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# Islands in *the Sun*

The clichéd description ‘tropical paradise’ doesn’t do justice to the sensational Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago, reports a captivated Clive Nicholls

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

Nylon Pool, named by Princess Margaret: knee deep, crystal clear water, a mile off shore from Pigeon Point



“The music never stops: the partygoers are still ‘riding the rhythm’ more than 12 hours later. They certainly know how to throw a street party”



Clockwise: Carnival time in Plymouth; Tobago's Caston Cupid belts out his calypso *Scissors Cut*; old and new in Trinidad: Stollmeyer's Castle and the futuristic Academy of Performing Arts; visitors to the Caroni Swamp, a spectacular wildlife haven; a glass bottom boat over the reef

JUST A mile out from Pigeon Point, the sea shallows rapidly. The boat skipper hauls the big outboard out of the water before the propeller hits the bottom and we glide over the seabed just two feet below. Crystal-clear water covers a bed of bright coral sand, all tinted with a touch of turquoise, as the sun wins the battle with the passing clouds. Passengers jump into the sea; it's knee-deep, as warm as bathwater and is said to have therapeutic properties. Magnificent

frigate birds ride the thermals above us, wondrous fish dart about in the shallow waters below. This is Nylon Pool, the sea is the Caribbean and we are just off the shore of Tobago. It's an amazing scene as other boats join us and dozens of holidaymakers and locals alike enjoy these wonderful waters. Nylon Pool was given its name by Princess Margaret and it's said that in the right tidal conditions, and if you know the way, you could walk on the seabed to Tobago's beach without having to swim. No one has been crazy enough to try it in

recent years and we are all happy with the boat... Just half an hour earlier and a few hundred yards away, we were snorkeling over Buccoo Reef. The sea is shallow and, as the sun streams through the waters, the reef comes alive. Parrotfish zip among the corals, angelfish flash their brilliant colours and the grasses waft in the current. If you don't fancy snorkeling, the boat has a glass bottom. Take a cool beer and watch the undersea world pass you by as you relax in the shade of the lower deck. On the way back in, the boat passes just

off Pigeon Point. The beach looks magnificent and I promise myself a few hours there before I leave Tobago. We arrive at Store Bay, the boat backs up to the beach and the passengers wade ashore. This is not the sort of boat trip that you dress up for. It's brilliant but basic. At Store Bay, there's a busy beach, a permanent market and takeaway food outlets. After a few hours at sea, the grilled chicken and rice with a side of potato salad goes down a treat. I'm staying on the north-east of the island at the Blue Waters Inn overlooking

Batteaux Bay. The minibus ride is a bit bumpy, a bit twisty, but in 20 miles I cover the length of the island, passing through villages, idyllic coves and thick forests, giving a taste of Tobago. My room is on the waterfront, my door barely 20ft from the lapping waves. Across the bay is Goat Island and I can see the former home of James Bond creator Ian Fleming. They say money can't buy happiness but it certainly bought him a home in a very special location, and it's hard to see how you could be unhappy there. As I

wonder about Fleming's lifestyle, I reflect on my holiday so far. I have the same view he had, I'm sipping a rum punch as he probably did, the sea is hardly stirring the soft, sandy beach and, at 9pm, the temperature on my veranda is in the eighties. Life is good. Tobago, and neighbouring Trinidad, which I'll visit later, is not just about warm seas and fabulous beaches. There's heritage, tradition, tropical forests and – oh yes, carnival time. The carnival in Plymouth on Tobago's north shore starts at 5am – J'Ouvert, from



Clockwise: Walking in the rain forest; seafood is a Tobago specialty; order your outfit for next year's carnival at Harts; the museum in Port of Spain; the spectacular Argyle Waterfall; street food in Scarborough and Miss Jemma and daughter Sherine of Jemma's Sea View Kitchen



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the French jour ouvert, meaning daybreak. So by the time I join the Masquerade Theatre (street procession) in mid-afternoon, the locals have already been celebrating for many hours. It's perhaps not as organised as the massive festival in Port of Spain, Trinidad, held earlier in February, but the willingness of the locals to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the spirit of the event, the pounding Caribbean music and

free-flowing beer make it contagious and it's impossible not to be drawn in. It's full-on fun. Street food is the order of the day; the chicken looks fantastic but I go for the prawns on skewers. It's rough-and-ready eating but the taste is out of this world. There's time for just one more beer before I leave the party. The music never stops: the partygoers are still 'riding the rhythm' more than 12 hours later. They certainly know how to

throw a street party. Late into the evening, the Calypso Monarch Competition takes place. Ten entrants take to the stage to belt out their own calypsos before being judged by a panel of the great and the good. My favourite, and I suspect the crowd's too, is Caston Cupid, dressed as a giant pair of scissors, giving his rendering of his own song *Scissors Cut*. He is brilliant, despite his scissors outfit falling apart by the end of the number.

Caston comes second but maybe the fact that he is a previous winner puts him at a disadvantage. For me the pace slows the next morning. It's a walk in the rainforest – 10,000 acres of woodland dating back to 1776 and home to the Gilpin Trail that linked the Atlantic to the Caribbean before the road was built in the Fifties. Unfortunately, many of the original trees were destroyed when Hurricane Flora

hit the island in 1963 but it's still a magical experience. My guide, Darren Henri, is a forestry expert; he even trained at Kew Gardens for a while, but his skill at bird spotting is amazing. He points out birds that would take me minutes to find, even following his instructions. Our best 'spot' is the very rare white-tailed sabre-wing hummingbird that is only just recovering from near-extinction in the

Sixties and Seventies. He also has a great knowledge of insect life in the forest. I can almost feel sorry for the tarantula spider as Darren explains how the tarantula wasp first paralyses the spider before laying its eggs in him, leaving them to hatch. Yuk! Lunch is at Jemma's Seaview Kitchen, Speyside, with great food and wonderful views across the bay, and it's not expensive. In the afternoon I visit the village of

The wonderful beach at Pigeon Point; go back in time at the museum in Port of Spain; heritage games on the green at Mason Hall



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◀ Mason Hall. As part of the Tobago Heritage Festival, they recreate ‘Ole Time Tobago Games’ on the village playing field. One girl teaches the boys a thing or two about how to handle a cricket bat, but the local kids do struggle a bit with the concept of musical chairs; they are better at soap-box car racing.

*The other half...*

If you travel to Tobago, it make sense to visit the other half of the country, Trinidad. It’s a much bigger island, just

seven miles off the coast of Venezuela and a 15-minute flight from Tobago. The flights are regular, great value for money (about £25) and the aircraft are top-notch. Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, is a biggish city (160,000 population) and has the hustle, bustle and history that you would expect.

The carnival here is huge; 60,000 join the parade, and the festival runs between February 22 and March 1 in 2017, but celebrations begin just after Christmas. They take partying seriously here. I

visited Harts, one of the major companies producing outfits for the carnival. The theme for them next year is the film Avatar.

The costumes don’t come cheap – you can expect to pay anything from £500 to £1500 – but for that they’ll look after you on the day and you can use their mobile toilets that join in the parade!

So if you fancy dancing and marching for 12 hours non-stop wearing nothing but bra and pants and a few feathers, you can order online – the same applies to woman

as well! Trinidad, a Spanish colony since 1498, was invaded by the British in 1797 and remained a colony until independence in 1962.

Some of our influence was good, some less so. We were involved in the slave trade and the British governor from 1797 to 1803, Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Picton, was tried and convicted of the torture of Luisa Calderon, but the conviction was later overturned at a retrial. You know what they say, however: “There’s no smoke without fire.”



The National Museum and Art Gallery charts the country’s history, Picton’s fall from grace, the slave trade and, on a more positive note, the rise in the production of oil and natural gas that is the mainstay of the economy. Sitting alongside the museum, in a slightly uneasy mix of old and new, is the futuristic building of the Academy of Performing Arts.

Port of Spain has historic buildings, it has new buildings, but it is the culture that is mesmerising... laidback, chilled-out, but ready to party. On one of the main

traffic routes out of the city I find Tony wielding a machete. He slices the tops off coconuts so you can drink the milk. A poster promises that the milk will: help weight loss, reduce blood sugar, increase circulation, burn fat faster, improve heart health and skin condition, and cure hangovers. I’m not sure that I believed it all but a coconut and a straw only cost £1 and I was thirsty, and it fixed that.

Just out of town, the road climbs into the hills. Fort George sits in a commanding position with great views over the coast and



“Magnificent frigate birds ride the thermals above us, wondrous fish dart about in the shallow waters below”

Clockwise: The beach at Blue Waters Inn; overlooking Port of Spain from Fort George; the Temple in the Sea with Krishna inside; the healthy coconut water and the Indo-Caribbean Museum



## Passport to Trinidad and Tobago

### Getting there

■ British Airways: ([www.britishairways.com/Tobago](http://www.britishairways.com/Tobago)). Flights from £567 return.

### Where to stay

■ Tropikist Beach Hotel and Resort, Crown Point, Tobago. Tel: 001 868 639 8512, website: ([www.tropikist.com](http://www.tropikist.com)). Prices from £84

■ Blue Waters Inn, Speyside, Tobago. Tel: 001 868 660 4341, website: ([www.bluewatersinn.com](http://www.bluewatersinn.com)). Prices from £128

■ L'Orchidee, St Anne's, Port of Spain, Trinidad. Website: ([www.trinidadhosthomes.com](http://www.trinidadhosthomes.com)). Prices from £92.

### Tours

■ NG & Co Nature Tours, website: ([www.newtongeorge.com](http://www.newtongeorge.com)).

### Find out more

■ Tourist Board websites: ([www.gotrinidadandtobago.com](http://www.gotrinidadandtobago.com)) and ([www.tobagostyle.travel](http://www.tobagostyle.travel))

■ Twitter: ([tnt\\_steelypan](https://twitter.com/tnt_steelypan))

■ Facebook: Adventures of Steely Pan

■ For holiday packages, see: ([www.bluebaytravel.co.uk](http://www.bluebaytravel.co.uk)).

Port of Spain. Built in 1804 by the British governor Sir Thomas Hislop, it contained cannons for protection against the Napoleonic fleet. No attack ever came and the gun battery and the fort never saw action but, with the later addition of the Signal Station, it provides a well-preserved snapshot in time.

As Trinidad developed in the 1800s, a shortage of labour on the plantations forced them to look abroad. From 1845 150,000 workers made the journey from India with five-year work contracts. They

were eventually offered Crown land as an incentive to stay and today almost 40 per cent of the inhabitants of Trinidad are descendants of the Indian immigrants. An Indo-Caribbean Museum charts the impact that the influx of migrant workers had on Trinidad.

One worker – Sewdass Sadhu, a Hindu labourer – built a temple on a sugar plantation without permission. It was knocked down and he was charged with trespass. Not to be put off, he decided to build his temple in the sea at Waterloo.

Using his bike and buckets, he built a causeway out to his site in the Gulf of Paria. The authorities and businesses stepped in to help, and the temple you see is inspired by Sadhu but finished with public support. Everyone is welcome and the temple has a wonderful calming atmosphere. The Murti (religious statues) are particularly special.

The Caroni Swamp is a wildlife haven. There are a few mosquitoes around so I have a quick spray of insect-repellant before my boat trip through the wetlands. Exotic birds, strange fish, snakes and

monkeys are all there but it was the national bird of Trinidad, the fabulous scarlet ibis, that I really wanted to see.

A flash of red through the trees was our first sighting, then another flying high over the river, then several at a distance.

The colour is unbelievable, a red so intense it can only be created by nature. The ibis is about the size of a small heron so it's hard to imagine a more striking bird – another one ticked off.

As I take off on my flight back to Tobago, Port of Spain slides away to the

left and the land looks very green and the sea very blue. In the morning I'll fulfill my date with the beach at Pigeon Point.

The sun is high so I find a shady spot – rum punch is the order of the day. Out at sea I spot the boats on the reef, and here on the beach the palm trees cast their star-shaped shadows on the white sand.

The description 'tropical paradise' undersells what I'm seeing and what I'm feeling. It's a magical way to spend my last few hours before my flight home. Time for another rum punch, I think...