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TRAVEL

On this stunning Caribbean island, I find the embodiment of old-style hospitality — and no big-hotel hubbub

In Tobago, the village of Castara is small, but the vibe is serene, with an abundance of small, everyday joys.

By Doug Wallace Special to the Star
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A night view from a treehouse-style perch at Castara Retreats.
Castara Retreats

Beyond its starring role as the backdrop for Disney's 1960 adventure film "Swiss Family Robinson," and the beauty of its Nylon Pool — a shallow sandbank named by Princess Margaret on her honeymoon — the tiny island of Tobago has remained relatively overlooked. But that's the way most people like it.

An alternative to the more modernized parts of the Caribbean — including Trinidad, the other half of this dual-island nation, just a 25-minute flight away — Tobago is a quiet reminder of what the Caribbean was like in the 1960s, when the vacation plans of visitors were built solely around beach loungers, scenery and sunsets.

One small corner of the island that I find particularly enchanting is the traditional fishing village of Castara. Located on the sunset-facing coastline, with about 30 small-scale properties to check into — mainly cottages and single apartments — Castara is safe and serene, welcoming visitors who are happy to just sink into the sand and the region's cultural heritage.



The blue-chinned sapphire hummingbird is one of the beautiful creatures you may spot here.
Roger Neckles/Tobago Tourism Agency

Naturally, the beach remains the focal point, with the smattering of tourists bobbing about in the sheltered waters, the kids playing football in the sand, and the fishermen dealing with the day's catch while the gulls and frigatebirds battle for the scraps.

There's a noticeable lack of big-hotel hubbub or loud groups on the island. Instead, I encounter an abundance of small, everyday joys. These include the amazing traditional foods, like the fresh-baked goodies on offer under the almond and coconut trees at [Castara's popular dirt oven](#). This traditional, outdoor clay oven is owned by the family of Birtil "Alibaba" Taylor, a local tour operator and innkeeper. "This is our tradition — this keeps us grounded," he says, referring to the weekly baking of pumpkin and whole wheat bread.

Townpeople call ahead with their orders, then drop by later to collect them, perhaps stopping for a bowl of the communal soup — loaded with beef, pork, vegetables and dumplings — or a plate of grilled tuna and breadfruit doused with a barbecue sauce that is mostly butter.



Castara is a small, traditional fishing community on the island of Tobago.
Alex Treadway/Tobago Tourism Agency

Traditional foods also headline the restaurant menus here, including the one at [Castara Retreats](#), where diners tuck into grilled red snapper and kingfish, shark fish sandwiches, jerk chicken and curried lamb. The retreat is a series of secluded, treehouse-style apartments, each with an open-air kitchen and living area, plus an enclosed and air-conditioned bedroom. Birds of paradise blanket the grounds, hummingbirds zip between cottages, and dolphins can be seen from the verandas — the views of Castara Bay are spectacular.

Alibaba says that about 30 per cent of the island's tourism is from fishermen in tourism ventures, with the rest involved indirectly — like the fishermen, who catch bonito, kingfish, tuna and jackfish in wooden boats with long black nets. Live pan music, drumming and bonfire nights fill out the weekly recreation roster. "We try to protect everything we have," Alibaba says. "We want our village life to remain the same as it's always been, and we will only take as many tourists as we can handle."

For things to do outside the village, Castara is only a short drive from Tobago's major rainforest, the 4,000-hectare Main Ridge Forest Reserve, which has been legally protected for conservation since 1776.



A view of Castara Bay, where you'll find clear waters and sandy beaches surrounded by lushness.
Doug Wallace

Many people visit Tobago specifically to wander the trails and along the little tributaries under the palm and bamboo canopy, seeing things they would never have noticed without one of the sharp-eyed naturalist guides, like William Trim. He points out blue-backed manakins calling out to one another and performing mating dances, sparkling green rufous-tailed jacamars that seem to pose for the cameras, and red-crowned woodpeckers searching for their lunch.

More birds fill the air at nearby Shurland James Hummingbird Nature Park at the edge of the tropical rainforest. A tiny, gardenlike haven overlooking a valley, it's lovingly looked after by founder Shurland James, who is also a naturalist forest guide. Dozens of brightly coloured hummingbirds put on a dazzling show — practically eating out of my hand — as they flit among the feeders at the crest of a hill, while James fortifies hungry onlookers with her homemade cooking, including coconut ice cream.

It's a small gem of a place, on a small gem of an island, and yet another example of how effortlessly hospitable and naturally beautiful Tobago truly is.

Doug Wallace travelled as a guest of the [Tobago Tourism Agency](#), which did not review or approve this article.

