



Observing critically endangered leatherback turtles is a rare opportunity.

Natural Attraction

BY DEBBRA DUNNING BROUILLETTE

WILDLIFE LOVERS YEARNING FOR CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH EXOTIC BIRDS, ENDANGERED TURTLES AND COLORFUL FISH WILL FIND AN ECO-PARADISE IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.

Long before Christopher Columbus sighted Trinidad 10 miles east of the Venezuelan mainland in 1498 and renamed it for the Holy Trinity, its original inhabitants called this southernmost Caribbean island the land of the hummingbird.

To me, this makes perfect sense. During a recent trip, I perched on the veranda of the Asa Wright Nature Centre & Lodge, located high in the Northern Range of Trinidad, and found myself distracted from its grand backdrop of 10 miles of rain forest and mountain vistas by the magical glimpse of iridescent hummingbirds flitting amid nearby feeders and flowers.

Sixteen species of the tiniest member of the bird world are found here and on Tobago, Trinidad's smaller sister is-

A White-necked Jacobin is among the brightly colored birds there.



Trinidad and Tobago are home to thousands of species of plants and animals.

Leatherback turtle photo by stephenbroadbridge@yahoo.com. Bird by Corey Finger/0000birds.com. Trinidad by Jim Stephens T&T Tourist Board.

land, along with 450 other native avian species.

More than 150 of them have been recorded at Asa Wright, which is ranked among the best bird-watching sites in the world. My traveling companions and I watched, captivated, as flashy birds with colorful names like purple honeycreeper and blue-gray tanager enjoyed their daily feast of bananas and melons that gives ordinary observers and photographers, with lenses from modest to mammoth, a bird's-eye view of the action.

Earlier, we'd walked through a small portion of the center's 1,500 forested acres, touring the territorial homes of the bearded bellbird, known to have the loudest of all bird calls, and the white bearded manakin, whose elaborate courtship rituals are well known in the bird world.

Of course, a tour of this feathery wonderland isn't something novice birders like myself would excel at if left to our own devices, and we were wise enough to know it.

A naturalist guide with Paria Springs Tours took us under his wing and offered expert insight, as did a member of our group — a bird photographer who documents his finds in a blog called "10,000 Birds."

They kept our senses spinning with lightning-fast identification of the birds as they appeared at the feeders and fluttered in nearby trees.

Say hello to the exotic world of ecotourism, Trinidad style.

FEATHERS AND FUR

Many identify the dual-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, located outside the hurricane belt, with Trinidad's colorful and culturally diverse Carnival celebration, held in February or March before the Lenten season.

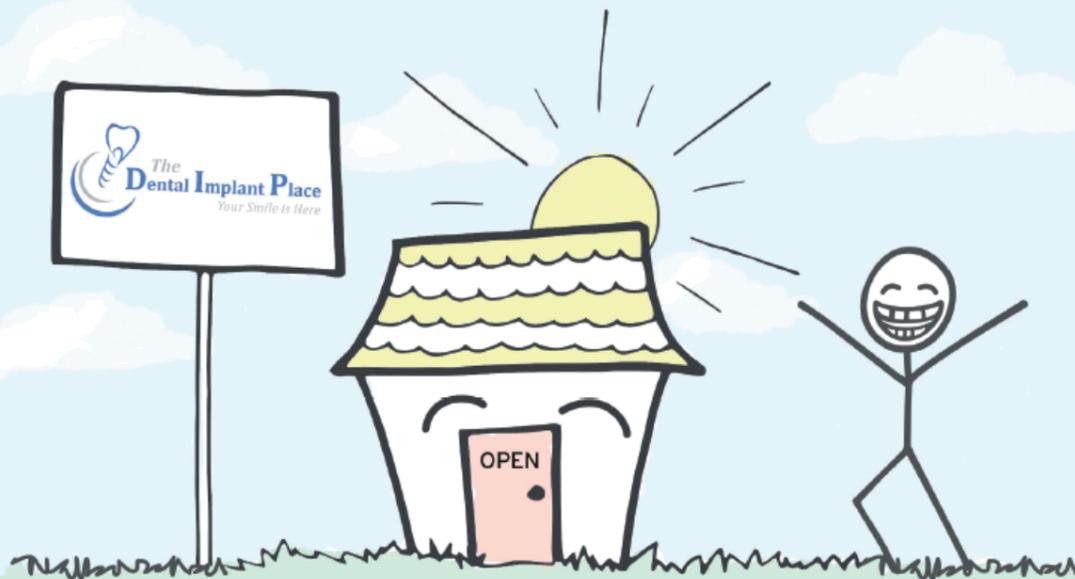
One hundred thousand revelers — nearly a quarter of them from the United States — arrive to dance in the streets of Port of Spain to the native musical styles of soca and calypso music.

Once the echoing beat of steel pan drums has passed and Carnival season has come to a close, however, ecotourism, the fastest-growing segment of the island region's tourism industry, becomes the main reason travelers find their way here.

Both islands have one of the densest and most diverse bird populations in the Caribbean, with toucans, woodpeckers and eagles flourishing in the tropical climate and varied terrain.

To the north, Nariva Swamp, a freshwater wetland, draws nature lovers with the promised view of red howler and Capuchin monkeys, the endangered West Indi-

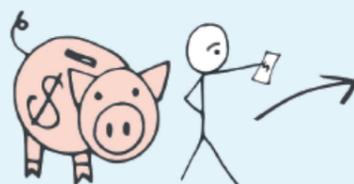
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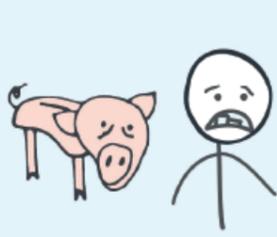
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Bill #2: Imaging lab for CT scan



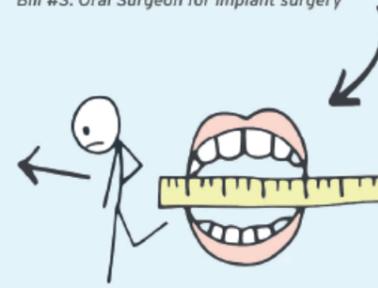
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Waves crash to shore after sunset at the Bacolet Beach Club.

an manatee and the tree porcupine.

In the Central Range mountains, Mount Tamana's network of bat caves attracts visitors wanting to see 11 species of bats housed there, while, from March through August, Trinidad becomes the world's leading tourist destination for people seeking a rare glimpse of the endangered leatherback turtles during their prime nesting season.

SPECTACLE IN A SWAMP

The Caroni Swamp Bird Sanctuary, on the northwest coast just south of Trinidad's capital of Port of Spain, is another lure for people who know a thing or two about birds — or who simply appreciate their beauty and mystery.

We spent an afternoon there, joining serious birders who travel to these islands to add avian sightings to their life lists, and local families that take a more casual approach to bird-watching.

We glided through the quiet, brackish waters on a boat at dusk, bordered by mangrove trees on either side, spotting an occasional tree boa on the branches above and glimpses of red deeper in the swamp.

We earned our reward as our boat emerged from the narrow channels of the swamp: a view of hundreds of scarlet ibis, which feed in

Only about 1 in 1,000 leatherback turtle hatchlings will reach maturity.



nearby Venezuela during the day, returning to roost for the evening and adorning the trees like Christmas ornaments.

Prized by poachers for their meat and brilliant red plumes, these long-legged waders are Trinidad and Tobago's national bird, and their images are featured on the local currency and coat of arms.

A TIME FOR TURTLES

The next day, we headed for Matura Beach on Trinidad's northeastern coast with our eyes on a new prize: getting up close and personal

with one of the world's largest colonies of the critically endangered leatherback turtles. Just 30 years ago, there were an estimated 115,000 leatherbacks worldwide. The Leatherback Trust now places the total population at fewer than 25,000.

More than 3,000 of these oceanic reptiles, with evolutionary roots that go back more than 100 million years, arrive here each year to deposit their eggs in nests that they laboriously dig and then cover with sand before returning to the sea.

It wasn't too long ago that harvesting sea turtle eggs on Trinidad was legal, but Nature Seekers, a community conservation organization, was formed in 1990 and worked to obtain protected area status for the Matura Beach area.

Even with the protections, the risk of extinction remains. Only about 1 in 1,000 leatherback turtle hatchlings will reach reproductive age, and when all human threats are taken into account, that figure may be closer to one in 2,500.

We walked the wide expanse of Matura Beach with our guide, who showed us how to identify turtle nesting sites and pointed out tiny tracks made by hatchlings that had emerged from a nest earlier that day and already found their way to the sea.

Most of the huge adult turtles drag themselves onto the beach to dig their nests between sunset and sunrise, so we waited at a nature center on alert for a turtle sighting and

a call. We didn't have to wait long. In less than an hour, we were summoned and given our instructions for turtle-watching etiquette.

Assembling behind the nesting leatherback, we were able to see her eggs drop down to fill the sandy hole with the help of an infrared light held by a Nature Seekers guide.

No flash photography was permitted until all eggs had been deposited; then, while the turtle was still in a trancelike state, we moved to the front of the gentle giant and were allowed to touch her head and neck and take photographs.

Once she began to cover her precious progeny with sand, using her body and rear flippers, we left quietly before she began her slow, shuffling return to the sea.

PICTURE-PERFECT PARADISE

The next day, my travel companions and I hopped an easy 25-minute flight to Tobago and checked into Bacolet Beach Club, a 20-room beachfront boutique hotel on the southern tip of the island, our base camp for the last two days of our tropical adventure.

Located 20 miles northeast of Trinidad, Tobago is tiny by comparison at just 116 square miles, yet similarly blessed by nature's bounties.

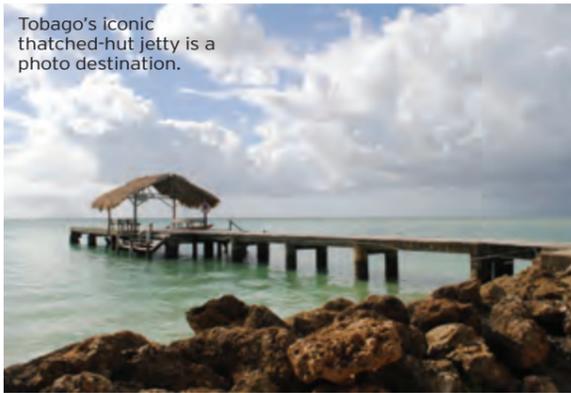
Leatherbacks nest in smaller numbers here, and more than 200 bird species are on view along with 6,000 species of plants and animals.

Named the world's leading ecotourism destination several times by the World Travel Awards, Tobago retains an undiscovered aura and rare remoteness that seems picture-perfect for island-themed books and movies, so nobody doubts it when local tour guides brag that Daniel Defoe's classic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, was set here; that Robert Louis Stevenson had Tobago in mind when he wrote *Treasure Island*; and that various Hollywood projects such as Disney's 1960 remake of *Swiss Family Robinson* have filmed on these shores.

The Bacolet Beach Club is stylish, even after dark.



Tobago's iconic thatched-hut jetty is a photo destination.



For folks who tire of overly commercialized resorts and man-made attractions, this is the dreamiest of island destinations. It's especially popular with scuba divers, who covet its crystal-clear waters and pristine reefs, as well as a chance to gawk at the largest recorded brain coral in the world or dive with massive manta rays and other diverse marine animals found in the isle's nutrient-rich waters.

Tobago's refreshing lack of commercial development cannot be blamed on inaccessibility or inconvenience. Caribbean Airlines offers 21 daily flights from Trinidad, all reasonably priced at \$48 per round trip. Ferry service is also available at a round-trip cost of \$15 for the 20-mile, 2 1/2-hour crossing.



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RAIN FORESTS AND REEF TOURS

We had more bird-watching in store, this time at Tobago's historic Main Ridge Forest Reserve, a tropical rain forest that ranks as the oldest protected forest in the Western world, dating to April 1776. Our guide through the lush foliage was Newton George, whose skills involved drawing birds in from other parts of the forest with his expert calls so we could spy them through his portable telescope, and unveiling other easily-overlooked creatures of the forest, like the trapdoor spider, whose nest looks like nothing more than a round brown knot in the forest's dirt wall.

By afternoon, some of my companions opted for snorkeling, while I took a private scuba-diving tour with Spencer's Underwater Adventures off the small island called Little Tobago (also Bird of Paradise Island), an excursion that offered educational views of schools of colorful reef fish, sponges and coral, plus a close encounter with a large green moray eel.

A day spent motoring along the coast through the protected waters of Buccoo Reef, sipping rum punch and drinking in the scenery, provided a perfect, leisurely ending to our Tobago excursion. Booking our coastline tour through Tobago Waterholics, we departed from the beach at Pigeon Point — listed among CNN's top 100 beaches in the world.

After several stops to swim and snorkel in sheltered coves where spotted moray eels and schools of reef squid make their homes, we docked at No Man's Land, a secluded spit of white sand beach, for a beach barbecue.

Beyond the endless beauty of a coastline tour, there's the added fun of learning about a destination's local lore, and our boat captain was generous with his knowledge.

Our final stop was an idyllic dip in the Nylon Pool, a shallow, waist-deep lagoon with a white sand bottom and impossibly clear, aquamarine waters, which I'm told received its name from Britain's Princess Margaret, who aptly



With its beaches, rain forests, reefs and swamps, Trinidad and Tobago make a perfect Caribbean getaway for those seeking diverse natural terrain.

compared it to her sheer nylon stockings during her 1962 honeymoon visit.

As our boat returned to Pigeon Point and we began preparations for a flight back to Trinidad, I managed to squeeze in one last task on my personal wish list: taking some photos at the famous thatch-roofed jetty — an iconic symbol of Tobago often labeled the most photographed jetty in the world.

Upon completion of this happy endeavor, I had the final reward of using the last of my Trinidad change to buy a scoop of soursop ice cream from a local beach vendor. Resting briefly under the roof of the hut, I savored every spoonful.

Debbra Dunning Brouillette is a freelance travel writer.

Cove photo by Jim Stephens T&T Tourist Board. Scuba by Enrico Matthews.



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Scuba excursions offer the chance to see reef sponges and coral, and maybe even a moray eel.

Schools of colorful reef fish will catch the eye of snorkelers and scuba divers.

If You Go
Getting there

Flights to Port of Spain (POS), Trinidad, from Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) are available on American Airlines, connecting through Miami, and United Airlines, connecting through Houston. Frequent flights to Tobago (TAB) from Port of Spain (POS), Trinidad, are available on Caribbean Airlines.

Where to stay: Tobago

Bacolet Beach Club
73 Bacolet St.
Scarborough
From \$190 low season; \$220 high season
1-868-639-2357
www.bacoletbeachclub.com

Blue Waters Inn Hotel

Batteaux Bay
Speyside
From \$150 low season; \$245 high season. (Dive packages available.)
1-868-660-4341
www.bluewatersinn.com

Coco Reef Resort & Spa
Coconut Bay, Crown Point
From \$326 (through Dec. 20.)
1-868-639-8571
www.cocoreef.com

More information on Trinidad and Tobago:
http://gotrinidadandtobago.com
www.visittobago.gov.tt

Where to stay: Trinidad

Kapok Hotel
16-18 Cotton Hill
St. Clair
From \$159
1-868-622-5765
www.kapokhotel.com

Asa Wright Nature Centre & Lodge

Spring Hill Estate
From \$150 per person, all-inclusive
Book through Caligo Ventures: 800-426-7781
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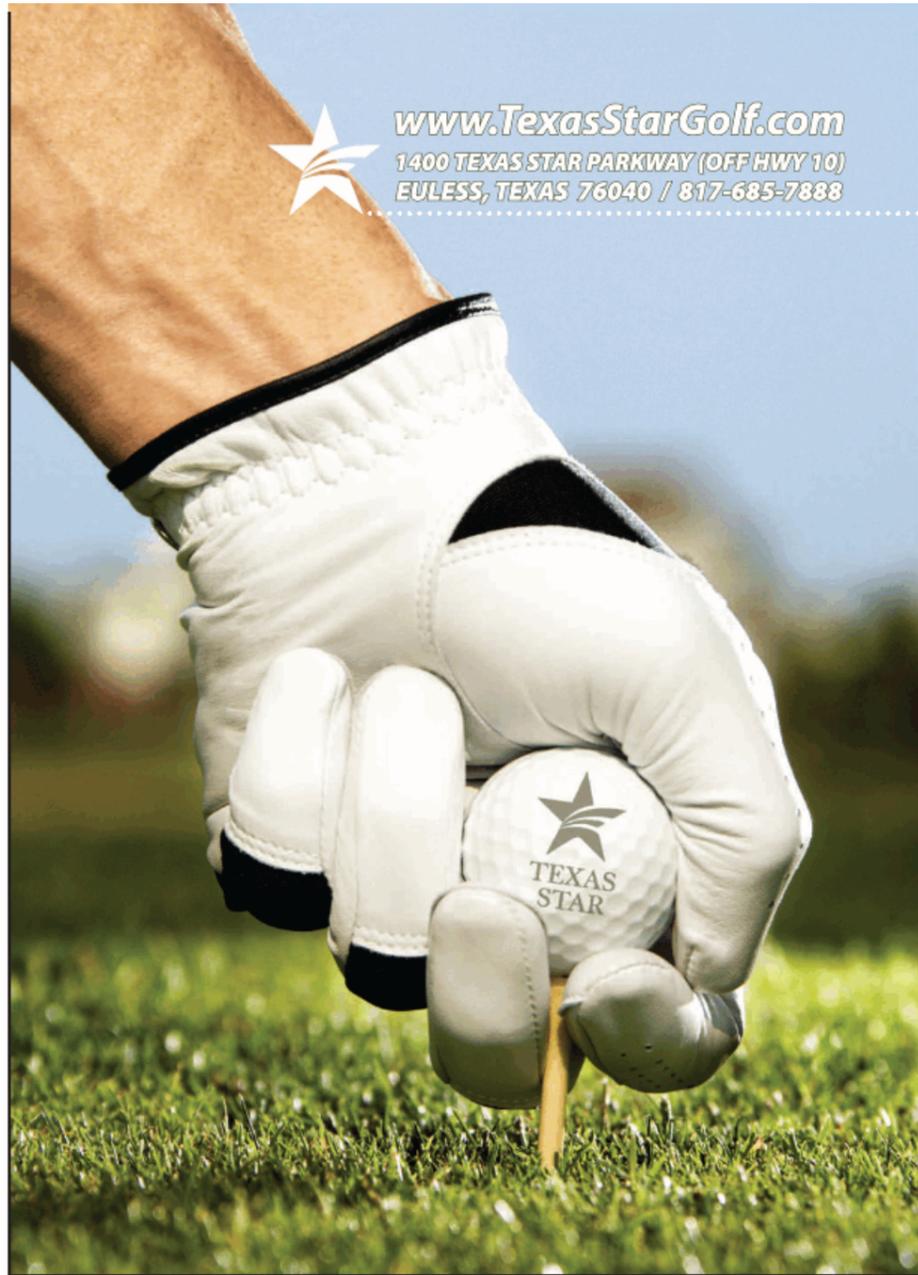
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