



Trinidad  
Salt Lake City

Welcome Aboard  
All Over the Map

Essentials  
Down to Business  
Food From The Edge  
Straight Talk  
Hands On  
Corner Office  
The 19<sup>th</sup> Hole

TechSmart  
In Gear  
Get Smart  
Get Personal  
Get Away

In The Hub

U.S. AIRWAYS

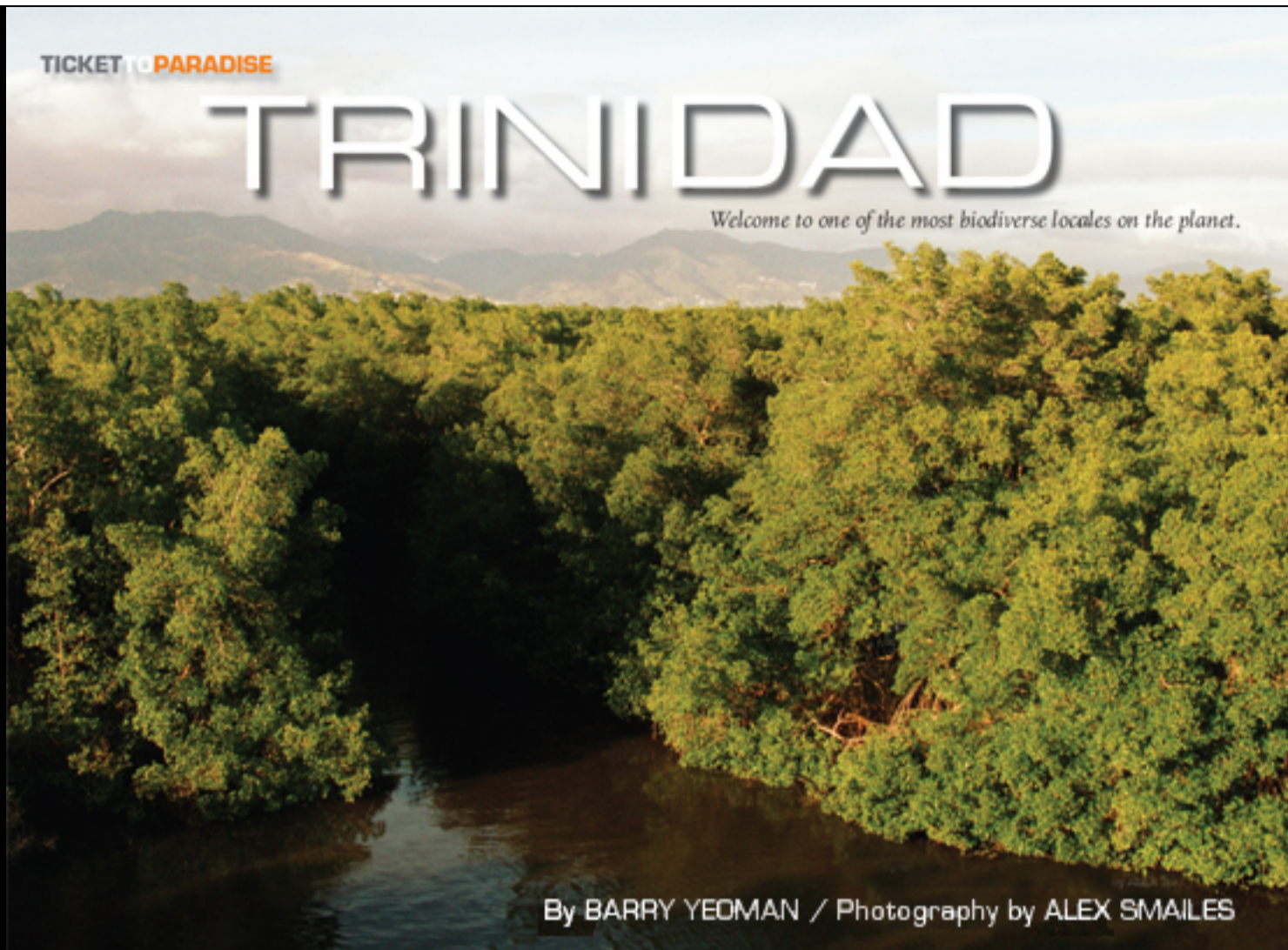
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Live Radio streams from Trinidad Live Chutney, Soca, Calypso, Kaiso  
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Our green wooden pirogue pulls up to the bank of Caroni Swamp, just a few miles south of Port of Spain. The boatman cuts the motor. It is nearing sunset, and we've just navigated a labyrinth of mangrove alleyways, practically brushing against the broomlike root systems lining our way. Tree boas, curled in the branches, peer down as we pass. A honey-colored puffball sleeps, clinging to the thinnest of twigs: It's a silky anteater, fueling up for a night of termite-hunting. Finally, we emerge into open water, from which we see the Northern Range in the distance. Scientists believe the densely forested mountains were once part of the Andes, until the island broke away from South America's mainland some 11,000 years ago.

Now the sun is low, bathing the nearest trees in pale light and creating the perfect backdrop for the daily spectacle we've come to witness: From all directions flocks of scarlet ibis swoop in, returning to their roosts after a day of feeding. Against the luminous green backdrop, the long-billed creatures are an unimaginable color, the product of a diet of shrimp and crabs. "Scarlet" doesn't do them justice; picture a hue halfway between a child's valentine and the innards of a ripe papaya. Once poached for its meat and feathers, Trinidad's official bird is now the focus of a strict, if imperfectly enforced, hunting ban. After years of decline, its population is rising in the 15,000-acre swamp.

As we keep a respectful distance, each new flock arrives with outstretched necks and squeaky calls, setting off a miniature commotion in both the trees and our boat. Cameras click. Binoculars and awed murmurs pass from one person to the next. And bit by bit, the mangroves light up like a marquee in bursts of ibis red, egret white, and heron blue.

**GETTING THERE**

US Airways serves Port of Spain through its GoCaribbean Alliance with Caribbean Sun Airlines.

**GETTING AROUND**

Generally, hotels will arrange airport pickup and recommend a trusted taxi service; this is your best bet for most trips. For travel between larger cities, the striped vans called "maxi taxis" are cheap and (on weekdays) efficient. If you're thinking of renting a car, remember: In Trinidad one drives on the left.

**WHERE TO STAY**  
**Mt. Plaisir Estate**

If your interest is turtles, Mt. Plaisir

It is hard in this moment to remember that we are on the Caribbean's most industrialized island, a place often overlooked by sun-seeking travelers. Located seven miles off the Venezuelan coast, Trinidad fuels its economy not with tourism, but with oil and natural gas. Its capital, Port of Spain, is more gritty than quaint, and its tourism infrastructure lags behind other Caribbean islands, including sister island Tobago.

But for nature lovers, Trinidad's thriving energy sector has had an unintended consequence: It has helped keep the loveliest parts of the island virtually pristine. "Industrial wealth has dampened any push to develop industrial tourism," wrote McKenzie Funk in Audubon Magazine last year. "Beaches are unmarred by a rash of mega-resorts.... In the Northern Range, one of the Caribbean's last great wilderness areas remains intact."

Add to that the fact that Trinidad — whose diverse population draws from Africa, India, the Middle East, and Europe — is also one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. It's home to a vast array of fauna. More than 400 bird species, 600 butterflies, and 100 types of mammals inhabit swamp and savannah,

has cozy rooms with wooden stable doors that open onto Grande Riviere's beach. The hotel also arranges hikes.

Hosang Street Grande Riviere  
1.868.670.8381

[mtplaisir.com](http://mtplaisir.com)

### Le Grande Almandier

The hotel offers charming rooms, and your walk to the beach is across the street.

Hosang Street  
Grande Riviere  
1.868.670.1013

[legrandealmandier.com](http://legrandealmandier.com)

### Asa Wright Nature Centre

For bird lovers, this facility has airy rooms, some air-conditioned.

Rates include three meals daily, and the centre runs tours of other nature sites, including Caroni Swamp.

1.800.426.7781

[asawright.org](http://asawright.org)

### Coblentz Inn

If you prefer the exotic, this inn (above right) has rooms with cricket, cocoa, rum, and Indian-bazaar themes.

44 Coblentz Avenue Cascade,  
Port of Spain  
1.868.621.0541

[coblentzinn.com](http://coblentzinn.com)

### WHERE TO DINE

The two hotels above in Grande Riviere have fine restaurants. Le Grande Almandier specializes in Creole-French cooking; Mt. Plaisir Estate adds Mediterranean accents. Asa Wright serves meals buffet-style. The lunches offer such items as coconut fish and pumpkin rice.

### Veni Mangé

Co-owner Rosemary Hezekiah greets every guest personally and enlivens the upscale Caribbean restaurant with her colorful art collection. The grilled carite (kingfish) with three salsas is heavenly.

67A Ariapita Avenue  
Woodbrook, Port of Spain  
1.868.624.4597

[venimange.com](http://venimange.com)

### Apsara

From its pampering service to the perfect tenderness of the shrimp zinga kadhai, this northern Indian restaurant leaves no detail unattended.

13 Queen's Park East  
Port of Spain  
1.868.623.7659

[apsara.co.tt](http://apsara.co.tt)

rainforest and coast. "This is a continental island, unlike most islands in the Caribbean," says Howard Nelson, director of the Asa Wright Nature Centre, the country's premier ecotourism destination. "Trinidad was once a part of Venezuela, so most of our plants and animals originated on a continent-sized land mass. They didn't have to cross hundreds of miles of ocean, so it was much easier for them to colonize the island."

I visit Asa Wright one morning. The centre is headquartered on an old cocoa-and-coffee plantation (located north of Arima) where it operates both an educational program and a 27-room lodge. (All tourism income is plowed back into conservation efforts.) From the century-old main house, one mountain unfolds beyond another in an endless sweep of untouched land.

Although the mountains are lovely, the more compelling sights are closer. Hovering around the veranda, sometimes at little more than arm's length, are tanagers and hummingbirds of every imaginable color, drawn to nearby feeders. Blackbirds with neon-yellow tails dart back and forth from their hanging nests in the trees.

I could stay on this rambling porch all day, sipping the centre's famous rum punch, if not for the guided walk that comes with my entrance fee. Descending a trail of tropical plants, including the hanging heliconia known locally as "sexy pink," we stop at a mango tree, where our guide invites us to look up. "Some of our wildlife have improbable hiding places — right out in the open," he says, directing our attention upward. We cock our heads and squint until we finally make it out: a common potoo, more than a foot tall and owl-like in appearance, standing in an exposed end of a leafless branch, yet utterly camouflaged.



That night, I learn that the leatherback turtle's nesting season has begun. I decide to take an overnight trip to Grande Riviere, a remote beach village on the far side of the Northern Range. Leaving the urban pulse of Port of Spain, I pass snowy egrets and stilt houses. There are Hindu temples, a beachfront convent, banana and custard-apple trees, and signs advertising "Guinness Beer" and "Chickens for Sale, Plucking & Gutting." Roadside stands peddle shark oil, pigtails, pineapples, pepper sauce, and hairdressing services. Children in pressed school uniforms fill village streets. The road grows ever hillier.

It's midday when I reach Mt. Plaisir Estate, an eco-conscious 12-room hotel owned by Italian photojournalist Piero Guerrini. The former boarding house fronts a beach that alone would have merited the three-hour trip. Sandwiched between the Caribbean and the rainforest, where Mt. Ju peters out in a lush final stand of almond trees, it's all but deserted on a warm afternoon. Chickens peck and scratch at the sand. Three local girls sift through a pile of streaked stones. After walking the beach's length, I return to an invitation from my new next-door neighbors, an Indo-Trinidadian family who share with me their roti — flaky flatbread filled with shrimp curry — and cold Carib beer.

When our conversation dies down, I set off to buy my turtle-watching permit. To protect the critically endangered species, Grande Riviere's beach closes at twilight, except to visitors escorted by conservationists. Ours is Carmichael Moolchan, a lanky young man who patrols the strand late at night, guarding the turtles and their nests against poachers and dogs. The full moon is high as 11 of us join Moolchan, following his flashlight until we find the first nester.

It's difficult to describe the wonder of seeing a leatherback for the first time. This one is about 1,000 pounds — literally, the bulk of a moose. Her ridged shell is made of connective tissue, fused to her body, making her unable to retract her head. She seems downright prehistoric, for good reason: By some estimates, the jellyfish-eating leatherbacks coexisted with dinosaurs 90 million years ago. Now, moving her flippers slowly, she looks like pure muscle, compacting the sand to protect the eggs she laid before our arrival. She rocks back and forth, her breathing audible and

reedy, creating an elaborate camouflage with false hills and holes to throw off would-be predators. Still, we know the chance that any individual egg will hatch and then survive to reproduce is infinitesimal. "This turtle had 999 brothers and sisters," Moolchan tells us. "Probably she was the only one to make it."

We move on. “I’m not going to let you leave the beach without seeing eggs dropped,” Moolchan promises. It doesn’t take long. Soon we encounter another leatherback that’s finishing her three-foot excavation through a particularly gravelly spot. She’s smaller than the first one, and therefore younger. “This could be her first time,” our guide explains. “She’s trying to relax now, because digging this nest probably took a lot of energy from her.” The turtle, in a trance, doesn’t notice as Moolchan pulls aside one rear flipper, allowing us to peer into the hole she has dug. Dozens of cueball-size eggs are landing with a rubbery softness. Moolchan calls us around to look at the turtle’s face. She is straining — a mother in labor — and secreting a salt solution from her eyes. It looks like tears.

By and by, Moolchan notices another leatherback who has just completed her camouflage. Normally, a visual navigation system pulls mothers back to the sea. But this one has grown disoriented. She is migrating not to the water, but rather toward the hotel. Our guide approaches the turtle with a bamboo pole. Gently, he prods one flipper to steer her in a semi-circle. She makes the turn, migrates halfway to the shoreline, and then briefly collapses. “She’s really exhausted,” Moolchan says. After a few moments, the leatherback rises up, this time zigzagging in the correct direction. A wave rolls in, lifting her body from the sand.

“Going,” Moolchan says.

Another wave covers all but her head and the top of her shell. Released from gravity, her terrestrial clumsiness gives way to grace.

“Going...”

With three more waves, the turtle’s head disappears. Her eggs hidden, it’s now up to nature to take its course.

Moolchan smiles. “Gone,” he says. ➔

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**BARRY YEOMAN** travels the world, writing about a wide range of topics.