

Tobago: Trinidad's countrified sibling

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Special to The CJN

Similar to any twins, Trinidad and Tobago are often mentioned together in the same breath. But they are not identical, and like any siblings, they assert their individual identities quite clearly.

"Trinis," as the locals from the main island of Trinidad call themselves, take their holidays in Tobago to get away from the bustling industrialization of their capital, Port of Spain. They find it a restful break to escape to their countrified sibling island.

Tobago was named Magdalena by Christopher Columbus in 1498. It later was re-named by the roaming Caribs and Arowaks for the long pipes they smoked that were filled with tobacco.

After a mere 18-minute flight from Port of Spain, Tobago takes you absolutely off the beaten track, and its appeal is instantaneous.

As John Murphy, acting manager of Magdalena Resort, said: "It is how the Caribbean used to be and should be."

One of the people I was travelling with commented, "The locals are so nice, I thought they were being sarcastic."

Trinidad and Tobago are very different twins, but what weaves them together are the similarities. Experiencing waterfalls and forests are quintessential, but there are many other activities to choose from around the two islands, including snorkelling, diving, hiking and bird watching. Birdwatchers flock to both in hopes of a peek at some of the 244 bird species found in Tobago and 450 in Trinidad.

In Tobago, I bounced around in the back of an open-topped jeep, and gripping firmly onto the handrail was the only way to stop from falling out as we careened along a winding Caribbean coastal road. The road was so narrow and muddy with deep puddles, our tires tipped and skidded. I found myself laughing, a mixture of nervousness and elation, because I didn't know what to expect next.

Our driver, Fabio, braked quickly as the jeep tore around a steep corner – the ribbon of the road ahead was completely blocked by a fallen tree. Fabio and Dennis from the second jeep didn't hesitate as



The Highland Falls

they leapt out, quickly grabbing machetes. In a Robinson Crusoe manoeuvre, they chopped their way through the branches, freeing up the path. As we drove on, we passed abandoned plantations completely overgrown with vegetation, giving us a brief glimpse into Tobago's history.

Once we reached our destination, we entered through a dense bamboo forest on foot, following steep winding whispers of pathways. As we approached a shallow river, there were mutterings: "How are we supposed to get to the other side?"

Those wearing waterproof shoes waded right through and continued on, while others jumped on the backs of our guides who carried them through the river on their back. The humidity and heat made the 30-minute walk seem much longer, but well worthwhile after our first view of vibrant Highland Falls.

Another end of the river required fancy footwork to cross a mosaic of flat, slippery rocks to reach the falls. I simply waded – the bottom of the river underfoot felt a safer option. To cool off, I grabbed a stick to keep my balance and walked into the deep water surrounding the falls, and a few others swam to get a closer view.



A tough group treks through jungle on their off-road jeep adventure.

[Melody Wren photos]

The first evening on Tobago, we waded up to our waists to board Island Girl, a graceful 43-foot catamaran, crewed by friendly locals that served unending amounts of rum punch and nibbles, all included in the reasonable price. From Mount Irvine Bay, we cruised around the coast of Tobago's north shore, drink in hand, sitting on the deck of the boat, watching as the sun set in vibrant Caribbean hues around us. It was a wonderful start to our stay.

The next day, we took the short, 10-minute walk to Argyle Falls, the highest falls on the island, tumbling 175 feet in a series of stepped cascades. Located on the Roxborough Estate, which was a thriving sugar estate up to the 1870s, it has artifacts of the old sugar mills still in place. Very pretty to see, and if you are feeling a bit too warm, cooling off and showering under the falls is recommended.

A visit to Fort George is worthwhile to help with an overview of the history of the island, still under the influence of a British-structured government. The number of times the island has changed hands is quite intriguing – now 31 times and counting, including traces of British, Scottish, French, Latvian, Dutch, Chinese and Finnish masters.

The British background is the most evident, with international cricket dominating the sports scene and vehicles driving on the left side of the road. Even the capital city of Scarborough was named by Scottish planters after its Yorkshire counterpart, apparently so named for the resemblance. Coastal, yes, but after that, the similarity ends.

The fort, named after King George III, still has the barracks that housed 200 men from 1784 to 1811, the walls are still crowned with broken glass meant to keep prisoners from escaping. Clinging to a cliff high above the ocean, it offers views of the harbour from the highest part of the island. Built in the 1780s, this is Tobago's best-preserved historical site.

The 56,000 people populating Tobago are 90 per cent African and 10 per cent mixed.

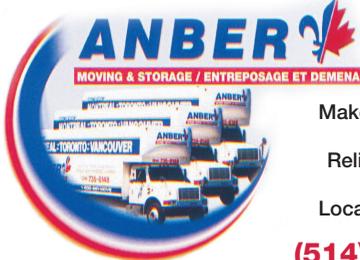
Magdalena Resort is the only four-star resort on the island, and it shows. Sprawled over 670 acres, situated along 2-1/2 miles

of beach and coastline, the grounds offer nature trails and canopy walks through a virgin mangrove forest. With complimentary bicycles, four pools to dip in, PADI-certified scuba training, a spa, and endless daily activities posted in the lobby including aqua aerobics and zumba, it is difficult to choose to just sit and relax, but many visitors do.

The resort is home to a PGA-designed championship 18-hole golf course, but many visitors choose to lounge on the beach or by one of the four pools. Shuttle buses travel twice daily to Pigeon Point, a nearby archetypal Caribbean Heritage beach with everything you need.

Off-road Jeep Safari: www.tobagonow.com

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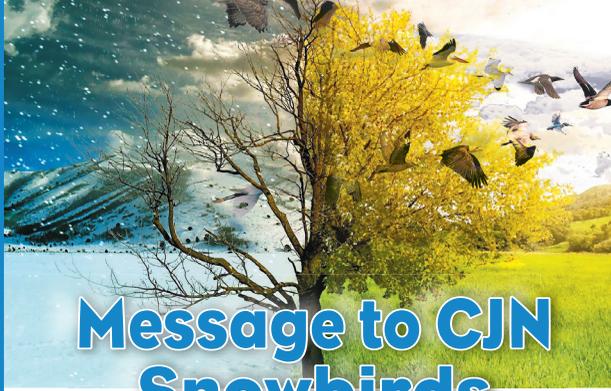
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