

Guinea-Bissau

Every year one of Africa's smallest nations plays host to a huge pre-Lent festival. Rose Skelton joins the party



their way from the furthest reaches of the country by any means necessary, coming to show off their musical cultures, and hopefully take home the substantial prize money on offer. Dances and songs much of the population didn't know existed come to town amid much pomp and ceremony, showcasing the country's ethnic diversity.

The Bijagos archipelago off Bissau's Atlantic coast is a group of starkly beautiful islands inhabited by some of the most isolated people on the continent. Once a year, competitors take wooden dugout canoes through the dangerously choppy waters and arrive in the city ready to parade in front of the judges. The Bijagos people, who won the competition in 2007, arrive in the city semi-naked, their bodies rubbed in deep-red palm oil so that their skin glistens beneath straw skirts and the rows of seashells strung around their bodies.

The Bijagos girls, clutching cracked wooden drums and singing as their shell-bound feet rattle a rhythm up the city's main street, are followed by a troop of enormously muscular men wearing helmets made from the blown-up, spined husk of a boxfish and a pair of pointed cow horns. Their bodies are covered in leaves, and their songs tell of their now-defunct custom of fighting a rival until one of the pair is dead. A tune, more like a cry, wails out from curved cow horn pressed to the lips of one of the group, and a narrow, more than two metre long drum, called the *cangueran etona*, keeps the drumming and singing in time. Another troupe of young men appears behind them, one of whom explains that the song is designed to attract women – in this, a culture where women choose their husbands, and the husbands are obliged to accept.

As night falls, the dance groups peel away and the thousands of people who walked in from the suburbs to watch the parade make their way back through the suffocatingly dark streets. Watching out for pot-holes which would easily swallow me up, I walk the few kilometres to one of the hottest night spots in town: the forecourt of a petrol station which has been turned into a live music venue and appropriately beer-drenched bar. As I walk in, past the vicious-looking armed police who look greedily around for any sign of trouble, I hear my name and the singer from the truck is paying homage to journalists from the stage. I buy myself a beer and get ready for another night in Bissau. ●

anging on to anything I can – in this case an enormous speaker – the truck lurches around a roundabout, throwing a trombone player sideways. Knocking into the drum kit, he finds his feet and blasts a new tune into the racing crowd. The two singers, clutching their microphones, sing into the scrum, adding a line about journalists in my honour. Exhaust fumes all but smother me but I manage to keep on dancing. This is, after all, one of the wildest and quirkiest parties on earth, and I've got to keep up.

Guinea-Bissau's carnival, held in Bissau, the capital of this tiny West African country, falls on the four days preceding Lent. Once a Portuguese colony, the country has held on to the catholic date even though less than ten per cent of the population call themselves Christians; the majority of people in this sparsely populated country of forests and islands are Muslim or animist, worshipping nature spirits. Carnival, no longer a religious festival, is now a fiercely competitive parade of the country's extraordinarily diverse cultures and a very good excuse for a party.

Clockwise from above: a Bijago drummer, skin glistening from palm oil; running to catch the spectacle; on board the riotous music truck; playing the *cangueran etona*

I am riding the carnival truck, a no-frills machine pulsating with the happy sounds of the Senegalese musicians brought over the border for the party. Amidst *sabar* drummers, the brass section and a plethora of guitarists who keep the riffs coming thick and fast, is a maze of dangerous-looking

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electrical cables and wires that keep the sound pumping out into the dusty streets. There's no room to move, only room to dance on the spot as the truck, leading a line of bands playing reggae, hip-hop and Guinean *gumbe*, trawls the city's residential back streets. It is musical mayhem, disorganised, dusty, not to mention dangerous, but it is satisfyingly excessive – just what a party in West Africa should be.

On day three of the carnival the parade takes on a very different tone. The trucks come pouring in, but this time they are carrying masses of people dressed in all kinds of costumes, some in very little at all. These are the groups that have spent days making

