

# A SMALL ISLAND RICH IN BIODIVERSITY:

*The Island of Tobago*

**T**ucked deep in the southern reaches of the Caribbean lies the tiny island of Tobago. Often referred to as “the capital of paradise,” Tobago is widely recognized as an environmentally friendly destination. In October 2003, the World Travel Awards in New York City designated the island as “Home of the Best Eco Destination in the World.” A month later London’s Travel Awards Committee named Tobago as “The Number One Eco Destination in the Caribbean.”

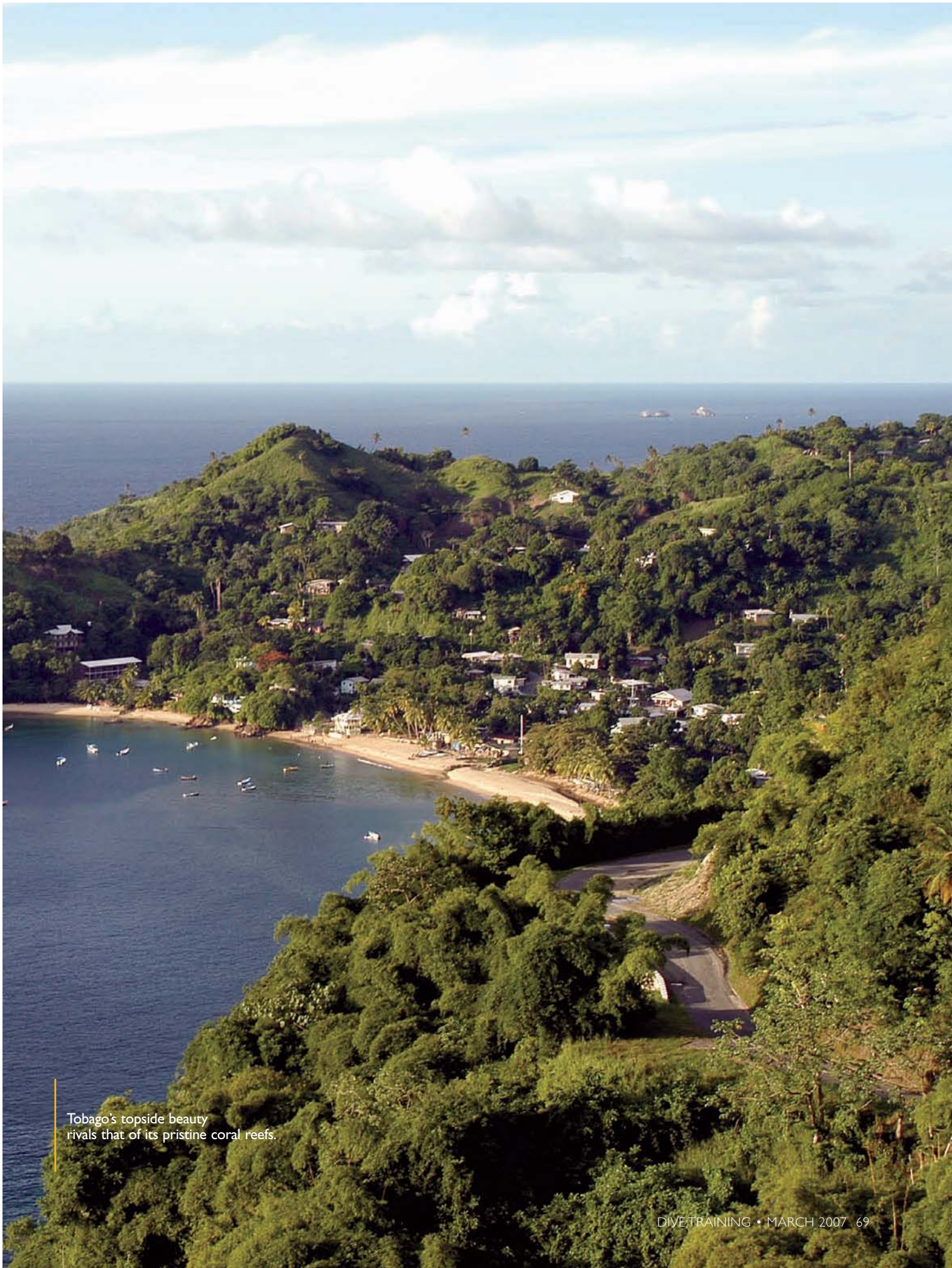
So what makes this small island so spectacular? One compelling reason for Tobago’s incredible beauty is its rich and diverse flora and fauna. Hundreds of species of birds, animals and plants thrive on the island, making it a haven for bird-watchers, hikers and naturalists. Mirroring the rich eco-diversity of the land is a tapestry of life beneath the ocean’s surface. Add to this mix the friendly locals, who are eager to share their hospitality and island with visitors, and you begin to understand why Tobago is indeed a tropical paradise.

## **Turbulent Past to Clear Future**

In ancient times Tobago and her sister island, Trinidad, were connected to the mainland of the southern continent now known as South America. The roots of the first inhabitants of the islands were traced back to the Amerindians who migrated north during the time the mainland was still intact. Columbus was the first European to arrive in the islands when making his third transatlantic voyage in 1498; he landed in Trinidad but never journeyed to Tobago. However, it was the English who “discovered” Tobago in 1508. Typical of the times, the islands became embroiled in centuries of struggle as countries including Spain, France and England sought possession of the land. Many cannons and battlements still dot the islands today, standing as silent reminders of the island’s turbulent past.

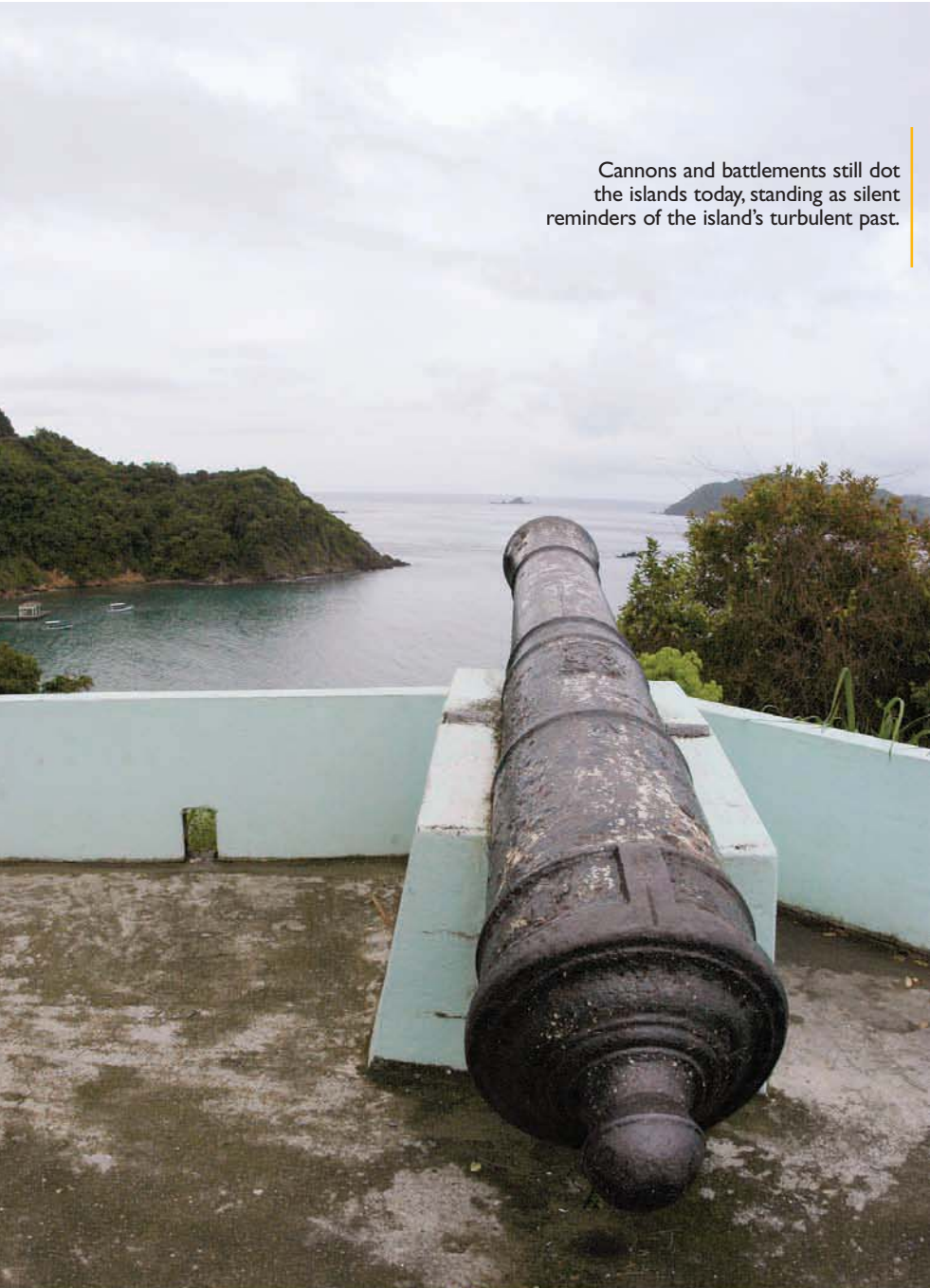
Tobago changed hands dozens of times before the English regained control through the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Five years later, the first Tobago Assembly was





Tobago's topside beauty  
rivals that of its pristine coral reefs.





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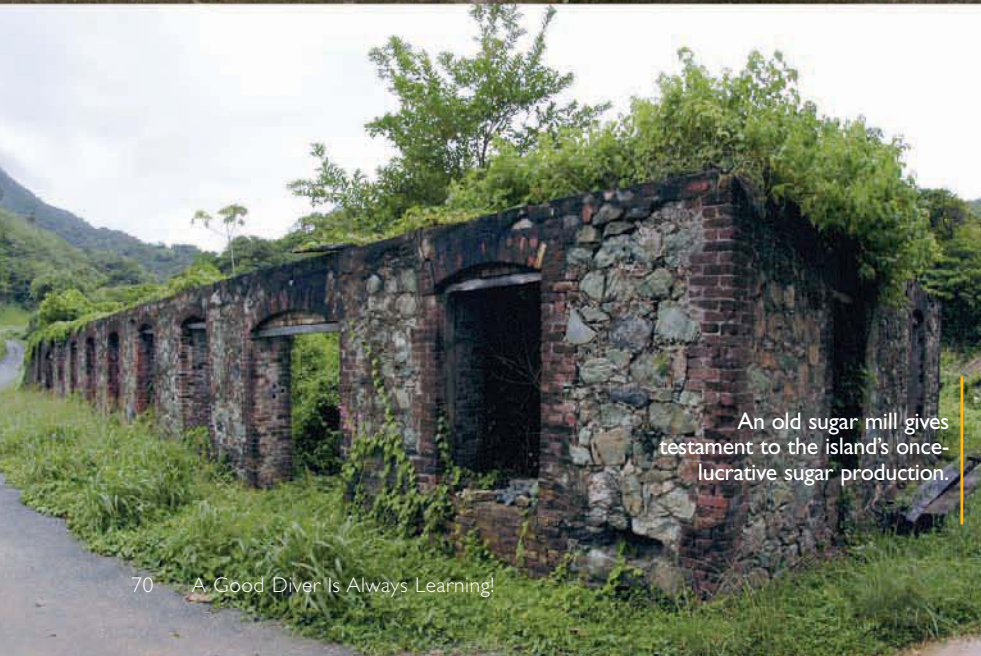
established and Scarborough became the capital of Tobago. However, the French remained persistent and twice occupied Tobago from 1781 to 1793 and from 1801 to 1802. It was during the second occupation that Tobago played a significant role in history by helping elect Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul of the Republic.

During the late 1600s and early 1700s the establishment of plantations led to the successful production of crops such as cotton, indigo and sugar. The exportation of huge quantities of these products, as well as rum, created a thriving economy. However, when the French occupation took place in 1781, the flourishing plantations were devastated and the once healthy economy collapsed.

The British regained control of Trinidad in 1802, and later Tobago under the 1814 Treaty of Paris. Now back under British rule, the production of sugar was re-established. Unfortunately, when a hurricane severely damaged the island in 1847, plantations as well as the underwriters were lost, thus ending the sugar trade. With the loss of the profitable sugar production, Britain no longer had an interest in Tobago. In 1889, the island became a ward of Trinidad and by 1898 fully merged with its sister island; however, it was not until 1962 that Tobago gained independence from Britain. In 1963, Hurricane Flora battered the island, destroying many crops and villages. The devastation led to the restructuring and diversification of the economy, giving birth to the development of the tourist industry. Thirteen years later the government established a Republican constitution and with the formation of the Tobago House of Assembly in 1980, Tobago began to assume more responsibility for the governing of its affairs. One of the main objectives of this forward-looking government involved the conservation of its bountiful natural resources.

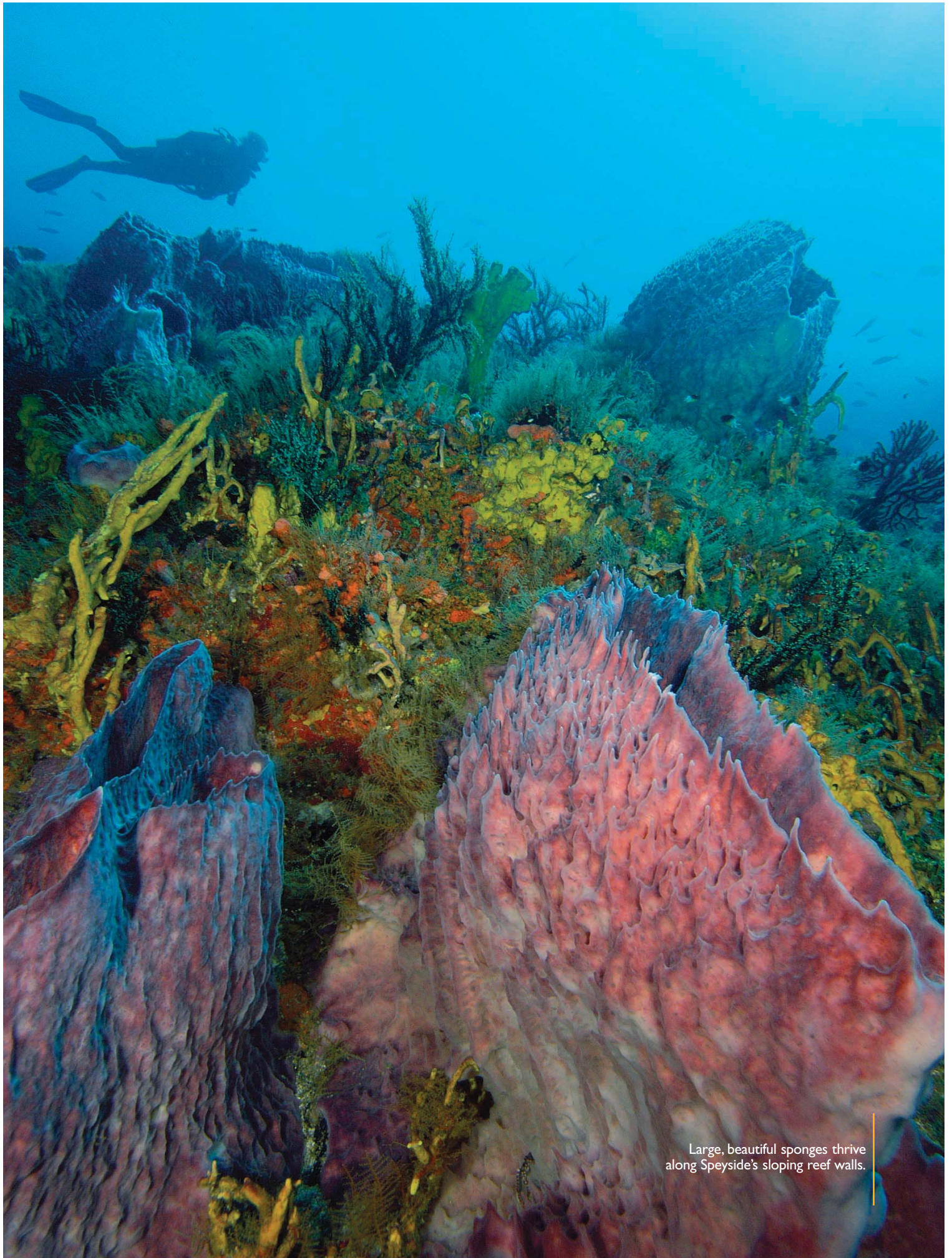
## A Long History of Conservation

The island became a land of riches when it physically separated from the mainland of Venezuela, and thus a rich



An old sugar mill gives testament to the island's once-lucrative sugar production.





Large, beautiful sponges thrive along Speyside's sloping reef walls.



## FACTS AND FIGURES

**Official Name:** Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies

**Location:** (11 N, 60 W) about 30 miles north of Venezuela in the Southeast Caribbean

**Size:** 27 miles (43 km) long, 7 miles (11 km) wide

**Capital:** Scarborough

**National Capital:** Port of Spain, Trinidad

**Government:** Independent Republic, member of the British Commonwealth

**Official Language:** English

**Population:** (Tobago) 55,000, with 98% percent African and 2 percent other. (Trinidad) 1.3 million.

**Electricity:** 115V/230V – 60 Hz U.S.-style two- and three-prong plugs

**Seasons:** Dry: January to May Rainy: June to December

**Air Temperature:** 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 degrees Celsius) to 90 F (32 C)

**Water Temperature:** 82 degrees Fahrenheit (28 degrees Celsius) to lows of 75 F (24 C)

**Money:** TT dollar – Floats with the U.S. dollar. At press time, \$6.27 TT= \$1 USD. U.S. dollar widely accepted. Most major credit cards accepted at banks and most tourist areas.

**Time Zone:** Eastern Standard. Daylight-saving not observed.

**Accommodations:** Bed-and-breakfast guesthouses, villas, condos, hotels from 1 to 5 stars.

**Recompression Chamber:** At Roxborough Medical Clinic

**Airport:** Crown Point International Airport

**Airlines:** Delta Air Lines begins direct service from Atlanta in April 2007. There are also flights every hour from Trinidad, which is served from North American gateways by American, American Eagle, Continental, Delta, Air Canada and Caribbean Airlines (formerly BWIA), which also provides connecting flights between the two islands.

**Departure Tax:** \$100 TT dollars = 17 U.S. dollars or 25 Canadian dollars

### For more information:

#### The Tourism Development Company Ltd.

Phone: (868) 675-7034

Fax: (867) 675-7432

E-mail: [tourism-info@tdc.co.tt](mailto:tourism-info@tdc.co.tt)

Web site: [www.visittnt.com](http://www.visittnt.com)

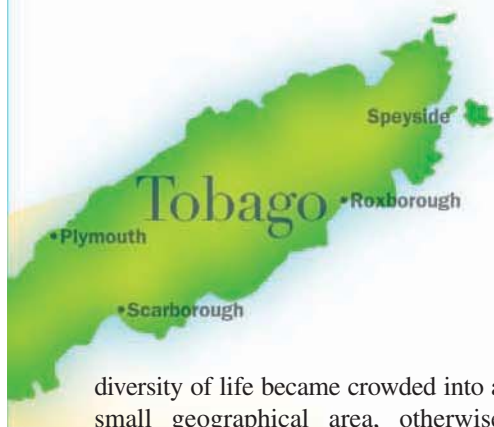
#### Association of Tobago Dive Operators (ATDO)

[www.tobagoscubadiving.com](http://www.tobagoscubadiving.com)

#### Tobago House of Assembly — Tourism Division

[www.visittobago.gov.tt](http://www.visittobago.gov.tt)

Tobago's reefs are home to an abundance of colorful fish.



diversity of life became crowded into a small geographical area, otherwise known as Tobago. Mangrove swamps, rivers, sandy seashores and a mountainous rain forest, all pressed into close proximity, created a miniature ecosystem of amazing riches.

One of the most compelling reasons Tobago has so much diversity packed into such a small space is because it is home to the Main Ridge Forest Reserve, a tropical forest running along the upper-eastern half of the island. Unlike so many of the world's rain forests, Tobago's rain forest is a protected reserve. With unprecedented foresight, the forest reserve became the first tropical rain forest in the Western Hemisphere afforded legal protection, a move considered by many to be the first environmental act in the world. It took 11 years of tenacious lobbying by Englishman Sasme Jenyns, who with his supporters, convinced officials that the preservation of the rain forest was essential to maintain the ecological balance. Jenyns' persistent determination culminated in the passing of a law in 1776 preserving the rain forest "forever," a just reward for Jenyns and a significant accomplishment for the times.

Conservation efforts are still a priority of the people of Tobago. One of the current projects is SOS Tobago — Save Our Sea turtles — an effort to protect the endangered green, hawksbill and leatherback turtles. The country also participates with other Caribbean nations in a project known as Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network, whose goal is the conservation of six species of endangered sea turtles in the region.

### **Divining the Reefs of Tobago**

The "rain forests of the sea" that comprise the reef system surrounding Tobago are a perfect reflection of the island's ter-

restrial rain forest. Divers as well as snorkelers can revel in an ocean playground where the tiniest creatures to the majestic mantas roam freely. This aquatic wonderland is home to hundreds of species of flora and fauna, largely due to the Orinoco River's nutrient-rich waters, which sweep past the island on the Guyana current. The richness of the water creates an explosion of marine life: More than 44 varieties of stony corals, including the world's largest brain coral, gorgonian corals and bright green algae carpet the lush seascape with color and texture. Adding to the beauty of the reefs are the large numbers and varieties of sponges in varying shades of vibrant oranges, reds and yellows. Some of the most intriguing sights are the huge barrel sponges, each with their own and often contorted shape. Unlike the typical barrel sponges to which most divers are accustomed, these can be up to 12 feet (4 m) long and very narrow in width.

The west/southwest end of the island has wreck and reef diving for all levels of experience. The MV *Maverick*, a popular wreck dive, is just off Mt. Irvine, and the area around Sisters Rocks frequently plays host to hammerhead sharks. The north/northeast end of the island, especially the Speyside area, offers spectacular dive sites, which are home to an abundance of colorful fish and provide a feast for the appetite of every diver.

As one can imagine, the magnificent reefs that surround Tobago support a rich variety of animal life, including groupers, queen angels, eels and snappers. Barracudas and tarpon are also frequent visitors, as are several species of sea turtles and sharks.

Diving in Tobago today is much like diving in the Caribbean 30 years ago. The reefs are pristine and healthy. Most dive operations use small boats that cater to 10 divers or less. Reefs are usually a short 10- to 15-minute boat ride away, making it possible to return to shore during the surface interval. Moderate currents mean the chance to "go with the flow," as many dive outings are conducted as guided drift dives. Eco-friendly diving is encouraged and

safety is always a priority. Operators often require divers to carry a signaling device such as a safety sausage. Once the basics are covered, divers are free to enjoy a relaxed diving experience. Live-aboard diving is popular as well.

### **Topside Adventures**

For adventures on the land, The Main Ridge Forest Reserve is easily accessible to visitors, making it an excellent location for activities such as guided tours, nature walks and bird-watching. The sights and sounds of secluded waterfalls occasionally interrupt hikers, surrounded by lush tropical growth. A keen eye may catch glimpses of local wildlife residents such as red squirrels, wild pigs, frogs, fish-eating bats or the green iguana, Tobago's largest lizard that can grow to 6 feet (2 m). In addition, seen floating gently through the forest are many different species of butterflies, including the beautiful Blue Emperor.

Bird-watchers will feel as if they have journeyed into bird-watcher's paradise, as about 100 of the 220 different species of birds on Tobago live in the reserve.

The variety of birds in Tobago is attributable to its diverse habitat and its location at the southern end of the West Indian Archipelago, placing it in the path of many migratory birds.

Also intriguing to bird-watchers are the colonies of seabirds that live on two small islands near the coast of Tobago. Little Tobago and St. Giles host substantial colonies of brown boobies, laughing gulls, beautiful red-billed tropicbirds and red-footed boobies. Due to strict conservation guidelines, visitors to these islands are required to have a permit and a guide.

The Grafton Caledonia Wildlife Sanctuary is on land that was a cocoa estate. The original house on the estate is now a nature center. Photographers, be sure to bring a camera with the appropriate lens to capture stunning wildlife photographs.

Hiking and bird-watching are only part of the adventures that await visitors. Two



championship courses provide an opportunity for a sporting game of golf. Visitors can also tour the beautiful cascading Argyle Falls, the island's highest waterfall. An immensely popular outing for locals and visitors, including neighboring "Trinis" (local slang for residents of Trinidad), is a glass-bottom boat ride to Nylon Pool where people of all ages swim and play on a shallow sand bank on Buccoo Reef, a marine park designated as such in 1973. The Nylon Pool received its name when Princess Margaret of Britain visited the reef and proclaimed that the water was as clear as her nylon stockings.

A "must do" is a visit to Tobago's historical monument, Ft. King George. The well-preserved fort built in the 1770s sits on the west side of the ridge close to the island's capital, Scarborough, where old cannons silently guard the coastline. Located on the grounds is a huge tree many hundreds of years old, providing a shady canopy over the lichen- and fern-covered walls of old prison barracks. The contrast of the lime-green foliage and the somber gray walls produces a strange beauty to a site that was once home to the island's prisoners.

Jeeps and mountain bikes are available for rent and taxis are for hire, but guided tours are the best way to enjoy the fascinating sights and sounds of Tobago.

## Customs, Traditions and Celebrations

About 55,000 people live on the island, and although Trinidad's inhabitants represent an eclectic mixture of cultures from Europe, India, Africa, China, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, more than 90% of the Tobagonians are of African descent. Locals are proud of their ethnicity and preserve their heritage through the customs and celebrations of their ancestors. Known for their hospitality, locals are more than happy to "make a lime" with visitors. "Making a lime," the local expression for gathering together for anything from a simple meal to a weeklong celebration, is the islander's way of making visitors feel welcome to their little piece of paradise.

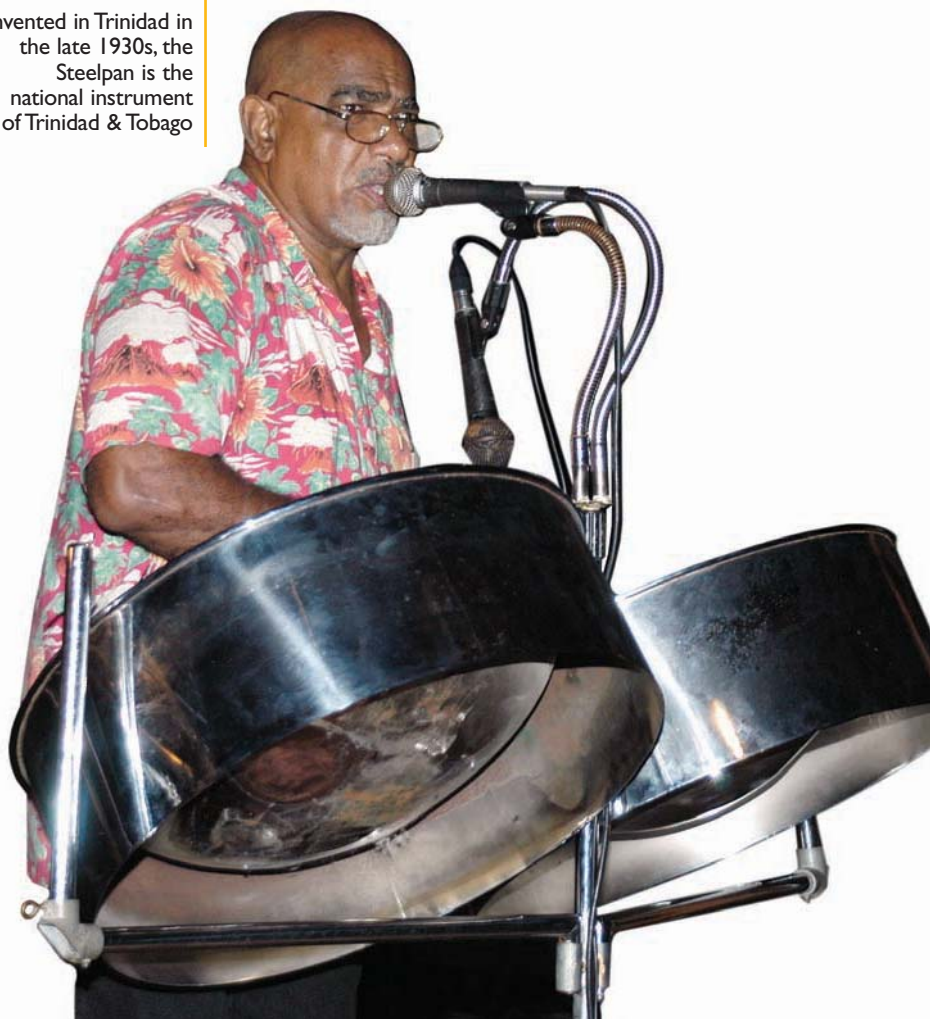
In April 2007, the island celebrates the third installment of the Plymouth Jazz Festival in the picturesque fishing

village of Plymouth. Patrons can look forward to performances by popular world-class artistes, foods, and displays of local arts and crafts. Visit [www.tobagojazzfest.com](http://www.tobagojazzfest.com) for more information.

"Sunday School" at Buccoo is another extremely popular custom on the island. Although held on Sunday evenings, it has no connection to a religious activity but is actually an open-air music and dance fest held on Buccoo Beach. The air vibrates to the sounds of well-known steel pan bands as guests swing to the rhythm of reggae and calypso. This weekly event provides a great opportunity for tourists of all ages to mingle with the locals while enjoying the festivities.

One of the most eagerly anticipated events on the island is Carnival. Tobago's version of the Caribbean-style carnival is somewhat quainter than the carnival in Trinidad, but it carries the same exciting intensity. Preparations for the festivities begin as early as January, when locals gather in their own backyards designing and creating elaborate homemade costumes worn in pre-Lenten parades.

Invented in Trinidad in the late 1930s, the Steelpan is the national instrument of Trinidad & Tobago



As the festivities begin, a transformation takes place that turns the whole island into one giant party of song, dance and great food. The unique sounds of the steel pan bands echo well into the night. Beaches and villages overflow with revelers as they enjoy breads and cakes specially prepared for Carnival. Typical island delights such as callaloo soup and curried crab and dumplings add an extra dose of spice to the party.