

Jamaican Easter Traditions Steeped in Culture and History

While American families hide colored eggs and eat chocolate bunnies, Jamaica's tradition of eating Easter bun and cheese, fortune telling and Carnival are the ways this island celebrates this holiday period.

COMMON EASTER TRADITIONS Easter egg predictions

One of Jamaica's long established practices is the setting of an egg to predict one's future. It is said if you place an egg white in a container of water on Holy Thursday night by Good Friday you will see your future. This is determined by the pattern which was formed by the coagulating egg white. If the shape formed in the container is a ship or aircraft, it means travel. The custom of offering Easter eggs, either chocolate or hard-boiled and colored, dates back well beyond the early years of Christianity to the most ancient pagan traditions. In fact, many cultures have also put their own twist to the egg story.

Easter bun
In Jamaica, this is the time of year when people tend to eat bun and cheese in abundance. Though it is not clear how the cheese aspect of the tradition started, bun eating has been around for centuries. The popular Jamaican Easter bun, a tropical version of the English hot cross bun is generally eaten with processed cheddar cheese. Supermarket shelves are piled high with these sweet loaves, spiced with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, and bursting with raisins, currants and other dried fruit. For those interested in making their own bun, see recipe below. Eating buns during Easter is not unique to Jamaica. In earlier times Greeks and Egyptians ate small cakes or buns in honor of the 'queen of heaven', the goddess Easter as early as the days of Cecrops, the founder of Athens, 1,500 years before Christ. Hot cross buns were first baked by the Saxons in honor of Easter. Early church fathers, to compete with the pagan custom of baking ox-marked cakes, baked their own version, using the same dough as the bun made for Easter. But they had to be discreet in their conversion methods. So they reinterpreted the ox-horn symbol as a crucifix, and gave the buns out to new converts attending mass. And again, they did a good job of disguising their motives.

Easter lily
Most churches and homes in Jamaica are decorated with Easter lilies, which seem to appropriately bloom on Easter Sunday. The lily is a symbol of purity, innocence and virtue because of its delicacy of form and its snow-white color and White Trumpet or Easter Lily has come to symbolize the resurrection of Jesus Christ. History, mythology, literature, poetry and the world of art are rife with stories and images that speak of the beauty and majesty of the elegant white flower. Often called the "white-robed apostles of hope," lilies were found growing in the Garden of Gethsemane after Christ's agony.

Physic nut tree
Another Jamaican Easter myth is the bleeding physic nut tree which usually occurs on Good Friday at noon. This is an often repeated story in rural Jamaica. It is said that on Good Friday, if you cut the tree, the sap that oozes would be a red substance that signifies the blood of Jesus. It is also believed that the crucifixion was carried out on a similar type of tree.

Fish especially Sprat

Food is an important part of Jamaica's Easter tradition. Another popular custom is the exclusion of meat from the diet for the Lenten period (40 days after Ash Wednesday). Many still observe this tradition and refrain from cooking on Good Friday, with fish as the main staple of nearly every household. It is prepared in every conceivable way: fried, roasted, steamed, grilled, escoveitched and jerked.

Carnival
While Easter is a solemn time for many, there are those who opt to celebrate in another form and choose to participate in Carnival in Jamaica. Culminating during Easter week, Carnival has become a major event on the Jamaican party calendar, attended by thousands of revellers. Kingston's biggest annual event is jam-packed with costumed parades featuring local and regional calypso and soca artists bringing the music of the region to the city's streets.