



RUM AND LIMING

Winter might seem a long way away right now, but if you fancy a trip to the Caribbean next year now's the time to start planning. **Neal Pawson** checked out the Tobago Carnival Regatta.

The heat and humidity hit you immediately as you step off the plane in Trinidad. Trinidad is the southern-most Caribbean island, just seven miles off the coast of Venezuela. A northern range of hills protects the island, which combined with their southerly position in the Caribbean has seen the island pair of Trinidad and Tobago avoid the destructive force of the hurricane belt.

The second thing to hit you is the contrast of rich and poor, new development and decay, all next door to one another. But the more lasting impression is of diversity: of people, of food and of religion. Trinidad's population is made up of an eclectic mix of people with origins from Carib, Afro-Caribbean, East Indian, European, Chinese and Syrian/Lebanese.

To the west of Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain, is the area of Chaguaramas which used to be an American military base but now is the centre of the country's marine leisure industry. Based in one deepwater bay are half a dozen marinas and all associated services: riggers, engineers, propeller specialists, woodworkers, welders, electricians, machine shops, chandlers, sailmakers, waterside restaurants, hotels and a customs post.

By contrast, Tobago is very much the classic Caribbean island with beautiful sandy beaches and swaying palm trees. It is very much seen as Trinidad's holiday island, lying just to the north-west, and accessible by a 50 minute flight or 10-hour delivery sail. The Tobago Carnival Regatta has been running for 27 years and was in 2009 year been re-branded as



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'the Festival of Wind' and moved earlier in the year to join Carriacou and Grenada in a Southern Circuit to cut down on the number of long deliveries competing yachts were making up and down the Caribbean. In 2010 the regatta will take place in February, making a great excuse to escape the British winter gloom.

Although Tobago is without a marina base the anchorage is protected from the swell by Buccoo Reef that runs offshore to the north of Pigeon Point and a free water taxi service runs to a dock in the

heart of the regatta village. There are quite a lot of options for hotels and accommodation in the area although it is recommended to get organised early as this is the island's high season.

Eclectic collection

Racers and cruiser-racers are brought together into one class for this event, the racers carrying spinnakers whilst the cruiser-racers are rated for twin headsails downwind, and the Cruiser class only carried one headsail - all are rated under the Caribbean Sailing Association Rating Rule.

The fleet was an eclectic mix, including two Farr 65s run by OnDeck and an old 72ft Challenge yacht in the Maxi class. These raced without spinnakers for the regatta to keep the boats manageable for the crews, who had had minimal training time onboard. The southern Caribbean is also slowly becoming home to some of the smaller one-designs with Melges 24s and J/24s establishing classes, mainly made up of older boats from the US.

For the first time in 10 years the regatta also saw the return of Bum Boat racing to the island of Tobago. Boats from islands of Bequia and Carriacou were shipped over to sail alongside the handful of 'Bum Boats' that still survive on the island. These are the workboats used to provision the visiting ships. Small enough to be manhandled onshore yet wide enough to carry a reasonable amount of cargo, the boats are double-ended so as



GO TO TOBAGO:

Regatta: February 9-13, 2010

Race: Visit event website www.sailweek.com, go to the crew forum to find a boat to race on or charter your own with a variety of opportunities with Ondeck, Ambition Sailing and Stormforce Coaching.

Pack: Long-sleeved T-shirts are common attire, but a light weight base layer under your shorts is a sensible option as it is the tops of your knees and lower thighs that bare the brunt of the sun's glare. Expect to get wet as there are some big swells. A light coloured shell jacket is perfect for keeping the spray off.

Distractions: Surfing – the island is exposed to the full Atlantic swell from both the north and the south and although there are no giant waves there are lots of clean breaks on the reefs and points of the island; if you have some time to spare then a day exploring the rainforest in the center of the island can be a great idea (so don't forget to pack some socks!); Carnival – as the birthplace of steel pan, calypso, soca and limbo there is no better place than Trinidad to experience Carnival and it falls just after regatta week!

Travel & Currency: There are a number of flights direct to Tobago from the UK via BA, Virgin and Monarch. Tobago is not far from the finish of the ARC in Saint Lucia and on a natural loop through the southern regatta circuit.

US dollars are accepted all over the Caribbean, but expect your change in local currency TT\$, flying out there is an exit tax of 100TT\$ approximately £11.00.

to cope with the shore break on the beaches. They provide a bright and noisy spectacle with lots of armchair generals and excited fans on the beach.

I jumped on board 'Wayward', a Beneteau Oceanis 43 that Jerome McQuilkin has owned for 15 years and is a regular on the Southern Caribbean circuit. Jerome himself hails originally from Carriacou but now runs a shipping company out of Trinidad. 'Wayward' got her name from how she arrived in the Caribbean – discovered drifting by a passing freighter following one of the hurricanes. She has subsequently had a Glenn Henderson-designed keel and rudder fitted by Soca Sailboats so is a bit of a 'wolf in sheep's clothing' according to Jerome.

Before setting off we gathered in the cockpit with a bottle of rum and a 'Wayward' tradition was explained to me. It starts with blessing the deck of the boat with some rum then each crew member drinks a toast to those friends absent and for the assistance of those who have sadly passed into the next world, a poignant and truly Caribbean toast. At the first windward mark I was introduced to another Caribbean tradition, of flying a second max-sized jib poled out to windward, ours was a dedicated downwind sail made from spinnaker cloth and flown flying clear of the forestay. Gybing involves treating the two sails as if they are one spinnaker and the pole merely moves across to support the windward sail. Despite sounding complicated it is very easy and we soon had the sail flying and pole gybing smoothly.

After a quiet start to the 2009 regatta the breeze picked up to add a bit of Caribbean spice with a steady 25 knots gusting more. One Melges lost a forestay allowing the mast to go horizontal and as we passed 'Juno', one of the Farr 65s, it had clearly lost their main halyard running downwind with it all very gently falling to the deck, while a pimped First Class 10 split her mainsail from luff to leech – the 'Festival of Wind' had lived up to its name!

Rum and liming

The regatta fleet returns to Pigeon Point for the afternoon, with afternoon entertainment provided with the local Bum Boats racing off the beach – apparently with more than a few wagers resting on the results! Also in the natural arena of Bon Accord lagoon, sheltered by the reef, the sailors were treated to a spectacle of some kitesurfing action and shortboard windsurfer racing. All rounded off with a



ABOVE Chilling on the beach – the Tobagonians are very friendly and welcoming.

BELOW Shorts and t-shirt sailing conditions with big breezes.

live band and hog roast on the beach.

The last day of the regatta provided a great workout, with two short sausage-triangle races just off Crown Point. Whilst on 'Wayward' we struggled to get the heavy powerful boat moving in lighter conditions, our rivals were loving the easier breeze to shake up the overall results. The Farr 65s also had a real ding-dong, flying genoas the crews sweated at the grinders to get the bigger sails in as they match raced round the course.

After racing finished we indulged in the Tobagonian tradition of 'liming', which is basically hanging out and chilling, normally lubricated with alcohol. The Trinis and Tobagonians are great fun and easily approachable – they might be an ocean apart, but are remarkably similar to the Irish with their love of the craic! Then it was time for the prizegiving ceremony, held on the beach of course, and attended by everyone from island dignitaries to Bum Boat sailors, windsurfers, yachties and sunbathers alike. ■



TOP The marina of Chaguaramas in Trinidad is a 10-hour delivery sail away.

ABOVE The lagoon behind Pigeon Point is also home to kitesurfers and windsurfers.