

## ***[Country profile: Trinidad and Tobago]***

### **Spotlight on Trinidad and Tobago**

#### **Country overview**

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island state, divided by a 21 mile strip of water, located 11 degrees North, 61 degrees West at the southernmost end of the West Indian archipelago of islands and on the edge of the South American continent. It is couched between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean.

Its original population of Tainos were largely decimated by successive waves of European explorers, save for a small group of descendants who have never been diluted through intermarriage with other nationalities.

The history of colonisation of the islands has left its uniquely diverse population of 1.3 million including descendants of French, Spanish, British, Indians, Africans, Chinese, Syrians and Lebanese, among others.

The country attained independence from the United Kingdom on 31 August 1962. The ethnic mixture of migrants has endowed the islands with unique cultural resources arising from inter-mixes and cross-culturation reflected in the national holidays and festivals - Carnival, Indian Arrival Day, Spiritual Baptist Day, Emancipation Day, Independence Day, Divali, Eid al-Fitr, Hosay and Christmas among them.

The variety of ethnicities is also experienced through the diversity of cultural habits and expressions, cuisine, architecture, music, song, dance and drama, and has effected major achievements in the literary arts including production of two Nobel laureates. This allows the races to co-exist in relative harmony, resulting in co-participation in the activities and events of each other, and socialisation and interaction through all institutions including shared education, transportation, and administrative systems.

#### **Fast facts**

- **Full name:** Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
- **Population:** 1.3 million
- **Capital:** Port of Spain
- **Area:** 5,128 sq km (1,980 sq miles)
- **Major language:** English
- **Ethnicity/race:** Indo-Trinidadian (40%), Afro-Trinidadian (37.5%), Mixed (20.5%), other (1.2%), unspecified (0.8%)
- **Major religions:** Christianity [(57.6%) - Roman Catholic 26%, Anglican 7.8%, Baptist 7.2%, Pentecostal 6.8%, Seventh Day Adventist 4%, other Christian 5.8%], Hinduism (22.5%), Islam (5.8%), other (10.8%), unspecified (1.4%), none (1.9%) (*2000 Census*)
- **Life expectancy:** 68 years (men), 74 years (women)

- **Monetary unit:** Trinidad and Tobago dollar
- **Main exports:** petroleum, petrochemicals, natural gas, asphalt, methanol, urea
- **GNI per capita:** US\$13,340 (*World Bank*)
- **Independence:** 31 August 1962

## **Culture in Trinidad and Tobago**

### *Culture overview (diversity, access and participation, encouragement of the industry, other relevant issues)*

Following European colonisation, beginning with the mapping of Trinidad in the 1490s by Christopher Columbus, and subsequent exploration by the Dutch, Corsican, English and French, when the entire population of native inhabitants was decimated, except for approximately two hundred in a reserve in North Trinidad, the slave trade introduced the now large population of Africans. With the abolition of slavery in 1834, the search for new sources of large-scale labour turned to China, Syria and Lebanon. Britain's stronghold in India made it a main source of labour for Trinidad's sugar estates. Some 130,000 immigrant labourers (around 100,000 Hindus and 30,000 Muslims) came from India between 1845 and 1917. These immigrants brought many religious customs with them.

While Trinidad and Tobago has no cultural policy, overall direction for culture falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. It is guided by a Permanent Secretary and a Director of Tourism. Tourism in Tobago is directed by a Secretary for Tourism in Tobago's semi-autonomous House of Assembly.

The Director of Tourism oversees separate departments that look after the National Trust, Carnival, Creative Arts and Culture. National organisations for the arts and culture include the Archaeological Committee, National Carnival Commission, Naparima Bowl, National Cultural Commission, National Museum and Art Gallery, National School of Music, Queens Hall Board, Royal Victoria Institute, National Steel Orchestra, Tourism and Industrial Development Company Ltd, and the Trinidad and Tobago Film Company.

The majority of the population participates in the various festivals and events, regardless of ethnicity, religion or other orientation. Although Trinidad and Tobago does not have a cultural policy, the Government's *Vision 2020 Operational Plan, 2007 to 2010* recognises the diverse culture as 'a powerful engine' to inspire innovation and creativity. As such, it carves a path to 'promote cultural awareness and preservation of cultural heritage' and provision of an enabling environment for aspects of cultural resources such as music, food, fashion, crafts, and the visual and performing arts.

The potential contribution of culture and the arts to social regeneration and economic development has not been quantified, nor exploited, and there has been little official input into sourcing investment and identifying potential cultural markets which have been largely driven by individual artistes and cultural establishments.

Community infrastructure is not sufficiently developed to facilitate training and development of local talents.

The Trinidad Carnival - which is the model for some 300 international Carnivals - has largely been driven by individual exponents of the art, and no official estimates of its contribution to the economy or society have been done. Carnival arts as a medium of education and a spur to creative thinking are also underutilised.

Little attention has been paid to refurbishment and preservation of heritage sites, and in the development and maintenance of museums and art galleries. The UNESCO-declared world heritage sites include 'The Magnificent Seven' - a group of buildings around the Queen's Park Savannah in the capital that represent a variety of Indo-European styles, and which are now in various stages of disrepair.

### *Heritage (cultural identity, history, traditions and customs, heritage sites, tourism)*

Cultural identity is largely defined through ethnic and religious orientation, but also through the evolution of indigenous cultural forms such as the Carnival arts.

The diversity of peoples accounts for the range of religions. Spanish and French explorers brought Roman Catholicism, whose presence is marked by the almost 230-year-old Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (1781) in the capital city.

In addition to the larger numbers of Hindus, Muslims and Christian segments are indigenous Shouter or Spiritual Baptists, followers of the Yoruban Orisha or Shango faith brought by slaves from West Africa, and minorities of Bobo Shantis who practise a fusion of Ethiopian Christianity, Garveyism and Judaism. There are also Rastafarians and Hindu-based Kali worshippers. From formal religion and folklore has evolved Obeah, a West African practice of magic that is linked with herbal healing or bush medicine.

Religion also directs the number of public holidays, with Christmas, of Christian origin, Divali of Hindu origin and Eid of Muslim origin involving the entire population in one form or another - whether through enjoyment of its food and drink or its festivities.

Cultural offspring of the religions include the Spanish-derived parang at Christmas time, worship of the Black Virgin of Catholic origin as Siparie Mai by both Catholics and Hindus, and by descendants of first peoples and Catholics at the Santa Rosa Festival.

Foremost among the festivals are the Carnival celebrations which originate in the 'pagan' rites of ancient Europe, celebrated on the days preceding Lent and involving a range of art forms including calypso, soca and chutney songs, steelpan music, dancing of costumes, and street theatre with parade of the bands.

Phagwa, the Hindu spring festival, with its accompanying singing of chowtal and pichakaaree songs, is celebrated in March; and the open theatrics of the Ramleela are re-enacted by amateurs on village savannahs while Divali, the Hindu festival of lights, is celebrated on both islands.

Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan's month of fasting, is observed with a national holiday. Hosay, which originates in a Shi'ite Muslim festival commemorating the martyrdom of the prophet Muhammad's grandsons Hassan and Hussein - is also re-enacted with colour

and pageantry in street theatre involving the parade of tadjahs, the moon dance and beating of tassa drums.

The architectural heritage also reflects the various ethnic styles, ranging from the opulent Indo-European to less flamboyant barrack-style remnants of slavery.

Built between 1902 and 1909, are the buildings known as the Magnificent Seven - Stollmeyer's 'Castle' (Killarney), White Hall, Archbishop's House, Hayes Court, Queen's Royal College, Mille Fleurs (Prada House) and Ambard's House (Roomor) - as well as Knowsley, and Boissiere House (the gingerbread house), all around the 2.75-mile Queen's Park Savannah, listed as a UNESCO world heritage site. Other city structures of note are the Anglican Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity (1818), the Red House of 1907 with its ceiling of Wedgewood blue and white gesso work, and the now hollowed out frame of the 1876 Old Police Headquarters, built in Italian-gothic style, and gutted during the 1990 coup attempt.

New structures explore a mixture of these styles with modern constructs.

Archaeologically, the Caribbean's oldest citizen, 7,000-year-old Banwari Man, was unearthed in South Trinidad. The skeleton remains are housed at the Archaeological Centre of the University of the West Indies. Other remains from an adjoining burial ground dating to 500 AD are shelved at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port of Spain.

Several other archaeological sites have been identified in South Trinidad, in the Northern Range and in Tobago, and archaeologists are excavating a 2,000-year-old Saladoid site at Blanchisseuse, as well as a two-hectare pre-Columbian site, dating from 600 AD to 140 AD, in Tobago.

### *The arts and creativity (visual, performing, music, film, fine arts, festivals, events)*

The Trinidad Carnival is the main influence on the arts in all forms including visual, performance, music and festivals. Apart from the annual Carnival, arts find expression in the Tobago Heritage Festival, the Best Village Competition, the Tobago Jazz Festival, Independence, Emancipation and Republic Day celebrations and Easter Bonnet parades, and chutney and chutney-soca competitions.

The most important contribution to international cultural forms is the steelpan - the only musical instrument invented in the 20th century - which now involves full professional steel orchestras that have largely blossomed through talent and determination rather than official support and encouragement.

A few initiatives exist to provide formal training in music to steel band practitioners. Teaching of the steelpan exists in some schools, as does training in pan tuning and musical arrangement at tertiary level institutions. Recent attention has turned to patent aspects of such innovation.

Calypso, a type of song that has evolved out of the Carnival arts, has been an evolving form that now accommodates the musical forms of all island ethnicities, creating cross-cultural genres that involve chutney of Indo-Trinidadian origin, and parang of French Creole/Spanish origin.

Other forms include rapso and forms of soca - chutney-soca, raga-soca, and parang soca.

*Language and literacy (languages, books, publishing, literate environment)*

According to a 2003 estimate, the literacy rate in Trinidad and Tobago stands at 98.6 per cent for those aged 15 years and over (male 99.1 per cent, female 98 per cent).

The official language is English, but Trinidadian English Creole is spoken by all. It involves English interspersed with words of French, Spanish, Indian, Chinese and African origin. Caribbean Hindustani (a dialect of Hindi), French, Spanish and Chinese are also spoken. The Tobago Creole is less diverse and largely influenced by the African languages.

Although Trinidad and Tobago does not have a developed publishing industry, the literate environment has resulted in the creation of several world-renowned authors, including two Nobel laureates, V S Naipaul (born in Trinidad) and Derek Walcott, (who was born in Trinidad and lived much of his creative life in Trinidad and Tobago). Other award-winning authors include Lawrence Scott, Michael Anthony, Robert Antoni, Shani Mootoo, and Earl Lovelace, who won the overall Commonwealth Writers' Prize winner in 1997 for his novel, *Salt*. These authors utilise either self-publishing or foreign publishers.

The informal literate environment is influenced by the oral tradition involving the talk arts of storytelling, and dramatisation, and draws from a gamut of folklore characters including storyteller, midnight robber, pierrot grenade, and chantuelle.

Trinidad and Tobago does not have an official cultural policy, but policy directions are contained in its *Vision 2020 Operational Plan, 2007 to 2010*.

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