

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2009

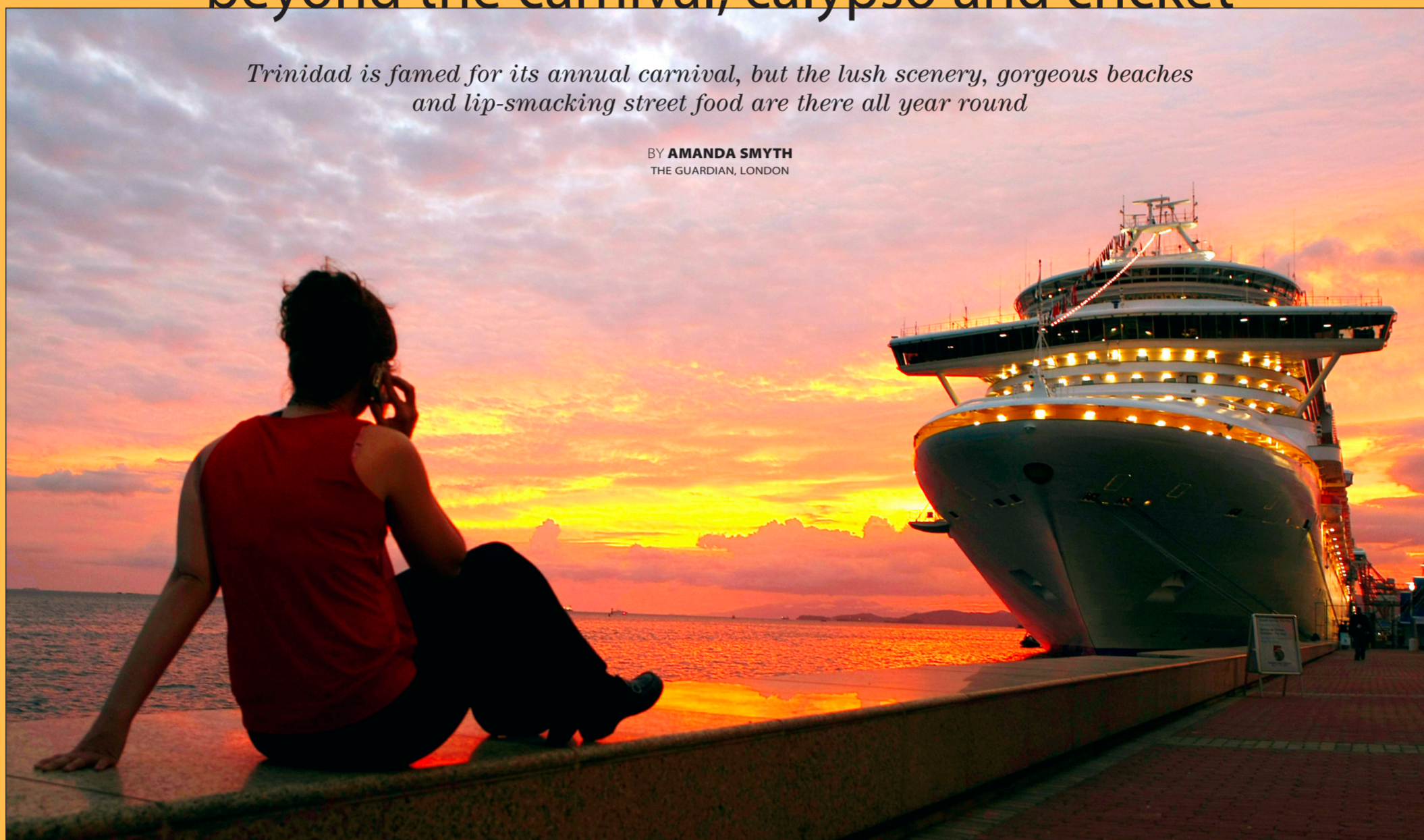
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Trinidad,

beyond the carnival, calypso and cricket

Trinidad is famed for its annual carnival, but the lush scenery, gorgeous beaches and lip-smacking street food are there all year round

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A woman talks on her phone while watching the sun set behind a cruise ship in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

PHOTO: REUTERS

We stood at the edge of the lookout and gazed at the land where it reached into the sea like an animal's paw. There were no clouds and the air crackled with heat. We were on our way to Maracas Bay, but had stopped at a hut where tall jars were filled with tamarind balls, salt and sweet prunes, pickled plums, dinner mints, sugar cakes and bubblegum. We bought a plastic bag of pineapple soaked in pepper, vinegar and chadon beni — a coriander-like herb — to eat in the car.

Maracas Bay is glorious: long and wide with off-white sand, lined with coconut trees and set against a backdrop of dark green mountains. We parked and headed over to Richard's Bake and Shark. The fish was fried in a dough-like bake, served in a basket and topped with all the trimmings: tamarind, lettuce, pepper, onions, garlic, mayo, chadon beni, tomatoes, pineapple. "Make a tower," I said, piling up my plate. We found a shady spot to eat, ordered two ice-cold Carib beers and spread out our beach towels.

I had five days to show my guest that Trinidad, although not an obvious holiday destination, is just as worthy of a visit as her smaller sister island, Tobago. My family has lived in Trinidad for many generations, and I have lived there, too, at different times. Vibrant, colorful, humming with creative energy and famed for its carnival, calypso and steel pans, it is a country in which I feel at home. I go back at least once a year but these trips are typically taken up with family visits, and the role of tour guide is an unfamiliar one.

Maracas seemed a good place to start. The water was somehow more refreshing and invigorating than the sea in Tobago, where it feels like stepping into a warm and soothing bath. Here, the waves were bigger, the current stronger, and it was easy to get tossed about.

After Maracas we drove on towards Yarra, over the rough little plank bridges and through a teak plantation. For a moment I remembered the douens I was told about as a child: the little Trinidadian folklore creatures with

no faces and feet that face backwards. If they find out your name they will call you away forever. I imagined the forest must be full of them.

Marianne Bay is the longest beach in Blanchisseuse. In the late afternoon light the sand was dark gold, and the big rock jutting out ahead made it seem wild and uninhabited. Racing to the point where the river met the bay, we found two or three people bathing in the clear, olive green water. The sky was splashed with pink and orange.

Over the following days, we went home only to sleep. My mother complained she had hardly seen me. Where were we going now? "Sightseeing!" I said, dropping my overnight bag into the trunk of her car.

We set off straight after lunch. It was going to be a long drive — three hours or more. We followed signs for Valencia, and took the road that led to Matura. Citrus and cocoa trees grew on either side, and in between there were wide, green spaces.

Suddenly we could see the Atlantic on our right, and the road began to climb and twist. I turned off the air-conditioning and it felt good to breathe in the sea air. The ocean looked like a realm of sequined cloth under the bright sky as we drove close to the cliff edge. Patches of beach showed between the craggy rocks below, and waves crashed and sprayed as we came into Sans Souci, well known to surfers. On a field so green it seemed almost luminous, a group of young men were playing football.

We stopped to buy coconut water. A boy quickly chopped at one end of the coconut to make a peak, then sliced off the tip. The water was delicious, the white jelly sweet and delicate. "Don't get it on your clothes," the boy said, grinning. "Those stains never come out." I bought a bag of chopped sugar cane to suck. I'd forgotten how much I love sugar cane, biting on the chunks of fibrous fruit and letting the sweet juice fill my mouth.

We passed little houses, well kept, with painted fronts and tidy yards, and now and again I'd see someone sitting on the porch or the steps. I caught a

glimpse of something bright — a flower or bird. Something moved — a hen dashing under a house, a little white goat shifting away from the road. The light seemed to be changing, softening; soon it was full of gold.

We pulled into the village of Grande Riviere, and followed the signs to Le Grande Almandier. Our room was clean and cool, with ironed sheets on the good-sized bed. When I threw open the doors to the tiny balcony, I was surprised by the nearness of the beach, the coconut trees, the sea shifting beyond. Hand in hand, we wandered on to the yellow sand.



A masked reveller participates in a carnival parade in Port of Spain's Woodbrook neighborhood, during the Jouvett Carnival celebrations.

PHOTO: EPA

That night, the moon was high, throwing a soft silvery light on the bay. A small group of us gathered 6m or so from the water's edge and watched as an enormous leatherback turtle hauled herself across the sand. She lumbered and heaved herself, until she found a place where something — the sand, the temperature — seemed right. Using her front flippers, she pushed back the sand, flicking it high in the air, scraping it away, over and over,

until she had made a hole; then she laid up to 100 eggs.

Grande Riviere and Matura beach are the prime spots for turtle watching. These extraordinary creatures arrive from March to August to lay their eggs. Approximately two months later, they hatch, and you can make the trip again to see the baby turtles struggle down to the sea. Thankfully, turtle watching is now regulated and a permit is required. Young boys patrol the beach by day to help the struggling babies as they emerge from the sand.

When she had finished, the giant turtle flipped and pushed the sand back over the eggs until they were completely covered and all that was left was a little lumpy hill. Then she slowly turned and dragged herself down to the water's edge, where she pushed off and, with a whoosh, disappeared into the black sea.

The next day we got up early and took the long, windy road north to the Asa Wright nature center. We ate lunch — creole stew with cassava, rice and buttery pumpkin — in the large colonial dining room, then sat on the verandah watching hundreds of birds — toucans, hummingbirds, hawks, motmots and jacamars — feeding just a few meters away. Beyond, huge corn birds flew between the trees, diving and swooping through the hot, moist air, showing off their brilliant yellow tails. We were supposed to leave by mid-afternoon, but it was almost dusk by the time we began to head home.

Mount St Benedict was next: the oldest monastery in the Caribbean. From the grounds of the red and cream building, through the hazy morning light, we looked down on the vast patchwork country below. We could see the thin line of the highway, Tunapuna, the flat lands of central Trinidad, and west to Port of Spain. We could even see the city of San Fernando.

"If you come again, I'll show you Caroni swamp and the pitch lake. I'll take you down the islands where the lepers used to live. There's lots more to see."

On the last day, we had lunch at my

favorite restaurant in Port of Spain, the Verandah: a gorgeous gingerbread-style house run by a charming, well-dressed Trinidadian woman. The Caribbean "free style" menu arrives on a blackboard and changes daily. We were lucky to find a table on the verandah, shaded from the afternoon sun by huge ferns, where we tucked in to garlic shrimps with plantain, spinach, a little mound of rice and a tangy salad, rounded off with coconut ice-cream.

I insisted we take a hike up Lady Chancellor Hill. It had been many years since I had made this walk. We set off on the 3.2km, 183m climb just as the sun was starting to dip. People smiled, said, "Good afternoon," as they passed on their way down. By the time we reached the top we were sweating and red-faced. We gazed down at Port of Spain and the shimmering Gulf of Paria.

On the way home, we drove around Queen's Park Savannah. I pointed out the poui trees, their branches full of yellow flowers. One day the flowers are there, and the next they're gone, spread out on the ground like a yellow carpet.

We stopped to buy snow cones from an old man wearing dark slacks and a worn fedora. He took great care to make sure the crushed ice was properly covered with thick red and orange syrup and generously topped with condensed milk. All the way up the highway we sucked hard on our straws. And we were still sucking on them when we arrived at the Studio Film Club. Part of the Fernandes Rum complex, this large white room at the top of a little flight of steps is where the island's film lovers gather once a week.

From his computer, the painter Peter Doig screens a film that locals might not otherwise see. There are large chairs laid out and a cooler full of beers with an honesty box. We're tired now, but the brilliant old Cuban film kept us awake.

At home, my mother asked if we'd made it to Mayaro or Manzanilla? Chaguaramas? What about Fort George? "Did you see the black virgin at the church in Tortuga?"

Lee shook his head. He looked at me. "We'll save that for next time."