



A Garifuna dancer strikes a pose at the annual junkanoo dance contest, a Caribbean tradition.

# Garifuna Dancing in Dangriga, Belize

By Lebawit Lily Girma

**S**haking themselves, arms half raised, the dancers move toward the drummers. Their feet and bodies respond to each beat of the pulsing drums. Chanting women and the cheers of the crowd drown out the lapping of the ocean waves, only a few yards away. I wiggle to the front through throngs of smiling Belizeans to get a better view.

The dancers are wearing pink and white masks. Shooting up from the masks are tall, yellow feathers. Their clothing is white—long-sleeve shirts and cropped pants, with suspender-like pink ribbon straps across their chests. The cowry shells strapped above their knees shake at every move.

I heard about this traditional junkanoo dance contest while traveling in Belize. I had no idea what to expect but I knew I wanted to experience the African side of this Caribbean country. And there's no better place than Dangriga, where you'll find the Garifuna people—descended from Africans, Caribs and Arawaks.

The junkanoo dance is said to have been started by the Garifuna to mock their English slave owners—hence the European features of the masks. The name derives from an African slave named “John Canoe” in the 17th century. Also known as the Wanaragua dance, you'll find similar traditions across the Caribbean.

After a two-hour drive from Belize City, I arrived at Dangriga's “Y-Not-Island”—a seaside basketball court transformed into

a makeshift dance floor. This was the second year of the contest, created by the National Institute of Culture and Heritage to help preserve the Garifuna culture.

A great base from which to explore jungle trails or island hop among the Caribbean cays, Dangriga is small, but there's a lot going on. It's home to musicians and artists, and hosts plenty of festivals. If you're hungry, there are restaurants to suit every budget and you can get delicious barrel-barbecued chicken with a heaped side plate for \$2.50. ■

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