

Bats and Fêtes in Tobago

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Not many of our fellow cruisers were heading to Tobago, but it sounded exotic and was off the proverbial beaten path, so we thought we'd give it a try. Sailing southeast from Grenada, Tobago is only about 85 miles...an overnight beat against the wind and current. We left St. George's in early evening and arrived in Scarborough midday the next day. Not a bad passage, but we'd been very spoiled by short daytrips and fine beam reaches between islands for the past few months.



Beautiful view of Charlotteville beach

Scarborough is not the preferred anchorage as evidenced by only two other boats in the small designated anchorage area, but it was fine for a check-in point with Tobago Immigration and Customs and offered a central transportation hub from which to tour the rest of the island and plan our visit. Large banners and posters throughout the downtown area informed us that we were in time for the annual Tobago Heritage Festival taking place in July at various locations on the island. Though everyone is welcome, we were told the festival is for Tobagonians rather than tourists. It is a celebration of their rich history and cultural traditions showcased in storytelling, dance, music and food. Events included goat races, an Ole Time Wedding, Carnival, concerts, feasts, and a local pirogue (dugout canoe) race.

Our first trek was to the furthest point of the island serviced by bus, Charlotteville. Getting most anywhere on a bus from Scarborough is quite easy.

Tobago is primarily rural. Chickens, goats, sheep and cows wander along the streets unfettered. Life is slow and uncomplicated and the scenic 1½-hour ride to Charlotteville, along the southern coast through Roxborough and Speyside reflected the island's pace. On arrival in the tiny town, we found not much more than a couple of streets with a few restaurants and snack bars, but lo and behold, there was an internet café!

A marked hiking path led to Pirate's Bay. The easy 20-minute hike, afforded us a spectacular view of the town from our elevated vantage point. A steep stone stairway led to a small pristine beach below. We could see several boats anchored in the deep water and later met cruisers in town enjoying rotis and beer at the local hangout.

The Ole Time Wedding took place the following day in Moriah. The wedding ceremony is a combination spoof on the 17th and 18th century upper class overlaid with African customs and music. Everyone gathers to witness the mock ceremony then follows the groom, in stovepipe hat and tailcoat, as he escorts his bride through the village streets, dancing and singing to the beat of the tambrin drummers and fiddlers.

On the north side of the island, Plymouth was the host town for Tobago Fest's Ole Time Carnival so we opted to motor-sail around and anchor there to be close to the festivities. The anchorage in Plymouth is pleasant and interesting. So many tarpons leapt from the water one evening, the water roiled around us. Pelicans, laughing gulls and brown noddies congregated on every vacant vessel and held major, very raucous, conferences.

While waiting for the Carnival to begin, we took a walking tour of the town. Ft. James, built in 1650, its canons still watching over the harbor, is small, but picturesque. Several vendors offered us bamboo carvings and local crafts as we walked the grounds. A couple of blocks away, Plymouth's "Mystery Tombstone" is the 18th century grave of a

Bats and Fêtes in Tobago

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

young woman and her child with a riddle for her tombstone's inscription.



Ship's cat, Jelly, exhausted by all the Carnival festivities, went to sleep with her costume on.

The Ole Time Carnival is not just an event. Like most aspects of the festival, it is a celebration of tradition and cultural heritage. Though very small compared to Trinidad, Tobago's celebration maintains most of the conventional elements of Carnival. Plymouth, usually small and quiet, burgeoned as everyone from the island converged for the celebration. The music was loud and we were serenaded throughout the entire night by a cacophony of sounds, beats and discordant tunes. J'Ouvert began around 5am...we think. The fete from the night before never ended, so it was hard to tell when the morning party began. The street parades the following day were elaborate and entertaining. I especially enjoyed the look on David's face as red and blue street devils playfully picked his pockets for coins. The evening held the finals of the tambrin drum competition, as well as the island's calypso competition. Excellent entertainment held under the stars.

Plymouth was a ghost town on Sunday morning, its inhabitants recuperating from the previous night's Carnival festivities. In a local brochure, we had read about the Arnos Vale Waterwheel Park, a nature preserve and restaurant on the site of an old sugar plantation and decided to take the 2½ mile

walk to find it. We enjoy long walks so we took our time and explored a small eco-farm along the way, feasting on ripe mangos provided by the owner. The rustle of the breeze through the bamboo stands caught our attention as the trees clacked together. We caught sight of a colorful mot-mot and also a cocrico, the national turkey-like bird of Tobago. The roads here are narrow and curvy and pedestrians do not seem to have any right of way at all, but again it was Sunday after Carnival and the traffic was light.

From the road, a replica of a waterwheel and a sign for the park were barely visible. There didn't seem to be a restaurant or nature preserve evident at all. There were no cars in the car park and no one was around. We thought the place might be closed. We walked along a thickly-forested footpath and on past an empty guard shack and finally arrived at an elegant, wooden entry way. We tried the door and surprisingly, it was unlocked. We peered inside and were amazed to see tiny white lights highlighting beautiful wooden floors and a gracious foyer. Still, there was no sign of life.



The "trial by fire" was walking the gauntlet of flying bats to our dining table.

We moved on past a little museum room and a boutique; both doors locked, rooms darkened. Gazing across a long, covered wooden walkway, we saw tables in the distance set with linen. While migrating towards the tables, I noted lots of birds in

Bats and Fêtes in Tobago

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

the eaves. Well, wait a minute, they weren't birds! They were bats...hundreds of them. Disturbed by our presence, they flew and swooped low, barely missing my head. Midst my shrieks of horror and David's shouts to calm down, a young man materialized out of nowhere and with no facial expression at all stated calmly, "Fruit bats. Staying for lunch?" Why not? The "trial by fire" was walking the gauntlet through the bats to our dining table!

Unscathed and all alone in an elegant rain forest setting, we enjoyed a superb gourmet lunch topped off with homemade coconut ice cream. The original waterwheel remains intact and is incorporated as the centerpiece of this lovely restaurant. Paths, lined with giant elephant ears, ginger lilies and heliconia, meandered through the reserve and highlighted the view from the wooden-terraced dining area. Midst all of the beauty and splendor, I must admit that I did keep a watchful eye on the bats hanging from the eaves.

Back to the boat and time to move on to Trinidad, but pleased that we stopped here and briefly sampled some of what Tobago has to offer. The logo of the Tobago House of Assembly has the inscription "*Pulchrior Evenit*", Latin for "She Becomes More Beautiful". It certainly holds true for this island and her people.



*Blue devil in the Carnival parade
"picked" David's pockets for coins*