

THE INDEPENDENT TOBAGO

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Small but perfectly formed tropical retreats

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Ride horses, snorkel and paddleboard at your leisure

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WINGS OF DESIRE

It's a twitcher's paradise, with an array of exotic birds

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Saddle up for goat racing at the lavish Buccoo track

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In association with

THE ISLAND OF
Tobago

BRITISH AIRWAYS

ONE STEP BEYOND *Dip into a beautiful, accessible island* **P.2**



GETTY IMAGES

Simon Calder

Our man in Scarborough

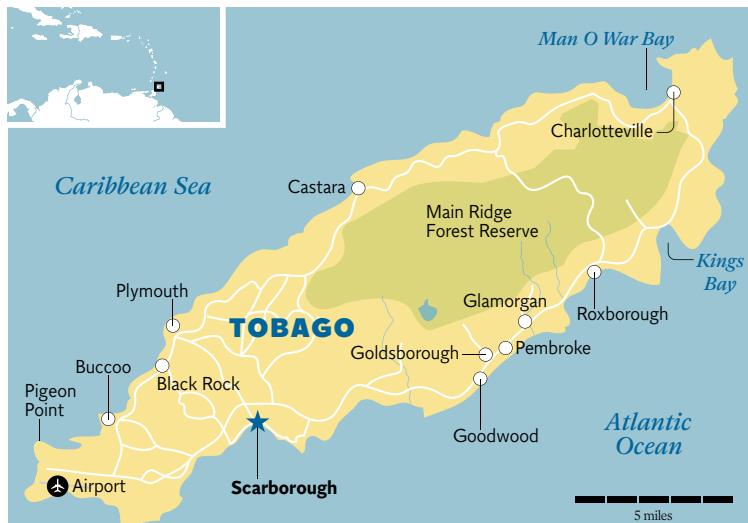


Caribbean with a touch of the Isle of Wight

Travel westwards, exactly one-sixth of the way around the world, and south far enough to be well within the warm embrace of the Tropics. You should find yourself 4,366 miles from Gatwick, and in the most fortunate position of touching down in Tobago.

The names are familiar: Scarborough, the capital, as well as Pembroke and Goodwood. On the map, the island resembles an acute accent that has come adrift from its bigger neighbour, Trinidad. Tobago is slightly smaller than the Isle of Wight, and having experienced them both I can confirm that it is rather more exotic. So perhaps you will join me on a quick tour.

A very good place to start is the extreme south-west of the island, at Crown Point, which is the location for the airport. The journey into Scarborough takes just a quarter-hour – and delivers you to a working port that decorates Rockley Bay. There's a pretty Botanical Garden, but the main attraction is Fort King George, offering fabulous views across the southern part of the island. Inside the former officers' quarter, the Tobago Historical Museum will not detain



'A good place to start is the south-west of the island'

you too long – but will give you an excellent insight into the island and its fluctuating fortunes.

Close by, the island's top stadium is named after Tobago's sports star Dwight Yorke, the former Aston Villa and Manchester United footballer.

Heading east, the road soon shakes off the modest suburbs and starts a sinuous course towards the far end of the island. There are those

who will whizz straight along to their hotels and villas, but wise travellers during their stay will visit the accessible and beautiful interior, in the shape of Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve.

The deeper you get into the rainforest, the more intense the experience. I took a guided hike along a trail that was wreathed in roots and tendrils, the air heavy with moisture and the aroma of the jungle. Climb higher – waves of cool air will assuage the effort – and you get glimpses of the Caribbean before the tourists arrived.

Arrive we did, though, and the north-east of the island is where most of us end up. Unlike some other islands, everything remains on a human scale. You get the sense that Tobagonians shun barriers between the host community and the visitor, so you can wander from your accommodation to eat, drink and be merry in colourful venues that you share with the islanders. Back in your resort, though, the usual luxuries abound.

The back road on the other side of the island is even more of an adventure, snaking beside the coast and through the hills, before dropping down to Scarborough. Over towards the airport, it loops past fairways that are the island's main appeal to golfers. One more feature in common to both Tobago and the Isle of Wight: both are outside the hurricane belt, good news for anyone planning a trip in the summer or autumn.

MY TOBAGO ALISON SARDINHA



Alison Sardinha, 72, runs the Blue Crab restaurant (tobagobluecrab.com) in Scarborough with her husband, Ken.

I always wanted to come back here.

I lived in New York for 17 years, three of my four children were born there, but I always knew I would come back to Tobago. The American embassy could not believe it when we gave up our US citizenship! Yes, we could have made more money in New York, but Tobago is about the people and the peace. It may have developed a lot, and nowadays there's everything to suit every pocket, but it is still a safe and good place to live.

The other end of the island is a big adventure.

When I was a kid, we used to make special trips all the way to Charlotteville. Dad would pack us seven children in the car and we'd travel all 26 miles right to the end of the island and stay there for a week. We'd stop in the rainforest on the way and catch crayfish in the streams. It was like going to another world, where the only sound was the smack of the waves on the beach. We also went there once when I was pregnant, and I ate nothing but fresh fish, morning, noon and night for a week.

My childhood on the island was all about freedom.

The place where I was born in Scarborough is now the site of a little church, so I always say I was born on sacred ground. We girls would go down to Rockley Bay to the beach, eating mangoes off the tree. I saw a land shark at Mt Irvine beach. At least I thought it was a land shark – my parents told me it was a normal shark, which had been chasing baby fish up onto the beach.

The sunset on the Caribbean coast is something else.

Head for Castara and watch the sun go down. The view is so completely unspoiled, the sky goes gold, and if you're lucky you'll see a green flash just as the sun finally disappears. When I first saw that green flash, I was so excited I screamed.

We have colourful superstitions.

We lived at the top of the hill and just down the road from us lived an old lady from another island. People said she was a *soucroyant* [a shape-shifting Caribbean folklore character], and I was always scared she would suck me up. If I was walking alone past her house, I would make the sign of the cross and sprint past as fast as I could. There was also the *diablesse* – she'd come out at night, looking very beautiful in a flowing dress, but with a cow's foot on one of her legs, which she hid by walking in a ditch. She would lure men into the bushes and do away with them.



Sea view: look out for the green flash at sunset – or if you're an early bird, sunrise ALAMY

We are creative about food in Tobago.

When I was young we had saltfish, fresh vegetables and fruits and all kinds of beans. Our parents were creative with sauces and herbs. We got our more exotic foods from the *potik*, the vendor who came around on his bicycle, blowing his horn. Today the creative local foods are still here.

I once won a trip to England.

My favourite trip was three years ago when I won a ticket to the UK. My husband Ken and I went to – I don't like to say it, it sounds like a cuss word – Norfolk. I had my first eggs Benedict, and saw an apple tree. We went to where the Queen goes on holiday. I gave her place a little wave.

The Big Six

By Aoife O'Riordain

Guesthouses



Best for honeymoons **Castara Retreats**

There is touch of the treehouse to each of the 14 lodges that make up Castara Retreats, poking up through lush vegetation on a hillside outside the small village from which it takes its name. With views of a perfect mezzaluna of golden sand, the one- and two-bedroom, self-catering villas and apartments are simple yet stylish with louvred shutters and hammocks for al fresco lounging watching the hummingbirds dart around you. Castara Retreats has extended its wellness offering, and now has yoga classes and massages with mind-blowing views of the aquamarine waters of the Caribbean; or you can simply wander down to the village and mingle with the locals.

► *Castara Retreats, Castara (07841 645238; castararetreats.com). Doubles from £75, room only.*



Best for couples **The Seahorse Inn**

Grafton Beach is one of Tobago's most alluring stretches of sand, gently lapped by the azure waters of the Caribbean. It's also an important nesting spot for the endangered Leatherback sea turtles that visit the island's shores. A short walk away at Black Rock is The Seahorse Inn, a small B&B with a restaurant that gazes over the beach. The inn has four bedrooms done in simple yet comfortable style, each with a view of Stonehaven Bay. The charming restaurant, one of the island's hotspots, is the ideal place to watch the sunset. ► *The Seahorse Inn, Grafton Beach Road, Black Rock (001 868 639 0686; seahorsein-tobago.com). Doubles from £68, B&B.*



Best for wilderness **The Rainbow Nature Resort**

There are just four guest rooms at this pretty converted cocoa house, surrounded by jacaranda. Quiet and tranquil, this is the place to get away from it all – the resort forms part of a 25-acre organic farm on the island's east coast in the foothills of Main Ridge, the oldest protected rainforest in the Western Hemisphere. With two enchanting waterfalls within easy reach, the estate is criss-crossed by trails shaded by bamboo canopies and forests inhabited by over 62 bird species. ► *The Rainbow Nature Resort, Lure Estate, Goldsborough (001 868 660 4755; therainbownatureresort.com). Doubles from £66, room only.*



Best for singles **Native Abode**

Experience authentic Tobagonian hospitality at the family run Native Abode, a short drive from Crown Point on the southwestern tip. Stephanie Trotman puts her experience spent working in the island's hospitality industry to good use at this three bedroom B&B. There are lots of local tips for guests and thoughtful touches like the fruit for breakfast plucked from the house's tropical gardens. You can use free bicycles, and are well placed for trips to the lovely beaches of Store Bay, Pigeon Point Beach and Heritage Park. ► *Native Abode, 13 Fourth St, Gaskin Bay Rd, Bon Accord, Tobago (001 868 639 0162; nativeabode.com). Doubles from £95, B&B.*



Best for families **Top O'Tobago**

As the name suggests, Top O'Tobago occupies a spectacular setting perching on a ridge on a tranquil swathe of the southwestern corner of the island. From here guests can soak up the views of hills cloaked in verdant vegetation and the sparkling waters of the Caribbean beyond. The main villa is supplemented by three smaller cabanas, all surrounded by tropical gardens of mango, cashew and lime trees. Borrow a snorkel and explore the coral reefs off Arnos Bay a short walk away, or spend an afternoon hiking the Mot Mot Trail, one of Tobago's acclaimed walking routes. ► *Top O'Tobago, Arnos Vale Road, Plymouth (001 868 697 0121; topo-tobago.com). Doubles from £80, B&B.*



Best for culture **Richmond Great House**

History buffs will enjoy a stay at Richmond Great House, one of only a few surviving historic plantation houses left on Tobago. Built in 1766, this grand, colonial-style home, set on a hill overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, was once at the centre of a sugar cane plantation, later switching to grow cocoa and coconut in the late 19th century. There are 10 very traditionally decorated guest rooms and a pool in the garden, shaded by the same immortal trees that once served as natural sun protection for the cocoa trees. ► *Richmond Great House, Glamorgan (001 415 298 7520; richmondgreathouse-tobago.net). Doubles from £100, B&B.*

Sun, sea, sand and stamina

*Tobago has more leisure activities than you can wave a palm tree frond at. **Andrew Eames** spends his mornings exploring the options, before recovering on the beach in the afternoon*

DAY ONE

AM: See how the other half lives. Civilisation – and tourism – may have colonised Tobago's southwestern lowlands, where most of the hotels are located, but the vast majority of the island's landmass is steep, cloaked in green and sizzling with life. A huge and ancient rainforest, a protected reserve since 1776 and on the list as a potential Unesco World Heritage site, runs down the island's spine. Meanwhile, a thin ribbon of a road throws a loop around the island's perimeter, teetering through ridgeback communities and then plunging down to fishing villages in a roller coaster ride.

Anyone with an ounce of curiosity will want to experience some of this, either by renting a car or taking a tour. Distances are not great (the island is only 26 miles long) but progress is slow. Be sure to venture up the Roxborough to Parlatuvier Road, the only ribbon of tar that traverses the rainforested spine. If you have time, take a walk down one of the marked trails. Even if you don't have the right footwear, a popular path like Gilpin's Trace has wellie-boot hirers ready and waiting by the side of the road.

PM: Time to relax. Enjoy the elegant oasis that is Castara, a fishing village on the Caribbean shore with a surprising number of distinctive guesthouses snuggled in among the rioting greenery that lines the steep-walled bay. There are two beaches, the main one where the fishermen come and go, and Little Bay, with the better view, quieter water and multi-coloured

beach bar with a deck for watching the sunset. If you are in Castara on a Wednesday or Saturday, local women bake delicious bread in a domed wood-fired oven just behind the beach.

DAY TWO

AM: In and out of the bright lights. Tobago's southwest corner, particularly at Crown Point, is the holidaymakers' hub, with restaurants, hotels and shopping centres. It can be busy, particularly along the main artery, Milford Road, but even here there's some remote country where you can ride on horseback past disused sugarcane mills and canter along empty sands, yet still be in plane-spotting distance of the airport.

These horse-friendly trails are in former plantation lands in the community of Friendship, just south of Milford Road. Here Derek Hearn at his endearingly ramshackle Friendship Stables (001 868 308 7201; tours T\$150/£15) may look a touch wild and woolly, but he loves his horses, and his horses love to wade out into the warm sea. Ask to ride his docile 17-year-old former racer, Sweetman in Thong.

PM: Afterwards, you may need reminding that despite barely having seen another soul all morning, you are just a stone's throw from the hub of tourism. So head back down Milford Road to Pigeon Point, Tobago's big set-piece white sand beach, and a location much loved by wedding planners. Here there's plenty of space for everyone and everything, including many more forms of riding: windsurfing, Jet Skiing,



'Henry dispenses wisdom and fixes shoes under the mango tree'

stand-up paddleboarding, and kite surfing, with equipment hire and lessons all available (001 868 681 4741; standuppaddletobago.com; US\$60/£40). Pigeon Point's placid, shallow offshore waters are ideal for all this, thanks to the long, protective arm of the Buccoo reef. Reef trips and glass-bottomed boats come and go from Pigeon Point's jetty, the setting for many a photograph, all of which have a backdrop of surfers' kites.

DAY THREE

AM: You have only got to open a menu here to realise that "teeming" is the keyword, because fish are colourful, delectable and never far away: catch them yourself. One of the most excellent sport fish is the "ghost of the flats", or bonefish, stalked in reef-protected shallows that are rarely more than thigh deep. Caught on the fly or with lures, these superbly athletic fish can reach up to 10lbs, growing far larger here than on most Caribbean islands. Gerard "Frothy" de Silva at Hard Play (001 868 639 7108; hardplay.net; fishing tours from US\$150/£100pp) has the gear and the expertise.

PM: Escape from the glare of the sun on Turtle Beach, over by Plymouth, where there's a chance to get even more fish by helping the locals haul seine nets onto the sand. As the beach's name suggests, leatherback sea turtles come ashore after dark along this sandy mile to lay their eggs during the nesting season (March to August). Ask the charismatic Henry the leatherman about it; he dispenses wisdom, and fixes shoes, under the mango tree by the Turtle Beach Hotel.



DAY FOUR

AM: By now you might be feeling the need to take some serious exercise. So combine fitness gain with a fresh view of the island by renting a bicycle at Easygoers (001 868 681 8025; easygoersbikes.com; from US\$15/£10 per day) in Crown Point's Milford Road. Get off the main drag quickly by heading down Golden Grove Road towards Mount Irvine, swing around the golf course and climb up to the village of Patience Hill, for a taste of village life and excellent views in all directions. If you feel the need for speed, Easygoers can also drop you and your bike at the far end of the island, to make your way back along the hilly coastal road.

Totally tropical: Pigeon Point beach (above) is the ideal photo backdrop; if golfing (left) isn't your cup of tea, boating (right) is sure to be

REX FEATURES, GETTY IMAGES, CORBIS

PM: Collapse onto a sunlounger at popular Store Bay, just across the road from the bike hire. The beach is excellent, with good snorkelling to the left side, but can be crowded, particularly at weekends. To refuel, good quality and good value local food is sold from takeaway outlets (try Silvia's for goat curry) at the back of the beach, alongside several souvenir kiosks.

DAY FIVE

AM: Once upon a time Tobago was a prized colonial possession, changing hands an amazing 33 times. To get a sense of this history, head up to the British-built Fort King George (001 868 639 3970; admission T\$10/£1, open Monday-Friday 9am-4pm), which lords it over the island's capital Scarborough. From there you can admire the island's best preserved fortifications (from 1780) and the terrific view. Travel that view by driving out along the Atlantic coast to Roxborough. Just inland here, by the Argyll waterfall, is the Tobago Cocoa Estate (001 868 390 2021; tobagococoa.com; tours T\$60/£6), the only remaining plantation of what was once a valuable island-wide industry. The manager will walk you round this very peaceful, fruitful glade, and then slide back the roof of the drying-house to let you smell the beans. When ripe, they taste of nothing; when dried, they smell of bad feet. It's a miracle that anyone ever discovered chocolate.

PM: Kings Bay, beyond Roxborough, represents peace in the east, with one of the calmest spots on the (generally rougher) Atlantic shore. It's a quiet, laid-back place of soft sand tucked into the corner of a big protective bay. Come



here midweek, and it could be just you and the lifeguards.

DAY SIX

AM: Cruise-sail the coast: Every day the all-inclusive catamaran *Island Girl* (001 868 639 7245; sailtobago.com; US\$90/£60 per adult) sets off at 9.30am from the beach at Mount Irvine to dawdle along the island's more placid Caribbean coast, her steady progress unwrapping the steep, green-cloaked tumbling shore. Captain Danny and crew drop anchor in Cotton Bay (only accessible from the sea) and serve up a lunch of marinated fish and caramelised chicken stew, before moving on to Emerald Bay, where the snorkelling is particularly good. Usually the return journey is made under sail, scudding peacefully home pursued by dolphins and followed at a distance by huge wingspan frigatebirds, on the hunt for flying fish.

PM: You'll be back by 3.30pm. Afterwards, Mount Irvine beach itself makes excellent sunset watching, and there's a handy beach bar to consolidate any friendships made on board. For anyone seeking more excitement, the far right-hand side of the beach has a surfer's reef-break which can reach 15ft high, with boards for rent under the almond trees (ask for George).

DAY SEVEN

AM: The seventh day is the Lord's day, and it won't have escaped a visitor's notice that this is an island that loves to celebrate its faith, which it does in a uniquely Tobagonian way. Every community holds its own harvest festival (tnt island.com/calendar.html) once a year, when the whole village decamps outside to cook local food, laugh, talk and drink a lot of rum and beer. Usually there's a harvest taking place somewhere on the island every week, and everyone is invited, for free, even tourists. Key features are the Cantata, at mid afternoon in the local church, with lots of singing, and "blocko", in the evening, where dancing takes to the streets. These are genuinely hospitable events and you wouldn't be made to feel like a gatecrasher – lots of islanders from other communities are doing the same.

PM: The choice of after-party relaxation will of course depend which harvest you attend, but if you leave early enough, have had a few drinks and would rather chill in a safe place, then the beach at Fort Bennett (near Black Rock) has a big reef-protected tidal pool where many an islander learned to swim. If you don't get there till after dark, then the gazebo up on the fort headland is an excellent place to philosophise and gaze out to sea.



Seahorses: whether you call it swimming or riding, it's fun ALAMY

Iridescent flights of fancy

Even non-twitchers will be enchanted by the prolific birdlife on this dazzling island. By **Alexander McLeod**

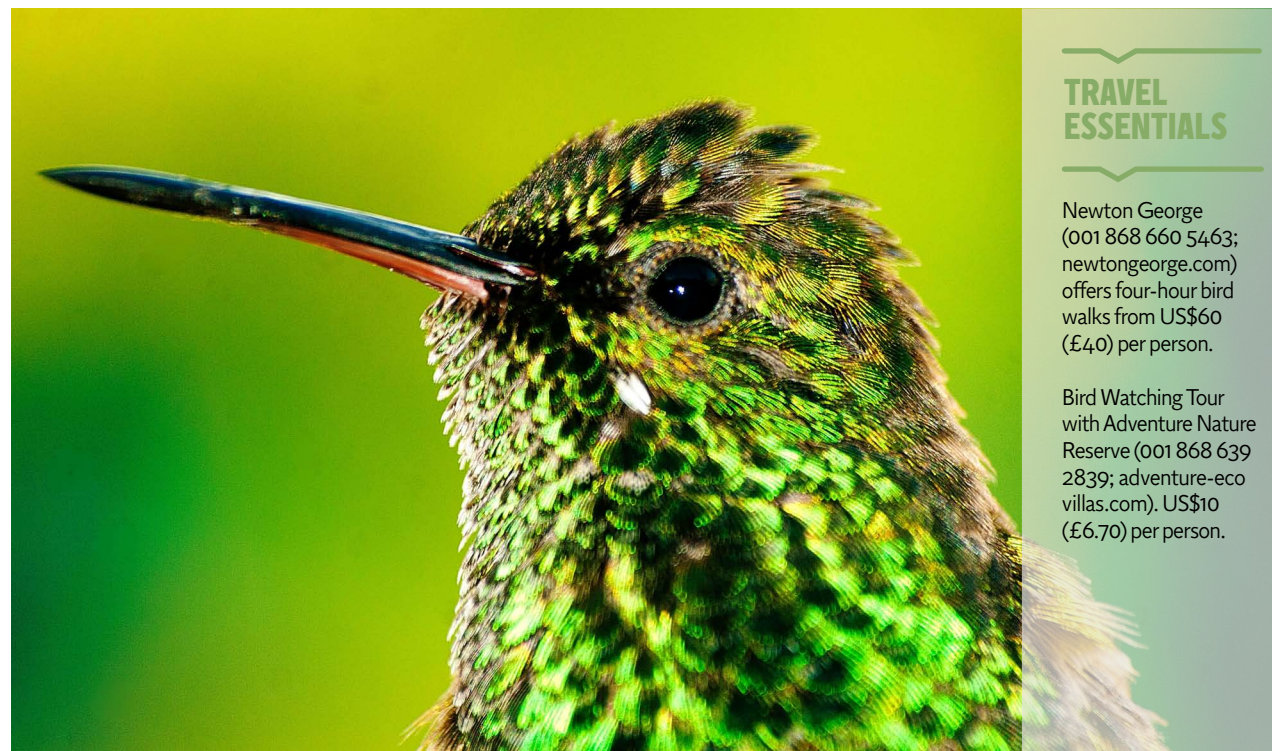
Newton George is a magician. Whenever he pointed his magic wand (aka a laser pen) at a branch of a tree, hey presto, a bird appeared, sitting right next to it. Either that, or he'd been round earlier in the morning bribing the blessed things. It happened again and again: look at the green dot, he'd say, and kapow, a sabre-winged hummingbird materialised out of thin air.

For the half-dozen of us on Newton's early morning bird walk up into Tobago's Main Ridge Forest Reserve, some things were obvious enough: it was hard to miss, for example, the call of the rufous-vented chachalaca – Tobago's national bird – whose harsh, cackling call suggests it has had a heavy night on the rum, but is still enjoying the jokes the morning after.

From our early morning meeting point in Roxborough, Newton took us up the forest road, explaining that Tobago, with some 270 species, has one of the highest ratios of birds to ground area of any place in the world. Evidence was all around. There were rufous-tailed jacamars on the roadside, shiny cowbirds in the undergrowth, and we soon saw a blue-crowned motmot, a lavishly beautiful bird with a fiery orange chest and skull-cap of iridescent blue. But Newton was after more unusual species, and he soon found us the potoo, a nocturnal bird dozing grumpily on a tree stump; and a pair of manakins, designer birds of electric blue with crowns of crimson, moving fast.

And then, once we'd donned our wellies and dived into the rainforest along a trail called Gilpin's Trace, Newton started to explain everything else as well: how the cornbirds made their hanging nests; what the leaf-cutter ants did with the leaves they cut; how the heliconias and bromeliads played their part in the life cycles of the birds. Before we knew it, four hours had gone.

Even if you are not a twitcher, you can't help noticing how prolific the birdlife is on Tobago. Sit down to breakfast al fresco, and the cheeky yellow-bellied bananaquits will come and perch on the chairback opposite. Offshore, the fishermen's



Lord of the wings: hummingbirds are just one of the many species that inhabit the island ALAMY

boats are lined with pelicans, and the sky is adorned with the huge wingspans of frigatebirds, looking for something to steal.

But the headline-grabbers are usually the hummingbirds, with their colours and their delicate grace. I'd heard that the place to see them in big numbers was a village called Adventure, but what I found was far better than I was expecting.

Adventure is near Plymouth, and here the Scottish-descended Ean Mackay runs his Adventure Farm and Nature Reserve in eight acres filled with exotic fruit trees. The big attraction, however, is Ean's veranda, lined with hanging bird feeders, and the rim of the patio otherwise stocked with all manner of fruit and seeds.

I was expecting to find captive hummingbirds looking a bit sorry for themselves, but the waves of birds visiting the feeders were as wild as those I saw with Newton in the forest. The five species here have become habituated to human presence, so when Ean rings his bell signifying food, these Billy whizzes come raining down from nearby trees and whirl around, bickering with each other, showing off their colours and drinking greedily.

Their manoeuvrability was mesmerising, from high speed to dead-stop hover in split seconds, and they barely seemed to notice me standing there, blazing away with my camera, hoping that the blessed things would stay still just for a second or two.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Newton George (001 868 660 5463; newtongeorge.com) offers four-hour bird walks from US\$60 (£40) per person.

Bird Watching Tour with Adventure Nature Reserve (001 868 639 2839; adventure-eco villas.com), US\$10 (£6.70) per person.

Whatever floats your goat

A multi-million dollar track in Buccoo is as fun as it is unique. By **Andrew Eames**

If there's one thing in which Tobago leads the world, then it is the (albeit fairly obscure) sport of goat racing. The word "racing" may sound like a malapropism, particularly as it takes place in a village whose name sounds like a syllable-challenged Buckaroo. But this is all for real: the Buccoo Integrated Facility (BIF) is a multi-million dollar goat-racing track, with grandstand, stables and paddocks, in the south-west of Tobago.

The BIF describes itself as "world class", and it has good reason to; in fact, the big Easter championships which take place here, attended by thousands, might as well call themselves the World Championships, given that nowhere in the world does goat racing in such style. And you don't have to be around for Easter, either, because



Win-win situation: goat handlers, also known as 'jockeys', race for the finish line REUTERS

the racing is now a feature of Buccoo's Sunday. If you want to make a (very long) day of it, you can stay on in the village for the celebrated Sunday School, which despite the sobriety of the name is an exhilarating evening of dancing, drinking and eating spread across several village venues.

But back to the goats. The sport has a long tradition in Buccoo, starting in 1925, and the sheer

scale of the BIF demonstrates how seriously it is taken. The track flaunts a traditional, manually operated 10-goat starting gate, and the course is 120 metres of carefully tended grass, with the finishing stretch flanked by a long grandstand and a VIP Pavilion.

Thoroughbred goats come thundering down the turf, hauling along their sprinting "jockeys" at the end of nine feet of rope. For the big festival these jockeys wear professional outfits, but for most Sundays they are likely to be in T-shirt and shorts. They need to be fast runners, because the goats are faster. A truly eager goat – and they all seem pretty competitive – is well capable of pulling his jockey over, and each race invariably has one or two animals, which arrive at the finishing line like a riderless horse.

Even if you don't manage to get to Buccoo for Sunday racing, there's a good chance of coming across evidence of the sport elsewhere. In the early morning, down on the beaches of Tobago, you may well see a man taking his goat for a swim. Not exactly normal behaviour, but then that won't be a normal man and his goat: it'll be a champion, and his trainer.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Visiting there
The Buccoo Easter goat-racing festival takes place at the Buccoo Integrated Facility on Tuesday 7 April (buccoointegrated.org)

OFFERS



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Seven nights at The Villas at Stonehaven

Discover Tobago, a tropical oasis of pure beauty, and experience the services and amenities of a luxury villa. Set out on a hillside that rises above the shimmering waters of the Caribbean Sea on the west coast of Tobago, The Villas at Stonehaven (stonehavenvillas.com) epitomises the best of a luxury resort in the Caribbean.

We've teamed up with the Tobago Division of Tourism and British Airways to offer one lucky reader the chance to win a seven night self-catering holiday for two in Tobago with return flights from London Gatwick courtesy of British Airways. The winner and their guest will stay at **The Villas at Stonehaven** in a luxury, one bedroom oceanview villa, with spacious living area, sundeck and infinity pool.

Tobago is one of the best kept secrets with year round sunshine and friendly people. White sand beaches, restaurants and an abundance of diverse activities such as bird watching, mountain biking, sailing, diving and golf are within easy reach. The island also offers lush tropical rainforest, a profusion of

wildlife, over 300 species of coral and 250 species of tropical birds in a virgin habitat of mountainous terrain and waterfalls.

British Airways flies to Tobago twice a week and offers seven nights at the 4.5* The Villas At Stonehaven, from £1,329 per person, for travel in September and October. Including return flights from London Gatwick and accommodation.

For reservations visit ba.com/tobago or call 0844 493 0120 (book by May 16).



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TOP THREE DIVE SITES

From the exquisitely clear waters of Speyside to the manta-ray infested waters of Stingray Alley, plunge into some of Tobago's finest diving spots

REX/FEATURES



Speyside

The island's Atlantic coast tends to have the best of the coral, and those sites furthest away from mainland Venezuela and the mouth of the Orinoco River (which sweeps out extensive sedimentation) also have the clearest water, so Speyside wins on both counts. In addition, Goat Island and Little Tobago ensure that there are always calm waters here, whatever the wind direction. One of the biggest single attractions is the Caribbean's largest brain coral, a giant at 15 feet wide.



Mount Irvine

Over on the Caribbean coast the currents are much more gentle, which makes wreck diving a viable prospect. The Maverick is a former passenger ferry, which was deliberately sunk off Mount Irvine in 100 feet of water back in 1997, since then it has steadily become a fertile ecosystem. Big schools of fish, and a real sense of mystery and adventure accompany entering the pilot deck and the cargo hold. The whole thing is covered in oysters, with lurking lobsters and moray eels.



Off Crown Point

The visibility on this south-westernmost shore may not be the best, but it has other advantages: it's close to all the hotels, and the fish density here is second to none. Lots of groupers and grunts, scorpionfish and damselfish, and hanging barracuda, particularly on the Kariwak Reef. Plus manta rays at Stingray Alley. There's also a very good chance of seeing sea turtles (hawksbill and leatherback), which go ashore here under cover of darkness to lay their eggs in the sand.

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