

Jan. 28, 2007-----

PORT OF SPAIN, Trinidad -- The sound of Mighty Bomber could be heard in the distance of the crowded Queen's Park savannah. The calypso legend sings of old men dreaming dreams and young men seeing visions. Carnival in Trinidad 2006 was a 50th birthday gift from my friend, Tom. Some men go fishing. We go to small Caribbean islands to dance with half-naked women.

Wandering around the dark grandstand of the old racetrack in Queens Park, I tried to locate Tom. People were sweating skin to skin.

What I couldn't see, I could hear. What I couldn't touch, I could feel.

Like Mardi Gras, Carnival in Trinidad culminates on the day before Ash Wednesday, which falls on Feb. 21 this year. But I have been to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and Carnival in Trinidad -- which attracts 50,000 visitors annually -- is a much deeper experience.

Carnival is rooted in slavery and the celebration of freedom from chattel (absolute ownership). Many of Trinidad's traditional Carnival characters exist from these origins: Midnight Robber, Jab-Jab (a devil-like costume that pokes at you with a three-pronged fork) and Dame Lorraine (a well-endowed woman, or a "Dreamgirl" of the period). These characters would slyly mock their masters, and over time the masters began to join in the fun. That's how Carnival was born.

Trinidad was colonized by the Spanish and English along with Dutch and French settlers. After emancipation in 1834, boundaries tumbled and Carnival became an event for people regardless of color, status and creed. Today the 1.3 million residents of Trinidad and Tobago consist of 40 percent Indian, 39 percent black, 18.4 percent mixed race and 0.6 percent white. About half of the island's residents are descendants of West African slaves brought to Trinidad by the French to work on sugarcane plantations. So Tom and I stuck out. We didn't talk to any American tourists, but we did meet people from Canada and England.

Tom and I were new to this. For us, a wild night is a couple of shots of tequila on Milwaukee Avenue. All the preparatory reading did not prepare us for what we encountered.

The islands of Trinidad and Tobago (today, almost everyone lives in Trinidad) are just grasping the potential of tourism. Only during our visit did we learn that people party hard in urbane Trinidad, enveloped by lush mountains. Then, after Carnival, people adjourn to dry out on the tranquil beaches of Tobago -- a 20-minute plane ride from Trinidad. But in January 2005 two ferries debuted that now transport people between Trinidad and Tobago in a three-hour, one-way cruise across the Caribbean Sea.

Planning for Carnival begins as early as Christmas when the mas (as in masquerade) camps open. This is where costumes are designed and made. Revelers purchase costumes and become part of the band that parades down the streets. A midrange, hand-beaded costume costs between \$350 and \$400. They are works of folk art you can take home. Costumes celebrate cultural and









historic themes. I ran into a group of Trinis who wore bright orange sequin and plumes in tribute to Native Americans.

There are dozens of mas camps. The big mas camp players during Carnival 2006 were a group called Poison. More than 10,000 people joined this traveling band, "chipping" or "dancing" along to the rhythms. A huge flatbed truck accompanied Poison's revelers throughout the Port of Spain. Steel drum players performed on the truck, and mobile sound systems delivered bass-heavy soca music. Throughout our entire visit, every mas camp spun Machel Montano's "Scandalous." The Poison truck was even equipped with a portable toilet and a high-tech water mister to cool off members in the Caribbean heat.

Other mas camp groups were Legacy, Atlantis and the Port of Spain Hash House Harriers. Typical groups contain between 500 and 5,000 masqueraded women. Poison was atypical. The band leaders wear the most elaborate costumes. Anyone is welcome to join a group. On Monday, before Ash Wednesday, the groups convene at the racetrack (stunningly similar to the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival racetrack) in Queens Park for a daylong revue. All the groups participate in a competitive "Road March." Last year, Poison did not win because members veered off the parade route, circumvented the judging stage, and began dancing into the suburb of St. James. That's what I like -- 10,000 people with their own minds.

Most mas camps have their own Web sites so tourists can pre-order costumes. We did not do that -- and that's why we were suddenly doused in dark blue paint. During the J'Ouvert (joo-vay) parade -- the name means "opening of day" and the parade begins at 4 a.m. Monday before Ash Wednesday -- the veteran Carnivalgoers threw paint at us! This was their way of saying "get with the program." Most participants are covered in mud, cocoa, paint and grease. You are supposed to wear as little as possible. My sleeveless 2003 Cubs World Series T-shirt was ruined.

J'Ouvert participants depict sailors, hooligans, blue devils and demons. Once the J'Ouvert gang crashes, "The Pretty Mas" -- traditional carnival with the lavish characters -- begins.

The century-old Queen's Park racetrack is also the site of the annual Sunday night calypso revue where the annual National Calypso Monarch is crowned. Last year, Luta won for songs like "Check the Foundation," in which he likened Trinidad and Tobago to a 43-year-old man who had lost his way. (The islands became independent from England in 1962.) Luta sang, "Everybody has a solution yet we living with the problem still / Check the first 40 years and see the foundation that you build." Runner-up Singing Sandra sang "Blind Justice," a ballad about how wealthy Trinis are rarely convicted of crimes. Join the club.

Calypso is Trinidad's version of 1960s politically charged American folk music. Soca is akin to hip-hop. "People used to pay more attention to issues and things that meant more," said Andrea Wilson, the information attache for the Trinidad and Tobago consulate, who showed us the ropes in her country. "Now soca is just party music. People complain about that."

Some Americans might complain that Port of Spain (population 51,000) does not have any fancy resorts -- yet. We stayed at the Ambassador Hotel, 99 Long Circular Rd., across the street from the U.S. ambassador's house in the suburb of St. James. Other Port of Spain suburbs are Woodbrook, Belmont and St. Ann's.

The Ambassador is about a 10-minute drive from downtown Port of Spain. We did not rent a car, which was a good call. Streets are congested with people, taxis and flatbed trucks. It seemed to be a 30-minute walk from Port of Spain back up a hill past the Long Circular Mall to the Ambassador -- at least when we were sober.

The Ambassador was a no-frills experience. The hotel's carnival rates are \$250 for a standard double occupancy, which includes breakfast. The non-Carnival rate for the same room is \$125. The funny thing about the Ambassador Web site (www.ambassadortr.com) is that we saw a picture of a bartender standing in a desolate lounge. That's how we found the place. It seemed odd that the hotel was fairly empty during peak Carnival season. We met a few Trini residents who were staying at the hotel. Tom guessed the place was exclusive for ambassador use. But the rooms were clean and, after all, during our six-night stay in Trinidad we probably spent a total of 18 hours in the room.

Smokey and Bunty's, 97 Western Main Rd. in St. James, was our ground zero. The gritty sports-soccer bar is named after its colorful owners and is open until 6 a.m. Friday through Sunday.

During Carnival, the staff serves cold Caribe (like Corona) and Stag ("A Man's Beer!") through steel cages. Loud music plays in the street.

Crime can be an issue during Carnival. We were chatting with the locals at Smokey and Bunty's around 11 p.m. on Fat Tuesday, when suddenly we heard the snap of shotguns from around the corner. The throng of dancers, ne'er-do-wells and hookers immediately dispersed. Carnival was over that night in St. James.

During the day, Trinidad has the strongest and most industrialized economy in the Caribbean. It is the region's largest oil and gas producer, and British and American companies such as BP Amoco have a presence in Trinidad. The country is also the global export leader of ammonia and methanol. Trinidad's 98.6 percent literacy rate is the highest in the Western Hemisphere.

The people are as warm as the weather, their hearts beat with the intensity of the steel drum. The sound of Trinidad becomes part of your soul.

We arrived on a Sunday (our flight was delayed in Puerto Rico on an early Saturday evening) and one of the first places Andrea Wilson took us was to the Magnificent Seven not far from Queen's Park. The Magnificent Seven are a cluster of mansions rival plantation owners built between 1904 and 1910.

The most magnificent of the seven is Killarney, a gothic concoction of limestone, spires and turrets. The Scottish castle was built by a German in Trinidad, and he gave it an Irish name. That melting-pot vision defines the

spirit of Carnival.

Across the street from the mansions, we found a frail street vendor selling coconut juice from a rusty van. He wielded a silver machete. The old man gingerly lopped off the top of the coconut with the machete and inserted a straw into the large palm nut. Tom, Andrea and I were all served the coconut.

If you are on the ball, you drink the juice through the straw and return the coconut. The vendor then scoops out the backside of the shell with a sliver of the discarded top. This is when you are supposed to eat the coconut jelly with the sliver or a spoon. The vendor then splits the coconut a second time down the middle to get to the jelly.

Well, Magellan here didn't drink all the coconut juice. I was too eager to get the party started. So when I returned my coconut, the vendor whacked the nut with his machete and splashed juice all over his shirt and pants. Even Andrea was splattered with the coconut juice, which stains your clothes. Tom and Andrea didn't speak to me for several hours.

The most common street food in Trinidad is roti, filled with curry and split peas with a choice of chicken, beef, goat or shrimp. Roti is about \$1.50 in American currency. Buljol is a salty cod served with tomatoes and onions and that generally sells for \$1. I sustained on pelau, a stew of chicken, pigeon peas and rice with a dash of carrots, about \$2 a plate.

But the most popular food in Trinidad is one of thought. After a night of calypso, an afternoon of soca and a hazy journey into J'Ouvert, one thing is clear: You think you are young again.