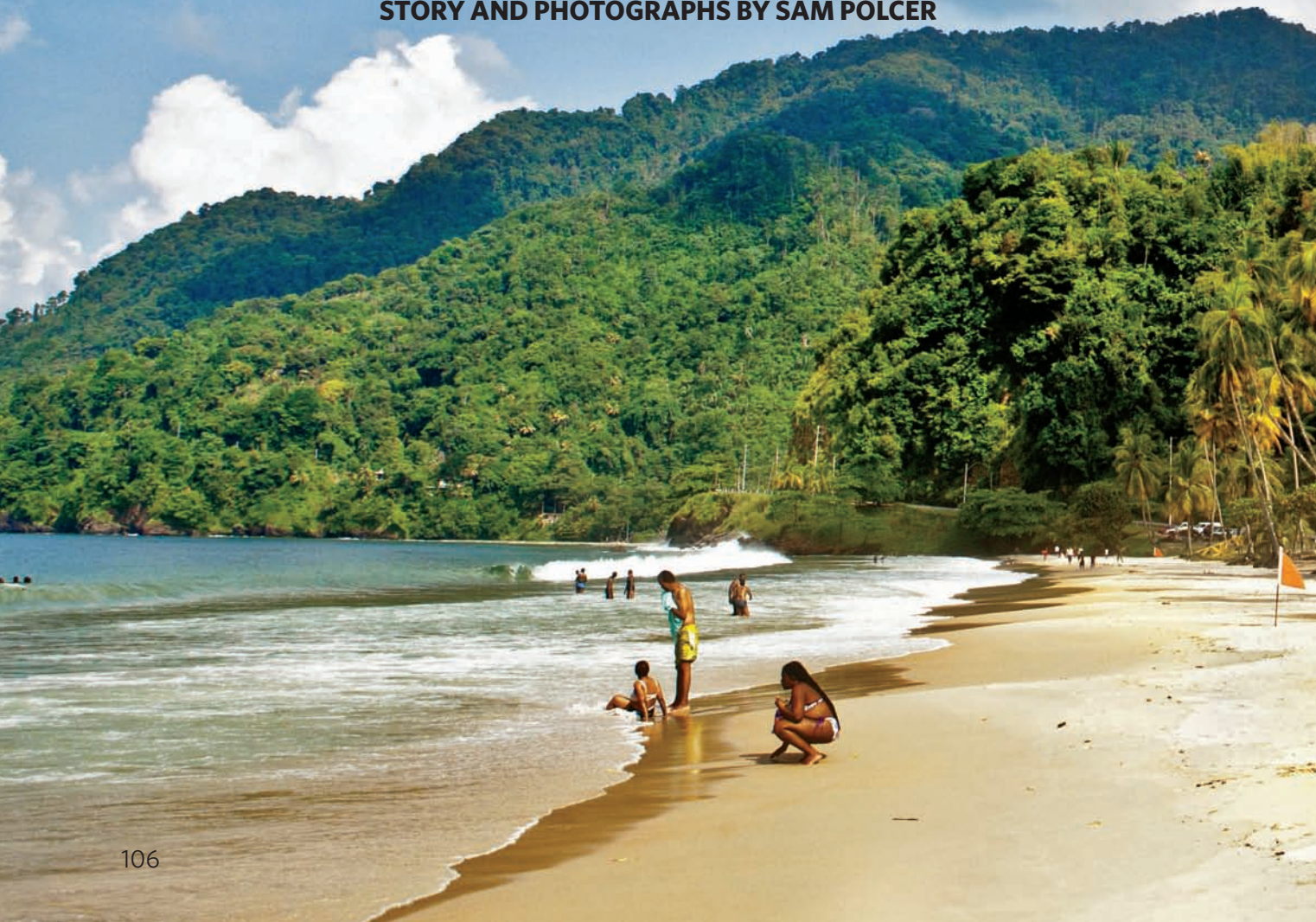


THREE PERFECT DAYS

# TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

This Caribbean nation proudly celebrated 50 years of independence in 2012—but with its sublime landscapes, sensational food, riotously fun nightlife and vibrant culture drawing a new generation of appreciative visitors, the best is yet to come

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM POLCER





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**DAY ONE**

Roti and a downtown stroll, alluring Carnival attire, late-night revelry with a soca soundtrack

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**DAY TWO**

A very tall monkey, frenetic steel pan band rehearsals, a peerless fried fish sandwich

**115**

**DAY THREE**

Breakfast treats, birdwatching in the forest, an impromptu fishing expedition

**WHEN CONFRONTED WITH** the beauty of the Caribbean, said the poet Derek Walcott, “the sigh of History dissolves.” This may be especially true of Trinidad and Tobago, the dual-island nation in which Walcott has spent much of his adult life, and which possesses such an abundance of natural splendor it’s a wonder anyone here can recall what they did yesterday.

But memory, it turns out, plays a big part in the life of these islands, which were first settled 7,000 years ago. Their modern history dates back to their “discovery” by Christopher Columbus in 1498, followed by colonization, economic exploitation and, in 1962, independence. Given the extraordinarily diverse population (dubbed “Trinbagonians”), which claims origins primarily in Asia, Africa and Europe, celebrating heritage is one of the things Trinidad and Tobago does best—yielding a kaleidoscope of sensory riches that both honors old traditions and combines them to create new ones.

Wrapping the nation’s yearlong 50th birthday celebration while gearing up for February’s Carnival, the cosmopolitan, passionate and proud Trinidadian capital, Port of Spain, works and plays as hard as any place in the Caribbean. But when it does come time to relax, idyllic, lightly developed Tobago has enough hidden waterfalls, secluded coves and thickets of tropical greenery to refresh the weariest of souls. It’s the best of both worlds.



**DAY ONE** | A single blast from a foghorn rouses you in your 20th-floor suite at the **Hyatt Regency Trinidad**, in downtown Port of Spain. You peer out over the Gulf of Paria, where fishing and cargo boats bob in the distance, before venturing into the hazy morning air.

Your first meal is at **The Breakfast Shed**, a no-frills waterfront eatery whose seating area is a covered courtyard favored by boat crews and office workers. You order swordfish *buljol* (a kind of salad), along with fry bake: the fried unleavened bread that’s a simple but surprisingly delicious local staple. Seabirds lurk, eyeing your plate, but you feed them not.

From here, you cut through Independence Square and hang a left at

Frederick Street, where a jumble of tin-roof markets, rum bars and roti shops jostle for your attention with the aid of roving touts and blown-out speaker systems. A few blocks north, you enter pastoral **Queen’s Park Savannah**, the city’s verdant 260-acre central park, where, even at this early hour, a handful of soccer matches are under way. It’s getting intensely hot, so you stop at a cart selling coconut water. The proprietor informs you that the park will fill up when the temperature drops in the afternoon, then hands you the most refreshing beverage you’ve ever tasted.

Continuing along the western edge of the park, you come upon the remnants



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## TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

**SHINE ON** The Yuma Mas showroom in Port of Spain, where the Carnival attire on display is described as “sexy mas”

### TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO BY THE NUMBERS

AREA, IN SQUARE MILES

**1,980**

POPULATION

**1.3 MILLION**

LENGTH OF COASTLINE, IN MILES

**225**

DISTANCE FROM  
THE VENEZUELAN COAST, IN MILES

**7**

BARRELS OF OIL  
PRODUCED ANNUALLY

**≈154,000**

DISTANCE THAT KESHORN WALCOTT  
THREW A JAVELIN IN THE 2012  
OLYMPICS (GIVING HIS COUNTRY ITS  
FIRST GOLD IN A FIELD EVENT)

**277' 6"**

NUMBER OF STEEL PAN BANDS

**225**

DATE OF THE NEXT CARNIVAL

**2/11–2/12**

of a running competition that started in the early 1900s among plantation owners to see who could build the most opulent estate. Some of the Magnificent Seven, as the buildings are known, have been lovingly maintained. Others haven't, but even those have a kind of crumbling grandeur.

As you reach the northwest corner of the park, you realize you've worked up an appetite. It's time for roti, *dhalpuri* bread stuffed with anything from shrimp to curried mango. You duck into **Dopson's Roti Shop**, an establishment whose spare concrete design belies its wild popularity among locals. Thankfully, the place is relatively empty when you arrive. The owner suggests the boneless chicken, which you wolf down while sitting on the restaurant's front steps.

A stack of napkins later, you visit the showroom of **Yuma Mas**, one of the city's “mas camps” (“mas” being short for “masquerade”), where Carnival bands display the outfits their members will wear come February. Mannequins are draped in some of the brightest, most revealing outfits imaginable. A production assistant takes a break from sewing baubles onto feathers to ask what will become an oft-heard question: “You're going to come back for Carnival, right?” Looking around, you start thinking that maybe you will.

Following a swim in the Hyatt's rooftop infinity pool, you stop for a glass of wine in the chic lobby lounge and take in a mesmerizing sunset over the gulf. Then you head to **Flair**, chef Jason Huggins' fine-dining restaurant on the corner of Taylor



**HOOKED** Lunch at No Man's Land; below, coconut panna cotta at Chaud Creole; opposite, The Villas at Stonehaven

Street and Ariapita Avenue (a bustling stretch known locally as “the Avenue”). The meal starts off with a bang: cassava-stuffed shrimp with Scotch bonnet–spiked tartar sauce. After devouring the fiery appetizer, you dig into crab-crusting grouper with mango-citrus relish, callaloo cream and yuca *con mojo*. Sated, you roll yourself outside, where evening revelers have already started spilling into the street.

Several blocks east, **Drink** entices you to take a seat at a sidewalk table. The wine bar turns out to be a hub for Trinidad’s creative community, and it’s not long before you’re engrossed in conversation. “If there’s one thing Trinbagonians are good at, it’s liming,” one patron tells you, explaining that “lime” is a catchall social word that locals use to describe everything from a quick chat to a big party. After a few more drinks, she invites you—along with an architect, a food writer and a fashion designer—to join her for a side trip to the St. James district for some classic Trinidadian nightlife.

Afterward, you swing through downtown to visit **Zen**, a thumping party spot, where you get sucked into a swirl of lights,

noise and heat. By the time soca stars K Rich and Swappi hit the stage, things really begin to blur: toasts, cheers, hugs, dancing. You’re told there are spots in town that keep the party going later, but you bid your new friends adieu—you have plans to visit a large monkey first thing in the morning, and for that you’ll need some rest.

**DAY TWO** | Getting up isn’t easy, but Trinidad provides plenty of incentives—most notably the “doubles” carts, which serve fried bread wrapped around curried chickpea filling. Having knocked down three of these at **George Doubles**, a popular cart in the Woodbrook neighborhood with a line 20 deep, you feel ready to tackle one of the island’s extreme sports: driving. This takes place on narrow, potholed roads populated with motorists jockeying for the title of

Most Unpredictable Driver. The key, as with most things in Port of Spain, is to stay sharp and go fast. You begin to enjoy it. Your rental car does not.

Heading south, you arrive in the town of Chaguanas, where you walk down a road that makes yesterday’s excursion on Frederick Street seem somnolent by comparison. You stop briefly to squint at the freshly painted **Lion House**, family home of Nobel Prize–winning author V.S. Naipaul.





**BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL** Clockwise from right, the Lion House; Richard's Bake and Shark; ornithologist Newton George in the Tobago Forest Reserve; cassava-stuffed shrimp at Flair; shopping at the Chaguanas Market

You move on to the produce section of the **Chaguanas Market**, where a hodgepodge of vendors fills the cavernous space with the delicious aromas of fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices. You haggle over a bag of sapodillas, then munch on one of the soft, sweet fruits while strolling back to the car, resisting the roti shops.

Soon you pull into Carapichaima, a town to the west with large Hindu and Muslim populations, and make your way to the **Waterloo Temple**, also known as the Temple in the Sea. A causeway lined with tattered prayer flags leads to the teardrop-domed structure. You take off your shoes, enter the Hindu temple and sit, surrounded by stone statues and painted tiles. Through the open doorway, past the prayer flags twitching in the breeze, you spy a tiny fishing boat rolling over the waves. Serenity envelops you.

A few miles east, you spot a red humanoid figure looming in the distance. As you approach, you see it's a monkey—a big



one. At 85 feet, the **Hanuman Murti** is said to be the tallest depiction of the Hindu Monkey God in the Western Hemisphere. Supposedly the deity protects people from wrongdoing. Its right palm is held out as if to say "stop," and your stomach is

grumbling, so you begin to wonder if the Monkey God might be trying to protect you from your increasingly urgent compulsion to devour fatty food.

From here, you wend your way past the capital and up the twisting North

**LOCAL KNOWLEDGE**

THE INSIDE SCOOP FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER JAMES FIELD



**Cleve Calderon**

OWNER,  
CLEVE'S ONE-STOP MUSIC SHOP

"The best local plays are at Queen's Hall and the National Academy for the Performing Arts. For calypso, go to Mas Camp Pub—they have dancing and a live band. The younger people like soca, though."



**Norma Clowes**

CO-OWNER,  
THE SEAHORSE INN

"I like the Tobago Plantations Beach and Golf Resort. There are caimans in the ponds, and there's a huge number of waterbirds because of the lakes, wetlands and mangrove swamp. It's just great."



**Kwesi Marciano**

PHOTOGRAPHER

"Mayaro Beach, in the southeast, has lots to explore. There are fishing villages, swamps and marshland. At sunrise, the villagers pull in their nets—if you lend a hand, you might be rewarded with some fish!"





## THREE PERFECT DAYS || TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



### DAY ONE

#### Hyatt Regency Trinidad

1 Wrightson Rd., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-623-2222

**The Breakfast Shed** Wrightson Road, opposite Independence Square, Port of Spain, Trinidad

**Queen's Park Savannah** Maraval Road and St. Clair Avenue, Port of Spain, Trinidad

**Dopson's Roti Shop** 4 Maraval Rd., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-628-6141

**Yuma Mas** 12 Alcazar St., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-628-1919

**Flair** 2 Taylor St., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-628-1606

**Drink** 63 Rosalino St., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-622-2895

**Zen** 9-11 Keate St., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-625-9936

### DAY TWO

**George Doubles** Carlos and Robert streets, Port of Spain, Trinidad

**Lion House** Chaguanas Main Road, Chaguanas, Trinidad

**Chaguanas Market** Eleanor Road, Chaguanas, Trinidad

**Waterloo Temple (Temple in the Sea)** Carapichaima, Trinidad

**Hanuman Murti** Carapichaima, Trinidad; Tel. 868-675-7034

**Richard's Bake and Shark** North Coast Road, Maracas Bay Village, Trinidad

**Chaud Creole** 6 Nook Ave., Port of Spain, Trinidad; Tel. 868-621-2002

### DAY THREE

**The Villas at Stonehaven** Stonehaven Bay, Tobago; Tel. 868-639-0361

**Tobago Waterholics** Pigeon Point Road, Pigeon Point, Tobago; Tel. 868-688-7669

**Gilpin Trace** Roxborough-Parlatuvier Road, Tobago Forest Reserve

**El Pescador** 14 Miller's St., Buccoo Point, Tobago; Tel. 868-631-1266



**POINT OF REFLECTION** The Waterloo Temple, a.k.a. the Temple in the Sea, on the Gulf of Paria

Coast Road to Maracas Beach, a crescent of perfect sand and swaying palms with a picturesque mountain backdrop. Your real destination, though, is **Richard's Bake and Shark**, whose specialty is fried shark served on fried bread (described by celebrity chef Andrew Zimmern as "the best fish sandwich I've ever eaten"). The puffy bake

proves to be the ultimate vehicle for the sauces you've chosen from the toppings stand, and one bite is all it takes. You're hooked. The Monkey God has been defied.

Back in Port of Spain, you make tracks for the far less serene Tragarete Road, home to the "panyard" of the Invaders Steel Orchestra. The band is rehearsing a

dynamic routine for the upcoming Panorama, the big steel pan festival preceding Carnival. The Invaders take their music very seriously—when you've heard them rehearse the same complex five-second phrase several times, you take that as your cue to return to the hotel to refresh.

Dinner is at **Chaud Creole**, a legendary outpost of Creole cooking in the affluent St. Ann's neighborhood. Chef Khalid Mohammed's gourmet take on oxtail burnt-sugar stew, paired with his melt-in-your-mouth breadfruit "oil down" (named after the process by which coconut milk is cooked into the fruit), makes you question your fealty to the fry bake.

You consider checking out the action on the Avenue, which will be hopping at this hour, but good sense prevails. The ferry leaves for Tobago around dawn.

**DAY THREE** | There are two things open for breakfast at this ungodly hour: the fruit bowl in your room and, to your delight, a doubles stand just outside the hotel. At the latter, you grab a few to go. Also close by: the ferry terminal, from which you embark on a two-and-a-half-hour voyage to the port town of Scarborough, Tobago.

## BEAT GENERATION

### The origins of soca

Regardless of whether you've shaken a tail feather at Carnival, you've likely heard (perhaps in the middle of a "Hot, Hot, Hot"-induced conga line on a cruise ship) the energetic dance music known as soca, which makes up the bulk of the festival's soundtrack. The style's origins go back to the late 1960s, when an artist named Lord Shorty added Indian rhythms and instrumentation to Trinidad mainstay calypso, dubbing the mixture "soca"—the soul of calypso. His 1974 classic, *Endless Vibrations*, is recognized as the genre's first full-length album.

But nothing can be left alone in a place like Trinidad, where cultural exchange is a matter of course. Today, there are innumerable soca offshoots—rapso, ragga soca, chutney soca—which incorporate other Caribbean influences. At Trinidad's clubs, DJs generally don't limit their palette to one style, yet the end result is always the same. "It doesn't matter who you are," says a dancer at Zen in Port of Spain, "your hips will move."



**FAST TRACKS**  
Soca star K Rich performs at Zen

**STANDING OUT** The Hanuman Murti, one of the world's tallest (and most colorful) depictions of the Hindu Monkey God



Upon your arrival, a taxi takes you to your accommodations at **The Villas at Stonehaven**, where you check in, drop your bags, inspect the Jeep that's been arranged for your stay, discover a private infinity pool out back with a view of the ocean, and fall in love with the beauty of it all.

After bonding with a neighborhood cat who's figured out that vacationers give good leftovers, you tear yourself away from the pool and drive west to Pigeon Point for a private cruise along the island's Caribbean coast. Your **Tobago Waterholics** captain insists, repeatedly, upon being called "Captain Jack Sparrow" (like his adopted namesake, he sports dreadlocks and a shiny grill). He takes you past secret waterfalls, secluded beaches and hidden

coves. Idling in Englishman's Bay, where a forest abuts a sliver of sand, Captain Jack suggests that you catch lunch from the boat, with the idea being that you'll commandeer one of the grills at a beach called No Man's Land. "No fish, no lunch!" he chides. "No pressure!"

You'd like to say it doesn't take long to reel in the bright red snappers that you and the jolly captain toss onto the grill, but the truth is that a kindly fisherman provides the catch after your attempts yield little more than used bait. But no matter. Standing there under a palm tree, your toes in the sand and the crystalline water halfway up your calves, picking apart tender flakes of salty fish cradled in a grape leaf, you are struck by the thought that failure has never tasted so good.

After a quick wade in the Nylon Pool—a popular swimming area on a sandbar of ground-up coral, supposedly named by Britain's Princess Margaret for its sparkling-clear blue water—you're back on land and driving east toward a spot in the lush Tobago Forest Reserve called **Gilpin Trace**. Tobago is a world-class destination for birders, and you're there to meet up with their most popular guide, noted local ornithologist Newton George, a charming, easygoing gentleman who convinced David Attenborough to feature Tobago in his landmark nature series "The Trials of Life." The hike that follows goes like this: George spots something colorful in the distance, asks if you see it, frames it for you in a telescope, asks again, points with a green laser, asks again. Repeat.

The last meal of your trip is at the homey seafood restaurant **El Pescador**,

where you order the jumbo lime shrimp, sweet plantains, rice and steamed vegetables. The dish, with the help of some local Angostura 1919 rum, lulls you into a reverie. You are brought back by your waiter, who politely informs you that the drumbeat you hear in the distance is the weekly "Sunday School" party getting started around the corner. You like the sound of that: dancing, drinking, street food, the smell of the ocean. You pay your bill and walk toward it, stepping to the rhythm being carried over the breeze.

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*Hemispheres editor at large* **SAM POLCER** wishes that 85-foot monkeys played more of a role in his major life decisions.

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**BOARDING PASS** ➔ From the revelry of Carnival and the nightlife of Port of Spain to the lush forests of Gilpin Trace, there's far more to the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago than surf and sand—though there's plenty of that too. United can get you there with nonstop service from its hubs at New York/Newark and Houston, which connect with dozens of North American cities. Before boarding, consider purchasing a day pass to relax in a spacious United Club; memberships are also available. **For more information or to book your flight, go to [united.com](http://united.com).**