

# *Trinidad's Asa Wright Nature Centre*

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Having left Charleston, SC in January, Trinidad was the end of our first major passage. We determined it would be a place to get some work done and settle for a couple of months before heading to the western Caribbean. Beyond the hoopla of Carnival, we were pleasantly surprised to learn there was so much to see and do in Trinidad as a respite from the boat work.

We visited the Caroni Swamp and took a self-directed walking tour of downtown Port-of-Spain. We wandered through the markets and the botanical gardens and the zoo, thoroughly enjoying each. However, of all the places we visited in Trinidad, the one that exceeded all expectation was the Asa Wright Nature Centre.



*Several marked hiking trails meandered through the center of the reserve.*

We'd heard some good reports from other cruisers. Jesse James' tour services offered an overnight stay at the Centre and, along with four other couples, we left early one morning for a 1½ hour van ride to the Center. Nestled in the hills of the Arima Valley, we reached the 193-acre preserve mid-morning. Once a cocoa, coffee and citrus plantation owned by Dr. Henry and Mrs. Asa

Wright, the main house provides reception, the dining room, parlor and verandah for the guests. Separate bungalows offer rustic, but comfortable accommodations.

Asa Wright sold the house and estate in 1967 to a group familiar with the property who wished to protect the area and promote eco-tourism. It is now considered one of the top five eco-tour centers in the world. The wonderful old house was originally built in 1908 and its huge verandah was the most popular meeting spot for relaxation, chatting, drinks and observing the wildlife. Tea and cocktails were served there in the late afternoon. Very civilized!



*Jacobin hummingbird – How much closer can you get?*

Only about 7 miles from the Venezuelan coast and geologically part of South America, Trinidad shares many of the same bird species found in South America, many of which are resident at the center. Several marked hiking trails were outlined on maps and regularly scheduled interpretive tours by the knowledgeable center rangers were available. Up the road a short distance, a wonderful little lake was available for a refreshing swim. The highlight of the center for us was watching the abundance of birds and wildlife which came to feed at dawn and dusk just below the verandah.

Throughout the islands, we have been impressed by the variety and exotic nature of the plants and flowers we've seen. Some flowers, like hibiscus, are most everywhere, but here many species and varieties were new to us. Hanging vine-like plants

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called Old Man's Beard were very distinctive and Monkey Ladder, which grows profusely under the forest canopy, are easily mistaken for snakes and got our attention several times. The tiny red seeds of the riccou are used for coloring food and rouging the face. Laura (Windswept II) and I couldn't resist a go at the natural cosmetics. Flowering plants were everywhere attracting hosts of humming birds and vibrantly colored butterflies. We also spotted several of the local lizards called matte which were about 3 feet long. We gave them right of way! Having an experienced guide greatly enhanced our knowledge and appreciation of what we encountered.



*Laura and Marcie try out the natural cosmetics*

We observed our first agouti, an indigenous rodent related to the guinea pig. They were abundant at the center, but somewhat shy (except at feeding time). They're herbivores, brown and furry with round pink ears and stand about a 1 ½ feet tall. They sat up on their hind legs in clear view just below the verandah and nibbled the lettuce and veggies set out for them.

After a buffet dinner in the dining room, we opted to take a night walking tour to view the center's nocturnal residents. Slathered with insect repellent, flashlights in hand, we made our way along a paved drive listening, looking and waiting. We heard and saw bats and huge moths soar by. Tiny

tree frogs chirped and croaked. Night birds screeched, upset by our unwelcome presence during prime hunting time. Bright red land crabs scuttled along the sides of the road and bugs abounded.



*An agouti searches for breakfast.*

We were awake and on the verandah sipping tea and coffee by 6am, waiting for the morning birds to take advantage of the feast which had been set out for them. What an absolute delight! We had brought a fairly good "bird book" with us to identify the birds we saw and document them. In all, we were able to add fourteen birds to our sighting list. Toucans, mot-mots, tanagers, honeycreepers, oropendolas, hummingbirds...it was nearly overwhelming. I must say that we had never been birdwatchers in the past. It's not that we don't enjoy birds, we just never took the time to sit patiently and observe them. Either we're getting old or we're finally beginning to appreciate the finer things in life...maybe both?

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