

Trinidad Notes 1– Summer 2008

These notes are a fruit salad of comments and observations summarizing things I came to understand after living in Trinidad for five and a half months over the 2008 hurricane season. They emphatically represent my impressions and no research has been done to get accurate facts and figures. Nevertheless, these statements are roughly correct in general outline if not in detail.

Many boaters don't really care much for Trinidad: "too hot," "too much violence", "don't like the food" are typical comments. Most North American and European cruisers bring their boats into Chaguaramas in June, put them on the hard for hurricane season, and fly home, returning in October or November to reclaim their boats. We were part of the small community of 200 -300 boaters who stayed on their boats for a good part or all of the summer months.

I loved Trinidad. Trinis are so oblivious of boaters that you can escape from the "yachtie bubble" and if you are there for several months and make the effort, you can participate in Trinidad life rather than simply be an outside observer. The privilege of tentative partial immersion in another culture felt wonderful, warts and all.

Overview: Trinidad is a 30 by 45 mile chunk of land that detached from South America and sits about 10 miles north of the coast of Venezuela, near the mouth of the Orinoco River. Trinidad and Venezuela take absolutely NO NOTICE of each other. In fact, Trinidad, like the rest of the West Indies south of the Virgin Islands, shows no trace of Latino culture, music, or food. Thanks to abundant quantities of natural gas and some oil, Trinidad has a robust economy and is far more independent of the 800-lb gorilla to the north than the rest of the West Indies. Except for the few square miles around Chaguaramas, the yachting center isolated at the extreme northwest ear of the island, it is completely indifferent to tourism and yachties, which is refreshing. Huge LNG tankers spend summers anchored just south of Chaguaramas and begin their weekly treks north starting in October. I used to stare at the big green LNG tanker that makes regular trips to Boston all winter long and think that if they took passengers it would be a quick trip home. The healthy economy means that there are substantial numbers of Trinis from all ethnic groups who live a high-end 1st World life, with lovely homes, BMWs, upscale recreation -- fancy restaurants, boats, recreational biking and running, beach weekends at Mayaro on the east coast. Of course, this is also accompanied by the lurking threat of violence—one thing affluent Trinis share with all affluent people in Latin America. .

Like most of the West Indies, Trinidad was first settled by small-scale European agriculturalists (ie feudal peasants) and adventurers but in the late 1600's sugar took over and huge estates were assembled, worked by slaves from West Africa. (For an excellent and enlightening history of New World slavery, read Eric Williams' "Slavery and Capitalism"). When industrial revolution manufacturing replaced sugar as the English golden goose, the abolition movement gained traction and slavery was abolished on the British islands about 1840. Afro-Trinis walked off the sugar plantations never to return. Indians from India (mostly tribal people) were brought as indentured workers to keep sugar going for a few more decades. So now the demographic structure of Trinidad (population 1.5 million) is approximately 45% African heritage, 40%

Indian heritage, and 15% European heritage, either directly or through South America. And all possible mixtures thereof. (These percentages are only approximate). Main religions are Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, Shouter Baptist, Rastafarian, Evangelical Protestant. In Trinidad, Eid (end of Ramadan), Divali, and Christmas are all national holidays with full-page ads placed in the paper by banks and important businesses, wishing peace and prosperity to the target religious group.

Government is a big deal, supports a large segment of the working population, and is the focus of a lot of political grandstanding. There is a free press and healthy communications industry and political opinions are freely expressed. The prime minister has a Napoleon complex and the cost of his new mansion exceeds \$40 Million US. But the government is by no means a kleptocracy and roads, utilities, etc seem pretty well maintained (2nd world rather than 1st world standard). In short, a fair proportion of the oil wealth actually does seem to be spent for the common good. The biggest failure of government is in carrying out long-term planning and in maintaining law and order. See my blog on violence in Trinidad. It was a pleasure to watch the 2008 US election through Trini eyes. Their excitement about the Obama campaign and victory was very touching.

Food: I have no idea what was served in fancy restaurants because they were outside our budget. Everyday food was anchored by rice with pigeon peas or by macaroni, accompanied by dal or callaloo (a soup made of green leafy vegies somewhat like spinach or chard, okra, and herbs – quite good when freshly made), a fish or chicken/duck/pork stew, and a chopped lettuce, cabbage and carrot salad. Women set up food stands outside the boatyards and served this as lunch to workers and boaters for \$3-4. In the morning, the women sold fruit:



The other food mainstay is a roti, which is like a tortilla made with chickpea flour, wrapped around curried vegies or chicken., with a dollop of chutney or hot sauce. The menu doesn't vary much from day to day or from meal to meal for most people, except for special events. A beverage favored by local people but not outsiders is Mauby – it is a concoction made from roots and herbs, sort of like a slightly bitter root beer. It is considered to be “cooling.” I personally grew very fond of LLB (lemon, lime bitters) bottled by Angostura – a venerable Trinidad enterprise.

Three food items deserve honorable mention: the swordfish dinners at Tropical Marina on Wednesday nights (basically the everyday meal described above, with swordfish grilled to perfection instead of the usual stew); shark and bake (a fish sandwich prized at Maracas Beach, to which you add your choice of coriander sauce, garlic sauce, hot sauce, tamarind sauce and other condiments); doubles (sort of like a soft roti married to an egg omelet, wrapped around a chutnied filling) – prized for weekend breakfasts if you could find a doubles stand.

And I can't omit mentioning a "buss-up shot" – a delightful name for a variant of a roti over rice.

Note absence of milk-based foods, desserts, beef. It is fundamentally a heart-healthy diet, albeit a somewhat monotonous one.

During the 22 weeks we were in Trinidad, inflation was 14% and by the end, we found food shopping, even at the fresh market, pretty pricey. I noticed that at the fresh market, root staples like cassava and dasheen became more prevalent. I thought it was a real comment on people's patience that there was no civil unrest with the dramatic rise in prices for foodstuffs.

Clothes: In Port of Spain, office workers dress like urban professionals in big US cities: men in well-cut slacks or suits with pastel shirts and subtle ties, women in sleek suits and pants suits worn with very high heels.

Working class and poor folks wear standard Caribbean attire. For young women who haven't had children yet this consists of tight jeans and pretty tops – beautifully fitted blouses or layered tank tops or tightly fitted tees with pretty necklines. And lovely bosoms --an absolute garden of high, round bosoms. Post-partum women also wear tight jeans or pants with tight tops, with no attempt to conceal accumulated flesh. In spite of all the tight clothing, dress is modest; skirts cover knees and tops cover shoulders. Guys wear ordinary jeans and shirts or tees. If they are rasta, they gather their very long hair and extensions into snoods or hats a la Dr. Seuss (think "The cat in the hat").



Pascal, a wonderfully gentle person who we hired to supervise our refinishing of the exterior woodwork. Pascal is a Rastafarian and always wears this kind of head covering. We never saw his actual hair.

Otherwise it's baseball caps or bare heads. Loose gangsta style clothing was rare. By junior high, boys wear long slacks and nice shirts to school (school uniforms are universal in the Caribbean) and after that, long pants are de rigueur for men. If you see a man in short pants it is either an upscale guy on the weekend (GQ) . . . or a yachtie (rumpled).

Some scenes from the Saturday fresh market and downtown Port of Spain. Crowd scenes were the only way I could take people-pictures without raising hackles, except for personal acquaintances..



Muslim women wore headscarves and long sleeve shirts with their jeans but full-length attire was uncommon, although I did see one woman dressed that way at the beach.



For special wear, Trini women show real flare. Even poor women dress nicely for church – a pressed linen skirt and matching short-sleeve linen top worn over the skirt is typical – and the men wear nice slacks and a shirt. And for special events, migod ! Trinis have flash and a real sense of elegance. The audience at Queen’s Hall concerts would put the Boston Symphony audience to shame. I was privileged to attend one event where women wore elaborate “African” gowns with lavish headscarves; Aretha Franklin’s inauguration hat was definitely of that genre. Alas, I had on my “boater’s best” too-short black skirt and white tank top – not quite what the occasion called for. On another evening we stopped to watch Indo-Trini women arriving at a Bollywood-type concert, all decked out in saris and gold.

Trini-speak: Trinidadans (or Trinbagonians) speak with a characteristic lilt different from but as pronounced as Barbadians or Jamaicans. While upper-class Trinis speak the Queen’s English perfectly when the occasion demands, the language spoken by absolutely everyone every day has strong elements of what we Americans call “Black English”: “th” is converted to “d” or “t”, possessive pronouns like “my”, “her” are replaced by “I”, “she” and other changes in pronouns. So you get “Me go she house in de morning” or my favorite “She be vex wid me”. It is startling when a Euro-Trini opens his/her mouth and begins speaking “Black English”—the vernacular that he/she has been speaking since grade school. The language veers off into true creole when rural people or very poor people speak with each other; I could make out very little of it.

Trinis are amused by their Trini-isms and there is a dictionary of them which unfortunately I didn’t buy. But here are a few that I remember:

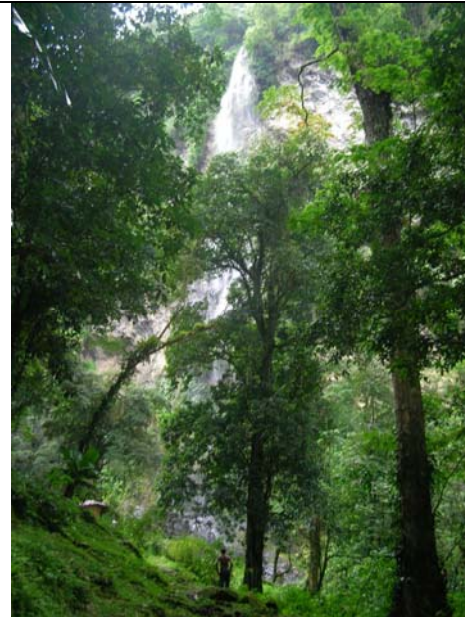
A “deputy” is a married man’s girl-friend on the side.

“Jes now” means soon or eventually or just a little while ago -- you have to figure out.

“Small-up yuhsef” means make room for others.

“He gorn come back” means he went out for a while but I don’t know where or for how long.
“Radio 94.7: We music, we culture”

Scenery and nature: Where it is not littered, Trinidad is gorgeous, with amazing birds and vegetation. Trinidadans are very proud of their island. With the exception of brief forays along the western coast to the southwest corner and some of the central part, all of our time was spent in the northern third of the island. That is the part with high steep mountains (3000’), lush rain forests and a gorgeous north coast. Trininis take their vacations along the east coast and I look forward to seeing those beaches next year. Here are a few scenes from the northern mountains and north coast:



To be continued next year.