

SUNDAY SCHOOL...

In Tobago

By W M Léal

Long before I planned my trip to this island, I had often wondered whether it is possible to go on holiday alone and have a good time? Well, it is. That's exactly what I did -and I had a great time.

Tobagonian culture, like that of many other Caribbean islands, is influenced by a history of slavery. What was once a thriving plantation economy is now reliant on tourism for its economic survival. The island offers turquoise water, coral reefs, hot sun, swaying palms, blue skies and plenty of fine fresh food.

Warm Welcome

Having visited Tobago once before, I had a good idea of what to expect. My goal, as always, whenever I go away on holiday, was just to chill-out and relax. My only stipulation, this time, was to stay at locally owned hotels. This was partly in order to get a real feel for the culture, and also because I wanted to know that the money I spent was re-invested in the local economy: none of the money spent at the all-inclusive hotels goes to the islanders. I flew with BWIA. Although this is not the most efficient airline, it is Caribbean-owned and, from the moment you set foot on the plane, you've taken your first steps to Caribbean warmth and culture.

I started my vacation at Enchanted Waters (www.kpresorts.com) a family run hotel, because last year I met one of the owners Marcia Patino, (the mother) at The World Travel Market (boring) in Earls Court, London. I will never forget that day at the show, because Marcia was a breath of fresh air among the nonentities representing the Trinidad and Tobago tourist board.

Some Enchanted Morning

Tobago is almost five hours behind UK time, so it was easy for me to wake up early to enjoy a morning walk before breakfast, and especially before the sun comes up fully because the heat makes it uncomfortable to walk anywhere. My walks were always promptly followed by a mid-morning siesta in the shade by the pool.

On my second morning's walk, I became a little more adventurous, deviating from the main road and turning onto a side road, believing it to be a short cut to the beach. Halfway along, I asked a guy who was fiddling with his bicycle, "Where exactly does this road lead to?" He looked up and replied, "My house, why?". I explained why, and after some polite chit-chat we were soon on first-name terms. I asked Keith (the stranger's name), "How much will a taxi cost me into town?" He replied, "For the colour of your skin (black) \$5, but for the accent (London) \$20". We both laughed. Keith kindly invited me to his house for a beer (it was 7am). He typified the attitude of the Tobagonian people that I met. They were incredibly friendly and helpful. He gave me some invaluable advice on the better places to stay and why.

Almost universally, Tobagonian people resented the bigger hotels such as The Grafton, Turtle Beach and Mount Irvine, saying, "They treat Tobagonians with disrespect and never encourage tourists to experience real Tobagonian culture."

The Golden Ring

Alan Clovis, a hotelier who I met towards the end of my trip, coined a phrase, 'The Golden Ring': this exemplified the type of holiday that I had in Tobago because I travelled, literally, around the island experiencing different types of resorts. The cost of food and travel is cheap for an English tourist because the pound is so strong. There are almost 10 Trinidad dollars to the pound sterling. Lunch never costs more than a couple of pounds and, for that, you eat well, buying such items as rotis (Indian bread filled with split peas, curried

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meats or vegetables), buljol (shredded salt fish with onions, tomatoes, avocados, pepper and olive oil), and pelau (peas and rice cooked with, and flavoured with, coconut and pepper. All of these are traditional island dishes that would tempt even the most hardened 'chicken and chips' man.

Hot Spots

If your looking for activities, there are lots of things to keep you busy: Tobago is, after all, known to have some of the very best 'dive' spots in the Caribbean. In particular, there's Speyside (north of the island on the Atlantic side) which is known as the diving capital of Tobago. But whatever you do don't miss Sunday school in Bucco, where alternative preaching comes by way of the booming sound systems playing their socca and reggae music, and the clinking beer bottles and guys 'sweet talking' the girls. Heaven! was fried bake and salt fish in one hand and a concocted home made drink in the other.

Personally speaking, just when I thought things couldn't get any better-it did. 'Sun, sea and sand' and now, unbelievably, I was able to watch my beloved Chelsea on satellite television (we won) live from Stamford Bridge while thinking, "This is the life!", as the camera panned into the crowd who were watching the game in the cold, wet, winter rain.

Green Peace

After Patinos, my next stop was Footprints, (www.footprintsco-resort.com) a naturalist resort (no, not nudist) Footprints is an eco-resort tucked away in Culloden Bay, with a small secluded beach

on the Caribbean Sea. I had what they called a standard room (which was anything but standard) where the view, through wide glass doors and windows, was of palm trees and the Caribbean Sea.

Footprints echoes the Caribbean's naturally green lifestyle with wild life running free on its land, organic foods and a brilliant sea-water swimming pool. All the amenities here are superb and, in the unlikely event of your wanting a change of scenery, they have their own drivers to take you on day trips around the island.

After a few nights, I moved onto Man-O-War Bay Cottages (www.man-o-warbaycottages.com) the inspiration for the Footprints resort in Charlotville. Better known as a fishing village, this is where the fishermen are often seen either bringing in their catch of the day, or relaxing under a palm tree during the mid-day sun. Three years ago, I spent two glorious weeks with my family there. The cottages are 'basic' and inexpensive. They can provide you with a cook and laundry service (a must) if you really want to do nothing at all. The cottages run along the beach, and the sea water in this bay is perfect for safe swimming. Man-O-War Bay Cottages are particularly good for families or groups of friends on a tight budget because they are self-catering with an option of a full service.

Heights of Luxury

Villas in Tobago are becoming big business but, like anything in life, there's good and bad. I experienced very good fortune when I was invited to stay at Villa Being (www.being-tobago.com), a luxurious architectural hideaway perched on top of a mountain in Arnos Vale. Like Moses, when I climbed the mountain I was not disappointed. The villa has a 40ft swimming pool with an awesome 180-degree panoramic view of the Caribbean Sea. There's an amazing Rastafarian couple, Sherina and Engine Bobb (the cook and the gardener respectively) who are responsible for looking after the guests. They complemented the villa's escape from reality. Everything about this place was so surreal, I had to pinch myself to make sure that I was really there- in the lap of luxury, chilling out (the right way) with two Rastafarians. If you're not strapped for cash, Villa Being will not disappoint you, and, even if you don't stay there, make a point of visiting the place just to admire the architecture.

Kariwak Village was my final destination. Ask any local Tobagonian where they would either like to work, or stay, in Tobago, and, nine times out of ten, the answer will be Kariwak Village. This hotel is a one-off on the island, priding itself on its holistic approach to life. It has won numerous prestigious awards and accolades for its proud owners, Allan and Cynthia Clovis, who treat their staff with a respect that is clearly reciprocated, because their staff accord every guest with superb service.

I spent two glorious weeks travelling my 'Golden Ring' of Tobago, something I strongly recommend for your visit. For further information, start by contacting the Trinidad & Tobago Tourist Board, although their response can be rather 'hit or miss'.