

TAKE SOME TIME OUT TO LEARN ABOUT FABULOUS TRINIDAD & TOBAGO!

Happy New Year!
My name is **Steely** and I will be sharing some amazing facts about **Trinidad & Tobago**.

For example, if eco-tourism interests you...

DID YOU KNOW?

T&T boasts the oldest protected rainforest in the Western Hemisphere!



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Caribbean Cuba, Trinidad

LIVING la vida SALSA

Havana is Cuba's vibrant capital, but in smaller towns you might find it easier to get into the Cuban spirit. **Philippa Jacks** dances in the streets of Trinidad



Our tour group was entertained in the paladar while we ate. The man who led us to his home for dinner is on percussion

AFTER it got dark, my tour guide led me quietly to Trinidad's town square to make the rendezvous. Up a steep, cobbled street, the man I had arranged to meet stood waiting in the shadows, in the scarlet shirt he had pre-warned me he would wear. He discreetly beckoned me up the hill, and into one of the crumbling houses. At this point my guide turned back; he would be breaking the law if he came with me.

I was not, as the more criminally-minded of you may have imagined, procuring black market cigars or a night with a Cuban gigolo (though I'm sure I could have found both in Trinidad if I'd really tried). I was on my way to have dinner in a paladar, one of Cuba's small, privately-owned and family-run restaurants. Tourists can eat in them but Cubans can't, hence our tour guide's cloak-and-dagger approach. Before getting to Trinidad on the south coast, we'd spent three nights

in Havana, where we'd been distinctly underwhelmed by the beans-and-rice combos we tended to have in state-run restaurants.

So as we sat in our host's backyard, and his wife and mother brought out plates piled with lobster halves, spicy prawns, avocados, potato salad, and grilled fish, we all shut up for several minutes while we tucked in.

After leaving the paladar we walked (which is easier said than done in high heels on the cobbles) to one of Trinidad's most popular nightspots, the Casa de la Musica. This music venue is at the top of a long flight of steps leading up from the church, but on the two evenings we visited, the bands were playing outside, halfway up the steps, instead of indoors.

A couple of hundred people sat sipping cocktails and tapping their feet as they watched an energetic, African-inspired tribal dance. But

the real crowd-pleaser was the 20-piece salsa band, which came with a troupe of ancient local men, who seemed to be employed to get female tourists on the dance-floor.

One particularly aged-looking guy asked me (via an interpreter) if he could reserve a dance for later. He looked like he could be on day-release from an old folk's home, but I reluctantly agreed, hoping to make a sharp exit before he could come back. He caught me half an hour later, trying to slide away, and dragged me straight off to dance.

My concerns that he might be past it were unfounded: he launched into such a lively salsa that we knocked the socks off much younger couples nearby, and I was suddenly rather smug that I was dancing with the oldest man in Cuba.

If dancing with octogenarian strangers is not really your scene, you'll still find lots in and around Trinidad to keep you occupied.

We spent one blissfully lazy day on a catamaran trip out to Cayo Macho, an island with tame iguanas. Another day we drove up into the Topes de Collantes mountains in an old Russian army truck, to hike through the forest and bathe in its lagoons.

It's worth spending a couple of days exploring the town itself too. Trinidad has been a Unesco World Heritage Site since 1988 and is a wonderfully preserved colonial city of churches, museums, and brightly painted houses with iron grilles.

To see how the sugar plantation owners lived in days gone by, visit the Museo Romantico. This is a colonial mansion from 1808 full of beautiful antiques and furniture. One room, about the same size as my entire flat, was empty except for a toilet in the middle: a real test of your whistling ability since there's no way you could keep one foot on the door from that distance.

Our guide Roberto also took us

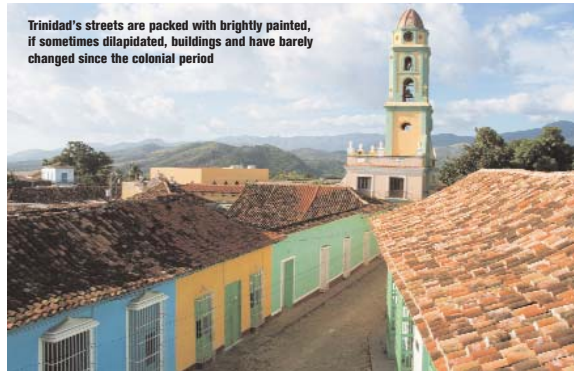
into one of the local ration shops to give us a fascinating insight into how Cuban rationing works. I felt rather voyeuristic, but Roberto assured me that Cubans are not ashamed of the way they live. Many are proud of their communist society, and the superb health and social services and education that it has allowed them.

The question on all of our lips was, of course, what will happen when Fidel Castro dies? (Whenever Roberto is asked this, he dryly replies: "We'll bury him.")

No one is sure if Castro's legacy will persist, or whether relations with the US will improve and Cuba's economy be revived. Perhaps Cubans will soon have Sky TV, new cars to replace the clapped-out Cadillacs, and the freedom to enter the US. And perhaps they will be allowed to eat in a paladar – though I don't think it would be half as much fun without the sneaking around.



Ration shops for food and basic provisions are found all over Cuba. All Cubans receive the same amount, irrespective of how much they earn



Trinidad's streets are packed with brightly painted, if sometimes dilapidated, buildings and have barely changed since the colonial period



You can hike to waterfalls in Topes de Collantes

SELLING TRINIDAD

TWIN-CENTRE HOLIDAYS
Trinidad is 5-6 hours by coach from Havana, so harder to twin-centre than Varadero. Many visit Trinidad on escorted tours, but accommodation-only supplier **Alpharooms** features two of Trinidad's best hotels: the new **Iberostar Grand** and **Las Cuevas**.
● www.alpharooms.com

HOTELS

I stayed at **Las Cuevas**, on **Cave-disco** hill, which has spectacular views but the hill is very steep. The **Iberostar** is more central.

GETTING AROUND

Most of Trinidad can be explored on foot. Street-sellers are more prominent in Trinidad than in Havana but will leave you alone after a firm refusal.

BOOK IT!

SAMPLE PACKAGE

EXODUS is selling a nine-day Taste of Cuba tour from £979 departing June 1, 2008. Price includes return flights, accommodation, all transport and some meals. Exodus has now abolished local payments, but entrance to some attractions and tips are extra.
● www.exodus.co.uk

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