

Christmas in Tobago – Travelling can be so exciting

Friends in Trinidad had invited Bernd and me to visit them during the Christmas holidays. We were delighted and gladly accepted the invitation.

It is wonderful to leave the grey winter days in England behind us for a while and exchange them for warm sunny days.

At the travel agency we enquire about flights that fit the time and are reasonably priced.

The best offer is to fly with KLM from Amsterdam. This means we have to take off from Heathrow early in the morning. We are happy to accept that.

It's Monday, 15 December 1986, still dark outside, a few snowflakes swirling in the light wind. We leave our house in high spirits and look forward to our well-deserved holidays.

The flight to Amsterdam is on time. We have just reached the prescribed altitude and the pilot's croaky voice announces that we will be landing in a few minutes.

We knew that Schiphol Airport is big and spacious and that we have less than an hour to transfer from one terminal to the other.

We are quite nervous and hurry along the seemingly endless corridors until we arrive at the right gate. The plane is at the gate, and we wonder why we don't see any passengers. We think we are too early and quickly go to the toilet.

When we get back to the gate, we can't believe our eyes. The plane is no longer to be seen. It has left without us.

The shock is enormous. We are speechless. We gradually recover and look for someone who can help us.

Finally, we find the KLM representative in charge to whom we complain and who is supposed to help us further.

We discuss for a while to clarify who is responsible for us missing the connecting flight. Should the travel agency in London have known that the time for the transfer was far too short or should KLM have waited for the passengers who were not yet present?

When we learn that KLM only flies to Trinidad once a week, we are so outraged and demand that KLM act immediately to compensate for the damage we have suffered.

The KLM representative is impressed by our indignation. He relents and wants to help. We wait patiently for what will happen next.

It doesn't take too long, then he submits what he could organize for us.

He was able to book a flight for us with BeeWee Airline for the next day. We have to fly back to London, get to spend the night in the 22 Hotel at the airport and get vouchers for dinner and breakfast.

We ask the airline staff to phone our friends in Trinidad to let them know that we will arrive a day late. We had been able to negotiate a first-class flight for our return journey.

Who would have thought that instead of flying towards the sun, we are on a plane that takes us back to the London winter.

It is early afternoon when we check into the airport hotel, enough time to relax in the sauna and pool.

We are totally impressed by the spa facilities. It consists of an all-glass room, soundproofed so that you can see the planes constantly taking off and landing without hearing the deafening noise.

In this bright warm room, we relax and enjoy the wintry view and no longer fret about the missed flight.

We let ourselves be spoilt by the opulent dinner and think, that went quite well once again, before we fall tired into bed for the night.

Well rested and breakfasted, we finally sit somewhat cramped for about the next 9 hours and 30 minutes on the plane on our way to

Trinidad.

We gain 4 hours and set our clocks back accordingly.

We land in Trinidad shortly after 6 pm local time and are surprised that it is already dark.

We are curious if our friends got the message about our delay. They are indeed there and welcome us.

So, everything seemed to go quite well, if we didn't have to find out after much back and forth that our suitcases didn't come with us. We leave the phone number of our friends.

It is very hot, and we only have our winter clothes with us. The very next morning we go to Port of Spain to buy summer clothes, hoping that our travel insurance will reimburse us.

Our friends had rented a cottage for us on Tobago in Charlottesvill, a fishing village in the north of the island, away from tourism.

Now we are just waiting for our luggage.

After three days we can finally pick it up and fly to Tobago.¹

We rent a car at the airport and are amazed how uncomplicated the formalities are. Since Bernd doesn't have a driving license yet, I am the driver and sign the contract.

They don't do a check to see the condition of the car. They just tell us to call them if we have any problems.

Before we set off in the direction of Charlottesvill, I want to take a closer look at the car. I notice that the tires have no tread at all, and I can't find a spare either. I sigh and say to Bernd, "This is going to be fun.

But what the hell, if we have a breakdown, we can call them.

The drive is pleasantly easy. We hardly meet any other cars and the closer we get to Charlottesvill, the more we have the impression that we are the only ones driving here.

¹ There are regular flights from Trinidad Airport Piaraco to Tobago Airport Crown Point.

On the road we mostly only see young men, either walking alone or in pairs. When they see us coming, they stop and give us a friendly wave.

A little later, we see two teenagers standing wide-legged on the road and asking us to stop. Laughing, they ask if they can help show us the way to the Argyle Waterfall, which is well worth seeing.

This is well meant, but we don't want to accept their offer, thank them and drive on.

We are in Charlottesville and our cottage is one of three closes to the water, surrounded by mango trees and huge banana plants. The cottage is spacious, with a living room, a bedroom, a small kitchen, and a terrace. What more do we want?



A phenomenon that we already experienced when we arrived in Trinidad is the sunset.

There is virtually no twilight here. It is as if someone simply switches off the light.

This is because Trinidad and Tobago are close to the equator. It is quite a strange feeling to experience the days and nights in this tropical climate so close to Christmas.

We are thrilled to be so close to nature, far away from commercial tourism.

We can well imagine that Robinson Crusoe lived here in solitude on

Tobago for many years.

Although this is disputed, some claim that Daniel Defoe refers to Tobago in his novel.

We are sitting on our terrace having breakfast and hear someone singing Christmas carols, accompanied by the sounds of a guitar. The singer, a handsome fellow, comes right up to us and ends his song with a bow. We applaud enthusiastically. He introduces himself; his name is Jack. We invite him to sit with us and offer him a coffee. He tells us he has a wife and two children and is a local fisherman.



He stays for an hour, during which we tell him a few things about us. He says goodbye and promises to catch a lobster for us to eat as a delicacy at Christmas.

As promised, Jack comes by on Christmas Eve afternoon with a live lobster. We are at a loss; we don't know how to prepare a lobster and don't want it to suffer when it has to be cooked in boiling water. Jack explains to us that as soon as the lobster is put into fresh drinking water, it dies immediately and does not suffer.

Before he leaves us alone with the lobster, he hands us a lobster cutlery and invites us to go on the traditional family-visitor round with him on Boxing Day.

We meet Jack as agreed and go with him from house to house. At each visit, we are greeted by the housewife with a glass of rum, but at the same time she retreats to the kitchen while we men sit in the good room sipping rum and talking about trivial things.

After our last visit about 3 hours later, we return to our cottage tipsy and enriched with an unforgettable impression of the life of the locals.

Although the official language here is English, most of the locals speak a Trinidadian English Creole among themselves.²

We want to explore the immediate surroundings a bit, drive around aimlessly until we discover a sign saying, "Pirates Beach". That sounds like adventure, so we want to go there.

We can hardly believe it, but the sign points to a rather steep path uphill, which only has room for one car width.

There is a precipice on the left and a high embankment on the right, so there is no way to get out of the way if a car is coming towards me. I don't want to take that risk and refuse to go up there. Bernd didn't like to walk and says: "Don't be a coward, it will be fine".

I hesitate for a while and then foolishly give in. Fearfully, I drive up the slope at walking pace, not daring to look into the abyss.

We haven't quite reached the top yet when the path suddenly stops.

Nothing but trees in front of us.

There is no way to turn around. Now we are lost. I am desperate and say that there is no way I am going to drive down this narrow path in reverse.

We are stuck, put our hands in our laps and don't know what to do. Then, as if out of the blue, four young boys appear from the forest and come laughing towards us. They each stand at a corner of the car, lift it up briefly, turn it piece by piece until it is completely turned around. It doesn't seem to be the first time they have rescued a stranded car up here. We thank them. They refuse the tip we want to give them. Shortly afterwards they disappear into the forest again. We now realize that this path to Pirates Beach is probably only suitable for pedestrians. One experience richer, we are back at the bottom and still don't want to give up trying to find a way that is accessible by car. But we can't find a road to get there. Probably the bay can only be reached by boat.

² The British have left behind not only the language from their long colonial period, but also left-hand traffic and many other democratic principles, institutions, and laws. In 1962, the first constitution of independence was promulgated as a British Order in Council. It provided for a Governor General appointed by Queen Elizabeth II, a cabinet and a bicameral parliament consisting of a Senate and a House of Representatives. Under the Constitution adopted in 1976, Trinidad and Tobago are a republic.

In the end, we landed in Speyside, a beautiful place very close by. While walking through the town, we discover a newly opened Scuba Diving Centre.

We are curious and ask if they offer a diving course for beginners.

Of course, they offer such courses.

They put together a course especially for us. That sounds tempting. We negotiate a favorable price and book the course.

Full of expectations, we leave the next day for our Scuba Diving Course adventure. We are excited about what is in store for us.

Two instructors are ready for us. They are extremely friendly, talk a lot and quickly in the typical English Creole dialect, which we can hardly follow.

We first practice in shallow water and are instructed in handling of the equipment and made familiar with it.

A particularly important rule is to give the instructor a sign if you are in danger while diving: draw your outstretched right hand over your neck from left to right. This looks like cutting your throat, which means the oxygen tank is empty.

Then it's time. Dressed only in swimming trunks and T-shirts, we get ready for our first dive: put on flippers, diving mask, strap the scuba tank on our backs and put the air hose with the mouthpiece in our mouths.

Our two instructors take us to the dive site by motorboat. We drop backwards into the water and immediately find ourselves in a fantastic other world.

We slowly dive deeper together, always making sure to stay within sight of each other. The deeper we dive, the more the mask presses on my face. To relieve the pressure, I have to open the mask briefly and blow the air out through my nose. But I only manage to do that sometimes. This irritates me a lot, but I don't want to give up.

I see Bernd shows the instructor the hand signal, which means that his tank no longer has enough oxygen.

I am very scared about what is going to happen now.

We are about 60 ft deep, and we know that we must only move upwards very slowly. There is a risk of Bends disease, which can cause life threatening damage.³

So, we have to act very cautiously and not panic, especially Bernd.

Bernd now has to share the instructor's tank with him. One of the two is allowed to take a breath and then hand the mouthpiece back to the other.

³ In other words, it means:

The pressure of nitrogen or other gas from a diver's air tank increases the deeper you dive. To illustrate, here is an example:

A bottle of carbonated soda is filled with gas (carbon dioxide) that cannot be seen because it dissolves under pressure. When the bottle is opened, the pressure is released, and the gas leaves the solution in the form of bubbles. A diver returning to the surface is similar to opening a soda bottle. As the nitrogen pressure increases, more nitrogen dissolves into the tissue.

It is important to make sure that the water that enters the breathing tube during the exchange is only blown out before the next inhalation. A procedure that requires the utmost concentration. So, we slowly climb to the top.

We have made it and are happy to have solid ground under our feet. We are glad to get away so well once again.

I don't understand why everyone laughs and jokingly asks me who I had a fight with.

Only when I look at myself in the mirror do I realize why they are laughing at me. Around the rims of my eyes are dark purple bruises that I must have got while diving when I failed to relieve the immense pressure in my mask.

We cannot clarify whether Bernd's air tank was not fully charged, or Bernd simply consumed far too much oxygen in a short time, which is very unlikely.

The course instructors claim they did everything properly.

For the enormous stress we went through, they offer us to repeat the dive the next day as compensation.

We agree, as not to end this experience on a negative note. We dive several more times into the magical underwater world.

We enjoy the last days without further incidents, say goodbye to friends and Tobago, which remains a true adventure dream island for us.

In fact, we fly back to London in 1st class and are pampered with champagne by the friendly flight staff and enjoy being able to lie flat for a proper sleep.

We have never forgotten this extraordinary holiday.