

The Caribbean

THE CARIBBEAN | CULTURED TRAVELER

Festivals Where the Beat Makes You Move

By BAZ DREISINGER

Am I the only one who returns from the Caribbean acutely in need of rest? Blame the music. The region is drenched in genres I crave — reggae, calypso, zouk, and the list goes on — which means that night after night has me feeling like Odysseus battling the Sirens: cursed be that delicious din at the dancehall or the rum shop, destined to foil my fantasy of an early night's sleep.

Yet who can resist nights of all-star performances by Caribbean acts, many of whom rarely make it to our shores? Not to mention big-name American artists, under-the-stars settings, the party-never-ends élan of those daytime fetes and the scent of local food vendors grilling up goodness at outdoor stalls. Add to that the sheer electricity of what feels like an entire island caught up in the vim and vigor of it all, and the conclusion is inevitable: sleep, begone!

Below, the crème de la crème of annual Caribbean music festivals, from small-island shindigs to marathon productions luring thousands.

JANUARY

Love City Live St. John, U. S. Virgin Islands

Small island, small hustle-and-bustle — big vibes. Consider it your consummate starter fest: a long-weekend affair (in 2014, Jan. 24 to 26) featuring a local food fair, D.J.'d beach party, beautiful-people-filled powerboat cruise to neighboring Jost Van Dyke and climactic reggae concert showcasing Jamaican stars — including Beres Hammond, who is scheduled to appear next year — and up-and-coming Virgin Island musicians.

Information: experiencelovecitylive.com.

Jamaica Jazz and Blues Festival Trelawny, Jamaica

The name is disingenuous: There's barely any blues and only the faint flavor of jazz. You won't mind, though; in 17 years this three-night blockbuster festival, drawing tens of thousands from as far as Japan and as near as the tony suburbs of Kingston, has hosted R&B and reggae acts ranging from Harry Belafonte, Diana Ross and Celine Dion to the Jamaican pop star Shaggy and the reggae crooner Maxi Priest. The open-air stadium venue, in the verdant parish of Trelawny, is decked out in enough sexy décor — white tents, ambient lighting — to make you forget you're in a stadium. The festival takes place Jan. 30 to Feb. 1. Information: jamaicajazzandblues.com.



MARCH**Moonsplash
Anguilla**

This four-day festival, March 13 to 16 in 2014, takes place, technically speaking, on the upmarket island of Anguilla. But really it happens at the Dune Preserve, which might well be another country altogether: a funky beachfront bar fashioned from driftwood, teeming with nooks and crannies. Aging American hippies, Rastafarian locals, cap-and-camera-wearing tourists — all populate Planet Dune, as its known during Moonsplash, for shows by reggae acts like the Wailers, Toots and the Maytals and Gregory Isaacs. The powwow is presided over by Bankie Banx, owner of the Dune and himself a reggae-rocker in the vein of both Bobs: Marley and Dylan. Information: olaidbanks.wix.com/moonsplash.

APRIL**Tobago Jazz Experience
Tobago**

The twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago blessed us with three genres of music: steel pan, calypso and soca, a kind of calypso on steroids — the high-voltage soundtrack of modern Caribbean carnival. All three sounds are showcased at this weeklong, island-wide festival roving from sleepy seaside villages to the island's tourist-friendly capital, Scarborough. Bring a rag, a flag, a towel — anything with which to obey the artist onstage when he orders all to "jump and wave": soca's magic words, meant very literally. Information: tobagojazzexperience.com.

MAY**Saint Lucia Jazz & Arts Festival
St. Lucia**

The name is for real — you'll hear jazz at

this one. And everything else: This stalwart 12-day fest (April 30 to May 11 in 2014), opened 21 years ago, takes a kitchen-sink approach, delivering everything from reggae, soca and steel pan to American R&B, European jazz and French-Caribbean zouk. The stunning venues — a.k.a. the island itself — may be the ultimate draw: Pigeon Island National Monument, where the main shows take place, is a serene slice of picture-perfect Caribbeaness; parks in the rustic south of the island, home to free daytime concerts, showcase the majestic Piton mountains, the paramount headliners. Past performers have included Hugh Masakela, the Isley Brothers and Ne-Yo. Information: stluciazazz.org.

JUNE**St. Kitts Music Festival**

It prides itself on being a music festival, not a jazz or blues or reggae one, and this translates into three nights that run the generic gamut. No, really, the full gamut;

Clockwise from top center:

Lady Saw at Reggae Sumfest in Montego Bay, Jamaica; Phillip "Grasshopper" Pickering at Love City Live Concert in Cruz Bay, St. John; Bankie Banx at Moonsplash Festival in Anguilla; crowd at Love City Live; at the annual West Indian American Day Parade in Brooklyn; Reemah at Love City Live; Arturo Tappin at the Jamaica Jazz and Blues Festival, Trelawny; The Jacksons at the Saint Lucia Jazz and Arts Festival; Akon at the Saint Lucia Festival.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP CENTER: SHELBY SOBRIE/GETTY IMAGES; RAY A. LLANOS; SARGI PIZZELLOZZI/RAY A. LLANOS; KRISTEN LUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; RAY A. LLANOS; GLEBERT BELLARDI/REUTERS; VIVIANE SCORLONORA DE SILVA/REUTERS; VIKREW SCOM; ANDREA DE SILVA/REUTERS; VIA NEW SCOM

over the years I've witnessed an outright peculiar combination of lineups: the rapper Ja Rule and Billy Ocean? The exhilarating soca star Machel Montano and Michael Bolton? Yet the festival works, perhaps because of St. Kitts's intimate, community-oriented vibe: At show after show, crowds of locals and tourists flock to the outdoor stadium with an open mind, thrilled to partake in rhythm and melody, whatever package it arrives in. In 2014, the festival is from June 26 to 28. Information: musicfestival.hailup.com.

JULY**Reggae Sumfest
Montego Bay, Jamaica**

Are you a reggae fanatic? Then from the ends of the earth, thou shalt make thy way — pilgrimage-like, as I've dutifully done for a decade — to this be-all-and-end-all of Jamaican music shows, next year on July 13 to 19. Since 1992 it's attracted tens of thousands to a colossal field for performances by all the relevant names in reggae (including Shabba Ranks, Sean Paul and all the Marley sons) and its younger, hip-hop-flavored offspring, dancehall; at least a couple of big-deal hip-hop and R&B acts are also thrown in for good measure. Three nights of shows — staged on an enormous field encircled by food and drink vendors — wrapping up well after the sun has come up demands stamina, yes, but the reward is sweet: reggae nirvana. Information: reggaesumfest.com.

OCTOBER**Dominica World Creole
Music Festival
Roseau, Dominica**

This unique three-day fest — the Caribbean's only one with French-Caribbean music as its centerpiece — is trilingual: You'll hear English, French Creole and Jamaican patois. In an outdoor stadium in the heart of the island's capital, Roseau, you'll discover Dominican bouyon music, also known as jump up — which nicely captures what it sounds like: New Orleans, with a Caribbean accent. How many other festivals can claim two Haitian presidential candidates in past lineups: the rapper Wyclef Jean and the current president, Michel Martelly, back when he was the zouk singer Sweet Mickey? Information: wcmfdominica.com.

SUMMER IN THE CITY

New York

As a kind of American annex to the Caribbean, New York City knows a thing or two about recreating that festival vibe during summer months. June belongs to the all-day Groovin in the Park Festival (groovininthepark.com) in Roy Wilkins Park, in Jamaica, Queens, which fuses soulful American acts like Patti LaBelle with reggae and lovers rock — the Jamaican version of R&B. July is for jerk: At the Grace Jamaican Jerk Festival (jerkfestivalny.com), food — specifically the spicy flavor in its title — is the main event, but Jamaican artists also deliver stellar performances over the course of the day at Roy Wilkins Park. Labor Day, home to the West Indian American Day Parade — a.k.a. New York City Carnival — is one big music festival, at clubs and venues all weekend long. This year, though, was the debut of one that promises to be a staple: for three nights, the Caribbean Fever Irie Jamboree Music Festival (barclayscenter.com/events) transforms the Barclays Center in Brooklyn into three rhythm-soaked islands: Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad.