

What is Garifuna Settlement Day?

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On November 19th the celebrations commence to mark the arrival of the first Garifuna to Belize in 1832. The festival marks the arrival of the Garifuna people to Dangriga. A mixture of African music and religion with native Carib language and traditions blends into a vibrant, tasty, stimulating experience.

Garifuna Settlement Day, is celebrated throughout the country, but especially in Dangriga, the cultural capital of Belize. There is traditional Garifuna and Belizean food, live punta music, games and Jonkunu dancers. In addition they reenact 'The Landing.'

The Garifuna are a people produced from the merging of two cultures. The history goes that two slave ships were shipwrecked in the Caribbean near the island of St. Vincent. The slaves escaped the sinking boat and reached the shores of the island, where they were welcomed by the Caribs, who offered their protection. Their intermarriage formed the Garifuna people. The Garifuna adopted the Carib language but kept their African musical and religious traditions.

In 1795 the Garifuna people rebelled against the British. The British punished them for their insolence by deporting them to the island of Roatán, off Honduras. According to legend, the Garifuna hid cassava, a mainstay of their diet, inside their clothes, where it stayed alive watered by the sweat of the tightly packed captives. They planted the cassava on Roatán, where it grew abundantly. In 1832, many Garifuna left Honduras after a civil war there and settled in Dangriga, Belize on November 19th. Garifuna Settlement Day began to be celebrated in Dangriga in 1941.

The matriarchal structure of Garifuna culture reflects their West African roots. The mother is the center of her family, which in turn is the basic unit of society. The culture's ancient wisdom is passed down through women, and it is even believed that they can communicate with the dead. Garifuna believe the dead can directly influence the living, and the women are periodically 'possessed' by relatives eager to talk. This is done at a formally organized encounter called a *dugu*. They also believe they can direct the forces of good and evil through spells.

The Landing

Each year in Belize on Garifuna Settlement Day, locals reenact 'The Landing' by slipping out to sea in boats, then riding the surf onto shore, waving palm fronds and banana leaves to symbolize the cassava that sustained their ancestors. This ritual is rich in music and dance.

Dining opportunities in Dangriga include Garifuna dishes with fish, chicken, pork, corn and manioc or cassava, and wonderfully prepared coconuts. In the town, one can find original works of art, palm crafts, Garifuna handmade dolls, calabash maracas and drums, which their makers say last for a century.

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