
- Officially, carnival runs from Friday night to noon on Ash Wednesday. But in reality, many barely work from Christmas until the end of carnival, the Brazilian summer. Brazil has up to 13.5 national public holidays each year.
- The most spectacular part of carnival is when the city’s top samba schools compete at the sambodrome arena, with spectacular parades of floats and thousands of dancers that last for an hour each, and cost millions, until dawn.

- Last year's winner, Beija-Flor, were criticized for allegedly accepting a \$3.5 million donation from Equatorial Guinea dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema, who seized power in 1979 coup. Their winning theme was focused on the African country.
- Brazil's economic crisis has led to carnival cutbacks. Compared to last year, the Mangueira school will have six not seven floats and 4,000 not 5,000 dancers and musicians. But it will still be one of the greatest shows on earth.
- Each year television coverage on the dominant Globo network is defined by the Globeleza, a dancer covered in body paint prominent in the coverage. This year's star is Erika Moura, a 23-year-old dancer from the interior of the Sao Paulo state.
- Samba, the heart of carnival, was born in Rio de Janeiro in the early 17th century at Pedra do Sal in the old town. The site of a former slave market became a popular Afro-Brazilian meeting point and the first samba, a ritual Candomble dance to drums and handclaps, is believed to have been composed there.

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