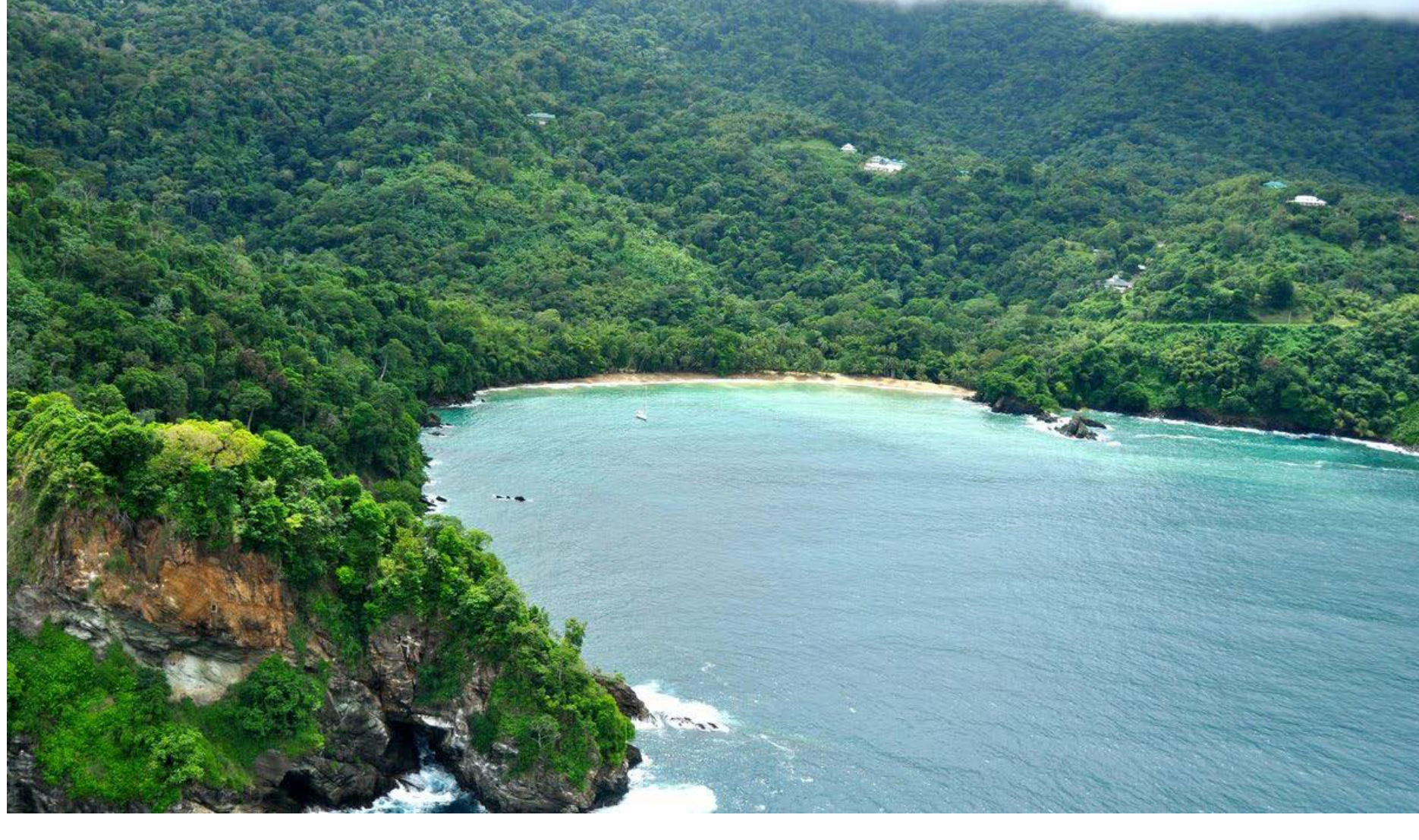


# Discovering ‘a feeling of home’ in Trinidad and Tobago

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CASTARA, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Englishman's Bay, Trinidad and Tobago.

TOBAGO TOURISM

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Alibaba Taylor stirs a pot full of Caribbean tradition every Saturday afternoon.

A dishtowel hangs over his shoulder as he lords over a large soup pot, propped up on blocks with coals burning beneath, at a cookout on the beach at Castara Bay. Making soup is a Saturday custom in Trinidad and Tobago and Taylor and his family dish up lunch for friends and strangers alike. He ladles the soup, a bubbling mix of green bananas, tropical root plant dasheen, sweet potatoes, cassava and other hearty staples such as pigtail and beef, into calabash bowls.

## Four warm-weather escapes for winter

Food, he insists, tastes better when served in dishes made from dried calabash gourds. Locals fashion potholders out of green leaves from an overhead Indian almond tree, so they don't drop their lunch when the soup's warmth penetrates their calabash. There's blackfin tuna and breadfruit on the grill. The pumpkin bread is fresh out of the dirt oven, which Taylor's father built here on the beach.

"We are holding on to our traditions," he says.

Trinidad and Tobago are the southernmost islands in the Caribbean, with Trinidad sitting 11 kilometres northeast of Venezuela's coast. Tobago, the smaller and lesser-industrialized of the pair, is about 32 kilometres north of Trinidad. Taylor is among those in Tobago promoting the island as a tourist destination while trying to preserve its local communities, culture and natural environment.

"Tobago is the last unspoiled island in the Caribbean," he says.



Castara Retreats.

ALEX TREADWAY/CASTARA RETREATS

About 700 people live in Castara, on Tobago's leeward coast, with about 30 per cent of villagers directly employed in the tourism industry, Taylor says. Their homes, businesses and guesthouses are built into the lush mountain terrain, overlooking 300 metres of beach and a bay dotted with fishing boats.

Castara is just west of Parlatuvier Bay, with Englishman's Bay in the middle. The views at all three look pretend, like AI-generated images of "tropical beach vacation," but with the crowds and all-inclusive resorts edited out.

Catherine Levi and her partner Joseph Wyatt, who is a retired ballet dancer originally from Trinidad, are among the visitors at Taylor's cookout. Levi, who lives in Oregon, will take Tobago over Hawaii any day.

"Everyone says: 'Good morning.' Everyone says: 'Hello.' If you are hungry, they will make you food. And they aren't trying to sell you anything," she says. "I infinitely prefer this."

Some of Tobago's Caribbean treats are only accessible by boat. Watch the sun set at Pigeon Point, then, as the sky darkens, set off on a kayak tour toward Bon Accord Lagoon. At night, the still water looks like a pool of black ink. But when the water is disturbed, perhaps by a paddle stroke, its resident bioluminescent plankton light up like a white T-shirt under a black light.

Jump in, splash about. It is like swimming in glitter. Disturb the water and watch it glow, if only for a few seconds. Some people see beads of water turn white. Others see glowing blue or green. Cameras can't capture it. If you continuously kick underwater, the glow intensifies in the churn around your legs. If you splash your kayak buddy, bright pearls of water sail through the air.

The same area hosts two of Tobago's daytime delights: the Nylon Pool and No Man's Land. Charter a boat or jump on a tour – they range from rickety wooden affairs to gleaming white cruising yachts – and putter out for an afternoon around the Buccoo Reef. The Nylon Pool is an area of the sea, between Buccoo and Pigeon Point, where the bottom is white-coral sand and the water is clear. Turtles, stingrays and other marine critters are easy to spot gliding through the shallow waters: The water is only about a metre deep.



Nylon Pool.

TOBAGO TOURISM

Tobago credits Britain's Princess Margaret for giving the Nylon Pool its name. She honeymooned here in 1960, prior to Trinidad and Tobago's independence in 1962. According to Tobago, a tour guide showed her the area, and she compared the transparency of the water to nylon stockings. The Nylon Pool was born.

No Man's Land, a spit of white-coral sand, is in the same area. The narrow stretch of undeveloped sand separates the sea from the mouth of the Bon Accord Lagoon, home of the glowing plankton. Here, locals and visitors lime – island slang for hang out or relax – on the beach and in the water. A few entrepreneurs have stands selling drinks and snacks such as grilled fish, fresh coconuts and Carib beers. Need a break from the rum punch? Order a homegrown favourite: a Lemon, Lime and Bitters, better known as a LLB in Trinidad and Tobago. LLBs are Angostura's answer to San Pellegrino's collection of sparkling non-alcoholic drinks.

If sandy beaches, ocean waters and accompanying adventures such as scuba diving and kite surfing bore you, you're in the wrong, but Tobago has solutions. Tobago's Main Ridge Forest Reserve covers about 4,000 hectares, or two-thirds of the island, and dates back to 1776. Tobago claims this makes it the Western hemisphere's oldest forest reserve. Colonizers protected the rainforest in an effort to ensure tourism for the island's plantations; now the area is a government-managed eco-tourism spot.

The forest is rich with plants and animals unique to Tobago and is a bucket-list item for serious birders. Tobago is famous for hummingbirds and the Gilpin Trace section is home to one of the world's rarest: the white-tailed sabrewing. Experts believed a hurricane in 1963 wiped the birds from the island, but they were rediscovered in 1974.

Shurland's Nature Park sits near the edge of the protected rainforest, overlooking Bloody Bay, another computer-generated paradise near Castara. Here, hummingbirds come to you, sipping sugary goodness out of feeders. Stand still and the birds will sip from a feeder in your fingertips.

Back in Castara, Taylor, a descendant of a plantation owner from Australia who fell in love with a slave and left land to his heirs in a trust-like structure, continues to dish out his homemade goodness. Samuel Bramble lives nearby in Lowland. The soup and cookout reflect his version of Tobago.

"It is a feeling of home," he says.

## If you go

Caribbean Airlines flies direct from Toronto to Trinidad's Port of Spain. From there, fly to Tobago or take a ferry.

Castara Retreats has 17 units embracing rustic luxury. Its cabins are built into a mountainside, overlooking the bay. The units have their own kitchens, as well as private indoor and outdoor seating. Castara Retreats has a restaurant as well as massage and yoga facilities. For details and pricing, visit [castararetreats.com](http://castararetreats.com).

And if you step on a sea urchin? The spines must be removed, carefully, they are fragile. Your hotel will insist on calling the paramedics, who will insist on taking you in an ambulance to the hospital. Physicians will bloody your foot to extract the shattered pieces of the spines, inject a painkiller into your backside, and write a prescription to ward off infection. Everyone will boast about Trinidad and Tobago's free health care. Place a vinegar compress on the spots where the calcified spines pierced the skin to dissolve rogue bits. You'll be fine. Trust me.

The writer travelled courtesy of Tobago Tourism Agency and Caribbean Airlines. These organizations neither approved nor reviewed this article before publication.