

# Cast your cares away and Tobago

We venture to the island of Tobago and find respite from the usual tourist crowds.



BY ANDREA YU



PUBLISHED: TUESDAY 10TH MARCH 2020

FEATURES

**M**Y ALARM GOES off at 6:45 a.m. on a Sunday morning. The early wake-up call is necessary, I'm told, to reach the day's first destination before the midday heat sets in. We're headed to the Main Ridge Forest Reserve on the eastern half of the island of Tobago. But by the time I hop into our transport van an hour later, it's already a steamy 29 C. While fanning sweat-drenched clothing, I remind myself that it's February and the dead of winter back home in Toronto. Surely, this is the better option of the two.



After an hour-long ride on a comically winding series of roads that climb upwards, I pull open the door and am relieved to be met with a wave of cool, refreshing mountain air.

I also lay eyes on our nature guide Newton George. An experienced ornithologist, George is 60-years-old but continues to host over 300 tours of the rainforest a year. Like a caricature of a birdwatcher, George is decked out in a multi-pocketed fishing vest and a ball cap with a pair of binoculars dangling from his neck. He's got a green laser pointer ready in his hand to flag any items of interest. If there is a person I trust to take me through the birding capital of the Caribbean, this is him.



Even into his sixties, Newton George is working as an active tour guide with an average of six excursions into the rainforest every week

© Alexa Fernando

We step into the rainforest, and with the shade of the tropical greenery, the temperature dips another few degrees. My heart rate also ticks down as I become enveloped in palm fronds and ferns. A constant breeze rustles the leaves as birds twitter in the distance – a symphony of nature fit for a spa or relaxed yoga session.

George stops intermittently to identify a pattern of chirps and the winged species associated with it. He then points to deep horizontal tunnels dug into sides of a dirt mound where birds like colourful momots and the pointy-beaked jacamar are known to nest. After the birds vacate, a species of spider, the whip scorpion (it looks as horrifying as it sounds, but I'm told they're harmless to humans) moves in and sets up house. George uses a metre-long stick to try and rile up a spider to show us. He seems disappointed not to find one but, deep down, the arachnophobe in me is relieved.

The Main Ridge Forest Reserve owes its verdant state partly to being the oldest legally protected forest reserve (established in 1776) in the western hemisphere. At this time, Tobago was a British colony but was famously fought over by French, Spanish, Dutch and even Latvian settlers, changing hands a total of 31 times. By 1889, Tobago and its neighbour Trinidad were combined as a single British colony and the twin-island republic gained independence in 1962.



The golden-sand beach at Parlatuvier Bay attracts swimmers and snorkellers with its semi-sheltered water

It was the Brits who established plantations in the region, notably for sugar cane, indigo and coconut. After devastating hurricane Flora wiped out much of the island's agricultural infrastructure and crops in 1963, the government encouraged a move to other industries like tourism and energy.

George stops intermittently to identify a pattern of chirps and the winged species associated with it. He then points to deep horizontal tunnels dug into sides of a dirt mound where birds like colourful momots and the pointy-beaked jacamar are known to nest. After the birds vacate, a species of spider, the whip scorpion (it looks as horrifying as it sounds, but I'm told they're harmless to humans) moves in and sets up house. George uses a metre-long stick to try and rile up a spider to show us. He seems disappointed not to find one but, deep down, the arachnophobe in me is relieved.

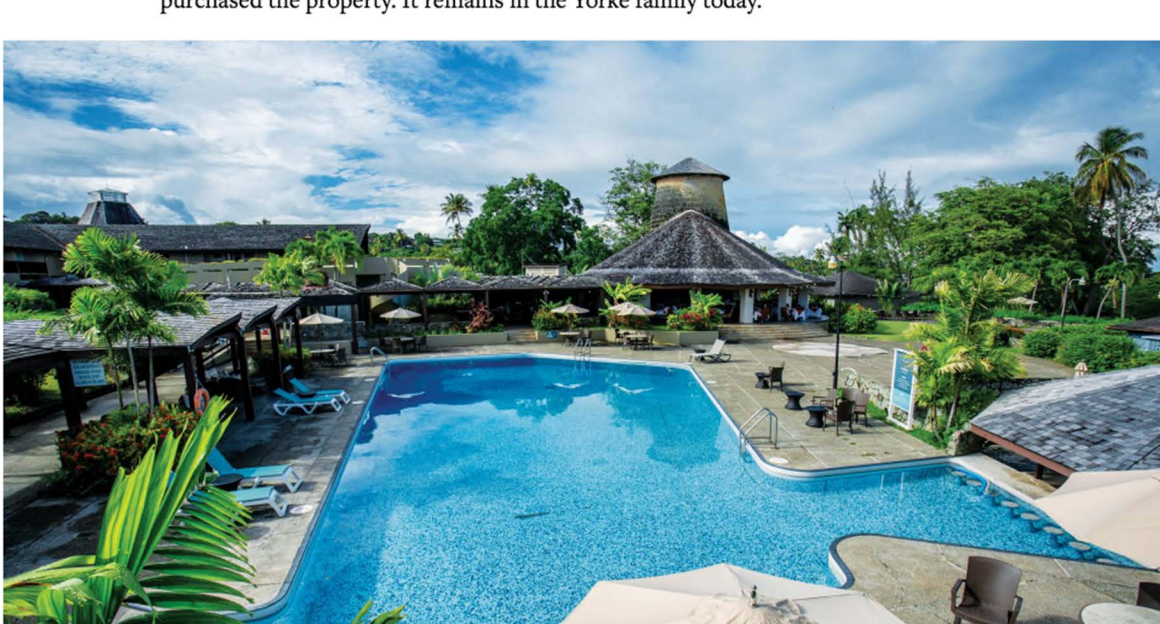
The Main Ridge Forest Reserve owes its verdant state partly to being the oldest legally protected forest reserve (established in 1776) in the western hemisphere. At this time, Tobago was a British colony but was famously fought over by French, Spanish, Dutch and even Latvian settlers, changing hands a total of 31 times. By 1889, Tobago and its neighbour Trinidad were combined as a single British colony and the twin-island republic gained independence in 1962.



The golden-sand beach at Parlatuvier Bay attracts swimmers and snorkellers with its semi-sheltered water

It was the Brits who established plantations in the region, notably for sugar cane, indigo and coconut. After devastating hurricane Flora wiped out much of the island's agricultural infrastructure and crops in 1963, the government encouraged a move to other industries like tourism and energy.

But you'll find plenty of remnants of that economic culture in Tobago today. In Speyside, on the northeastern end of the island, there are the remnants of a water wheel used to power rollers that squeezed the sugary juice from the cane. And my home base for the trip, the **Mount Irvine Bay Resort**, is a former sugar plantation, while the adjacent golf course occupies land previously used as a coconut plantation. It's also one of the few hotels on the island owned by a local Tobagonian, Jacqueline Yorke-Westcott. And in an ironic twist of fate, her destitute grandfather was once jailed for trespassing and picking coconuts off of the plantation to feed his family. A generation later, his son, Jacqueline's father, was a self-made businessman and purchased the property. It remains in the Yorke family today.



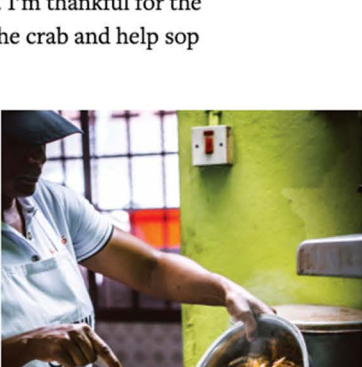
Mount Irvine Bay Resort has tranquility and history

© Alexa Fernando

The old sugar mill, once Tobago's largest, is now the resort's restaurant. Former slave barracks are now staff quarters and the sugar factory complex now houses an on-site spa. An ancient canon and a boiler, each covered in rust after centuries of neglect, lie next to a walkway near an old brick wall that marks the former border of the property. This is far from your cookie-cutter Caribbean resort.

Coconuts, while no longer grown in the area or in abundance on the island, still play an important role in Tobago's identity – especially its cuisine. Coconut milk seems to make its way into all the best dishes I've eaten on the island and I'm told by Meesha Trim, a local chef, that simmering any protein in coconut milk and spices makes it delicious. After a bite of her curry crab and dumplings, I'm inclined to agree. This signature dish of Tobago features segments of crab leg cooked in a yellow curry spiced with ginger, garlic, chives and a cilantro-like herb native to the island called shado beni. The resulting curry is more flavourful than it is spicy. I'm thankful for the flat half moons of gratifyingly chewy dumpling that accompany the crab and help sop up any surplus curry gravy. This is not a sauce to be wasted.

My appetite may have something to do with that day's adventures: A short boat tour around the southwestern end of the island, the highlight of which was a visit to Tobago's famed Nylon Pool. It's 20 metres or so from the coast – far enough that it should be part of the deeper ocean – but as you approach it, the water colour transforms from a deep blue to a brilliant, turquoise green. Thanks to a naturally occurring sandbar and coral reef, the water is only waist-deep and very calm, making it a pretty luxurious place to set anchor and go for a swim.



Chef Trim mixes a batch of her coconut crab curry

© Alexa Fernando

The Nylon Pool was apparently given its nickname by Princess Margaret. She visited the lagoon on her honeymoon and likened the shallow expanse to the transparency of nylon. With crystal clear waters and a sandy white bottom studded with the occasional piece of sun-bleached coral, the turquoise hue of the Nylon Pool reminds me of Iceland's Blue Lagoon, albeit with much warmer surroundings.

There's something surreal and calming about standing in the middle of the ocean. A local legend holds that the waters here are something of a Fountain of Youth for the Caribbean. I joke to the group that with my Asian skin and a half-hour soak in the Nylon Pool, I'll continue to be ID'ed at the LCBO well into retirement.

Given that midday is the best time to visit the Nylon Pool, when the tides recede to make the waters shallow enough to stand up in, we've got some company in this little stretch of heaven. A two-tiered party boat is anchored not far from us, where eager tourists are lapping up the pool's restorative properties. Although, I'm not sure how effective those properties will be against the rosy glow of a sunburn that's developing on a few of their chests.



What little party tourism Tobago attracts tends to congregate only at a few spots like the Nylon Pool off the picturesque Pigeon Point

Elsewhere in Tobago, I take the opportunity to explore deeper waters. At the Arnos Vale Reef, one of Tobago's top snorkelling spots and a peaceful enclave with little boat traffic, I strap on a snorkelling mask and head underwater. Careful to avoid the plentiful red urchins and their menacing spikes, I spot a marine textbook of sea creatures beneath me from a black and yellow spotted eel to multicoloured bright parrot fish weaving between the rocks, endless schools of fish and bunches of undulating brain coral.

There's more prime snorkelling over at Pirate's Bay in Charlotteville. The bay apparently served as a secluded hiding spot for swashbucklers in centuries past. But now the beach, which is only accessible by foot or boat, is a pristine location for sun-seekers like me. We choose the more fashionable boat-in option and, this time, I decide to hang up the snorkel in favour of a lie on a towel. The boat is scheduled to pick us back up in an hour and I'm quite certain that a sand-supported repose is the best way to spend it.

Time seems to warp as the sun warms my skin and the sound of ocean waves crashing against the shore lulls me into a mid-afternoon nap. But just before I cross the line between healthy glow and sunburnt red, our captain patters back into the bay for our return trip. With some regret, I end off the sand and pack up my belongings. My trip to Tobago may have come to an end but I'll continue to escape to the sounds of its beaches and rainforests for spa treatments and yoga sessions to come.