

## CULTURAL TRAVELING: THE TOBAGO HERITAGE FESTIVAL

--Linda Cousins/Amasewa Okomfo

("Akan")

For culture lovers who desire far more than a beach or bar scene during a vacation getaway, tropically tantalizing Tobago, particularly during its annual Heritage Festival, is a supreme travel treat. Tobago is a marvelous refreshment to the mind and Spirit year-round, but the Tobago Heritage Festival, taking place from mid-July until Emancipation Day (August 1), is the highlight of the island's cultural offerings. Now is the perfect time to begin planning such a getaway.

Initiated by the noted historian, Dr. J. D. Elder, author of **African Survivals in Trinidad and Tobago**, the Tobago Heritage Festival brings together the diverse talents of Tobagonians and visiting Trinidadians in colorful displays of the music, dance, song, drama, art, folktales and vibrant drum rhythms of our ancestral African heritage there on the island. The events take place at varied venues across the island, and villagers from far and wide exhibit the highest and best of their cultural offerings for the enthusiastic throngs gathered to witness this popular annual event.

Among such offerings are the haunting music and entrancing dance of the French-influenced Kalinda and Belair passed down from the slave ancestors and performed with awe-inspiring beauty, grace, and precision by contemporary youth of the island villages who have been immersed in their ancestral culture in order to prepare them for these presentations. It is a joy to see the youth exhibit with such pride the cultural legacy of their forebears. Other events include a Rites of Passage, a Heritage and Junior Heritage Exposition, an African Night, a Calypso Competition and Steelband Festival, a Folktales and Superstitions event, displays of the early stick fighting art, the speech bands, (complete with wooden swords and scathingly humorous political and social satire), and a Harvest Choir Festival.

During the Festival guests are invited to "brush back with the Ole Time Wedding", featuring a middle-aged bride and rotound, pipe-smoking groom along with a host of attendants all of whom are decked out in elaborate wedding finery for the long-awaited event. The couple have generally been together for many years, but the Ole Time Wedding allows them to celebrate their union in grand fashion and really strut their stuff.

Wherever our people abide, we are avid aficionados of music and dance; thus, be assured that there are plenty of Carnival-like jump-ups which one can enjoy as either a lively participant or as a laid-back spectator. These include an Ole Time Carnival, a J'Ouvert Morning celebration, (a 5:00 a.m. street parade), as well as an Emancipation March to Market Square. Young children, skillfully trained as stilt-walking moko jumbis, another ancestral holdover, represent Trinidad's Kilimanjaro Cultural Centre at the Festival as well as in Trinidad itself which also has numerous emancipation activities on August 1st, the date of our people's liberation from bondage in this part of the world. If that's not enough dancing, join weekend party people at the "Sunday School", a Sunday evening (ten-ish) island dance scene held weekly in Buccoo Village in the vicinity of Henderson's Disco.

Delectable Tobagonian foods, such as the much-in-demand crab 'n dumplin', are in tasty abundance throughout the Heritage Festival and particularly at the Tribute to the Sea where every conceivable delicacy hailing from Mother Ocean is prepared and served at this greeting of the dawn food festival. Never fear; if you can't wait until next July to get to gorgeous Tobago, "good eatin'" as my grandmother would say, is available throughout

the year at this nature-blessed earth isle. Miss Esme's and Miss Jean's beachside restaurants on Store Bay are local cuisine spots that lure visitors and Tobagonians as well. For a bit more formal yet equally as relaxing dining enjoyment, Rouselle's, an Arawak-decorated spot, owned by a former airline attendant, is another must-experience. The callaloo soup there is noted to rank among the best in T&T. You certainly won't want to return home without a trip to the pretty fishing village of Charlotteville, home of Gemma's Treehouse Restaurant and the island culinary treats for which this establishment has become internationally known. Might want to bring along your swimming togs for a refreshing dip here as it is near one of the island's lovely, semi-secluded aquatic spots.

Although the famed Buccoo Reef has seen better days, having lost a great deal of its coral, it is still a must-see scenic spot while on this lovely island. Don't forget to bring a swimsuit along for a dip in the crystal clear waters of Nylon Pool and for a snorkeling adventure available to beginners and experienced pros alike. The Davis brothers, operating out of the reef, give a topnotch tour of site with a welcomed personalized touch.

Tobago is exceptionally rich in African culture and history. A unique touch of our ancient culture and history can be experienced firsthand at Richmond Great House, a former plantation house overlooking the sea and owned by Dr. Hollis R. Lynch, noted scholar and former head of Columbia University's African Studies Department. Dr. Lynch is reputed to possess the largest collection of African artifacts and textiles in the Caribbean, and the rooms of the mansion are bedecked with the glory of our ancestry--from walls draped with vast yardages of kente cloth to intricately carved African statues to brilliantly shined Asante stools. Dr. Lynch is also an expert and author of several books on the illustrious Pan-Africanist scholar, Edward Wilmot Blyden. What a triumphant irony of history that this plantation where African people were once enslaved is now owned by a scholar on African history who has filled it with the glory of our ancestral motherland! Do make arrangements to visit the museum while in Tobago (809/660-4467), or perhaps you might even want to enjoy the comfortable accommodations there, as there are several rooms available for travelers. A large swimming pool and acreage bedecked with lovely tropical flowers and foliage surround this peaceful spot.

Purchase of the artful crafts of Tobago can be made at numerous sites throughout the island including Craft Galore at the IDC Mall in Scarborough (near the Cruise Ship Complex) and Kawame African Arts and Crafts on Wilson Road. You may also want to drop by the Mt. Irvine studio museum, (Fairyhause), of German artist Luise Kimme to view her towering wooden sculptures reflecting Tobagonian culture. While on the roadways of the island, look for the multi-colored flags waving in the wind which represent the Shango Baptist (Shouter Baptist) faith of the island which is a mixture of Africanisms with Christianity. I regretted that the busyness of my Heritage Festival activities did not allow me to look up Rev. Eudora Thomas (author of **A History of the Shouter Baptists in Trinidad & Tobago**)--another item for the must-do-next-time list. However, was glad to meet cultural scholar, Joan Bacchus-Xavier, locally-born author of travel guides on both Trinidad and Tobago. Look forward to reading her works.

You'll also want to drop by the Tobago Trust Heritage Museum (Fort King George) which houses artifacts from the African and Amerindian presence on the island. The Tobago Art Museum is just across the way. There is also a magnificent view of the island from this locale. The curator, Mr. Edward Hernandez, is a talented artist whose work, "Passages", illustrate the rich folklore of the island, including the legend of Gan Gan Sarah, a mystical African healer from the slavery era, whose resting place is in Golden Lane. I saw this African sheroe referred to as a "witch" in a travel guide. Au contraire, I found during my stay there that she is a powerful ancestor whose contribution is revered by Tobagonians.

Speaking of art, the Kariwak Village hotel is popular for its exhibits of local creators' works as well as the artful design of its rooms, constructed to resemble an Amerindian village. There are numerous fine guest houses and reasonably-priced hotels like the Kariwak in Tobago--from the elegant luxury spot, Mt. Irvine Bay Hotel and Golf Club with its large finely furnished rooms and huge patios within peeking distance of the Caribbean Sea to the Conrado Beach Resort, a modestly priced facility on Swallows Point Beach. The hotel is within walking distance of Pigeon Point Beach, site of numerous photo shoots depicting Caribbean island beauty. (Second floor rooms at the Conrado provide a better beach view.) By the way, a rental car to enable you to move around Tobago at your leisure can be a godsend. We found the Thrifty Car Rentals, located a few steps from the airport, to be an excellent, reasonably priced service.

Travelers to Trini's Carnival, the historic queen of island festivals and performance arts in motion, may want to chill out from the fast-paced action of this world-renowned event by retreating to Tobago for the placid beauty, peace, and serenity that even Trinidadians themselves spend many a weekend enjoying. Prior to my visit to Tobago, I found that when I would mention the island, a smile of reminiscent pleasure would grace the faces of those who had had the privilege of journeying there, and they'd sigh dreamily and say, "Oh, you'll lo-o-o-ve Tobago!" How right they were. Tropically tantalizing Tobago, particularly at Heritage Festival time, revels with a dramatic display and reverent island regard of our ancestral African culture; yet throughout the year Tobago is a beautiful island that soothes the Spirit and nurtures the soul. For further information on cultural travel to the Caribbean, my new travel guide to African-Caribbean and Amerindian

historical and cultural sites and events (**CARIBBEAN BOUND! - Culture Roots, Places, and People**), or to get together online for a cultural travel session, feel free to e-mail me, or to write: Cultural Travel Publications, POB 5, Radio City Sta., New York, NY 10101-0005.

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