

The colors of Tobago:
French angelfish at
London Bridge. Right:
Remnants of an old dive
shop at Pigeon Point. Bot-
tom right: A white-necked
jacobin comes to tea at
Arnos Vale.



the
TOBAGO

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Everything's a little different down here.



At the beginning of the dive, our small group entered the water at London Bridge in the shadow of the towering rock arch that gives this site its name. By the time we've kicked into the shallows at the end of the dive, we've found an unusual abundance of queen angelfish, two cherubfish—another kind of angelfish, these tiny and rare—and been wowed by the impressively decorated boulders at the base of the arch. Now, as we kick into the shallows, there is an ominous thundering in the water, a basso profundo rumble that's hard to locate in space. The noise grows louder as we swim over a narrow sand channel that leads to the passage through the arch. Looking up, I see white water churning, slamming against the rocks at the surface, and I feel the push and tug of the rocking surge. Looking down, I find a field of dozens of yellowhead jawfish flitting above their little burrows in the rubble, an odd welcoming committee to one of Tobago's most dramatic dive sites.

We've been briefed thoroughly on this section of the dive: If the surge presents no hazard, we'll cruise through the arch and meet the boat on the other side. If things look dicey, divemaster Lynne Marshall-Dunn will let us decide for ourselves whether we want to try to shoot the passage or turn around and head back the way we came. At this point, Lynne turns to the group and gives us the palms-up "Now what?" shoulder shrug. We watch the water to gauge the strength of the surge and decide to go for it. We progress kick by kick when the water is at our back and pause when the water switches direction to meet us head-on, sweeping us backward several feet each time. When we emerge on the other side, we are met by an enormous school of Bermuda chub and a dramatic plunge in temperature. We've spent a week diving and exploring Tobago, and this site is just the last example of the theme that has dominated our trip: Expect the unexpected.

GO *twist*

“It’s like the rum punch,” Marshall-Dunn tells me later. “Go anywhere else in the Caribbean and order a rum punch, and you’ll get the same thing—you know, fruit juice and rum. But here, they add Angostura bitters and it gives it an extra something. It’s just right. It’s the same way with the diving—it’s like the rest of the Caribbean but with a twist.”

Call it the Tobago Twist—the way everything here, above water and below, seems familiar and at the same time entirely unique. The twist shows up in countless ways as you explore the island, in the narrow roads that dip in and out of postcard-perfect bays along the coasts, in the outrageously colored native birds and the lush rainforest where they live, in the fresh spices, fruits and vegetables that dominate the local cuisine, and especially on the island’s reef and rock dive sites.

Even geographically, Tobago and its larger sister island Trinidad are out of the mainstream, at the extreme southern end of the lesser Antilles, the island chain that defines the eastern edge of the Caribbean Sea. Unlike the other islands in the chain, Trinidad and Tobago actually lie on the continental shelf of South America. For multitudes of fish, filter-feeding invertebrates and the divers who come to swim among them, this location close by Venezuela proves fortuitous because it provides the two twists that define the diving here: moving water and food.

CATCHING THE DRIFT The moving water comes courtesy of the powerful Guyana Current, which hits the Atlantic coast of Tobago and splits around the island before continuing its northwest trajectory. The food comes courtesy of the Orinoco River, which empties tons of nutrients (and sediments) from the jungles of Venezuela into



NEW FLIGHTS to Tobago

Travel to Tobago gets a little easier starting Dec. 9, when Delta Airlines begins offering four nonstop flights a week from Atlanta to Trinidad, a short hop from Tobago. Flight 319 will depart Atlanta on Mondays, Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, and return flight 322 will depart Trinidad on Mondays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays.

the ocean to be picked up by the Guyana Current and washed toward Tobago. For divers visiting Tobago, swift currents and plentiful nutrients mean two things: excellent drift diving and abundant marine life.

There’s some current present on nearly every dive and on some dives, it’s strong enough to offer carnival-ride thrills. Just drop into the water, head for the bottom and let the current take you away. Most diving is done from wooden pirogues that hold a relatively small group of divers and equipment for a single dive. The small dive boats maneuver well in challenging conditions, and on

Above: The life-packed reef at Kelleston Drain is typical of Speyside dive sites.



and Tobago is probably your best shot of checking it off your list.

DIVING CROWN POINT Tobago's two primary dive areas are a study in contrasts. At the southwest tip of the island, Crown Point is the bustling epicenter of tourism on Tobago and the site of the island's airport. At the far northeast end of the island lies the quiet village of Speyside. First, Crown Point ...

This is where nondiving visitors to Tobago hang out, and a whole range of resorts, restaurants and bars cater to them. Popular beaches are crowded on this end of the island, but a laid-back holiday vibe prevails over the scene, which sees many vacationing visitors from Trinidad.

Dive operators in Crown Point offer two basic choices for divers: the current-swept sites on the Atlantic side of the point or the quieter protected coves on the Caribbean side. If you're looking for a ride on the liquid wind, check out sites like **Diver's Dream**, **Diver's Thirst** and **Flying Reef**, which takes several dives to explore fully. Currents will push you quickly over these low-profile sites, but you'll want to keep an eye out for stingrays and flying gurnards in the sand and even the occasional whale shark cruising by. On one of our dives at Flying Reef, we stumbled on a huge aggregation of yellowtail parrotfish too busy doing what the birds and the bees do (and even educated fleas do) to notice us.

On the mellower Caribbean side of Crown Point, **Mt. Irvine Wall** is a favorite easy but beautiful shallow dive, with a sloping wall that bottoms out at 40 feet on a sand plain that reflects the bright sunlight, illuminating the brilliant colors of encrusting sponges on the wall. Nearby sits the interisland car ferry **Maverick**, which was sunk for

most dives, the dive leader will use a surface float to allow the boat to follow the divers.

THE NUTRIENT BUFFET Like the currents, the nutrients that wash in from the outflow of the Orinoco River can create challenges for divers in the form of reduced visibility, but the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Who wants to see forever anyway if there's nothing to look at? Tobago reefs are packed with life, thanks to the abundant food source.

The best-known diners at Tobago's plankton buffet are manta rays, and this is one of the best places in the Caribbean to spot one of the majestic creatures, especially between January and May. The plentiful nutrients also support lush stands of soft corals, healthy forests of sponges and filter feeders galore, like deepwater sea fans, hydroids, tunicates and Christmas tree worms.

And then there are the fish. Like bird-watchers in Tobago's rainforest, avid fish-watchers on Tobago's reefs are in luck. The unique underwater environment, coupled with the island's proximity to South America, means you'll find species here that are rare or absent in other parts of the Caribbean. If these fish haven't made it to your life list yet, you might want to consider a trip to Tobago: cherubfish, flameback angelfish, yellowcheek wrasse, bluebar jawfish, giraffe garden eels and saddled parrotfish. One of the prize finds in Tobago for any fish-watcher is the black brotula, a funny-faced, little eel-shaped cleaner fish that inhabits nooks and crannies in the reef and, unlike most reef fish, gives birth to live offspring instead of laying eggs. The black brotula is rare elsewhere in the Caribbean



Top: Tobago is one of the best places in the Caribbean to spot golden hamlets (top), where you'll also find rock beauties (middle) and spotfin butterflyfish (bottom).





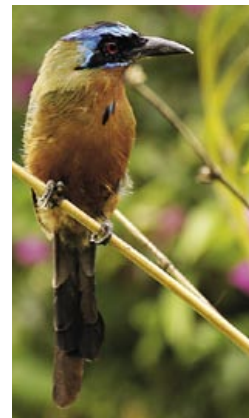
divers in 1997 and rests in 100 feet of water. The water can be greenish here, but that won't keep you from seeing the schools of silversides, bogas and jacks that call the wreck home. Descending into the big open car deck is like swimming through an empty warehouse that's been abandoned by everyone but the occasional school of smallmouth grunts. Check under the stern for polka-dot batfish. On the day I dived the *Maverick*, a ghostly



troupe of oversized moon jellyfish surrounded the wreck, performing an eerie silent ballet.

SPEYSIDE Many divers leave the Crown Point area as soon as they arrive to head for the northeast tip of the island and the world-renowned diving found there. An hour's drive from Crown Point, Speyside is a quiet fishing village. There are two dedicated dive resorts and a handful of restaurants in the scenic little town and not a whole lot else in terms of tourism infrastructure. But if you're looking for ripping currents, spectacular marine life and the best opportunity to dive with mantas, Speyside is your best option.

Speyside dives are clustered around two small islands just offshore, Goat Island and Little Tobago. The water surrounding these islands is filled with reefs, pinnacles and even smaller islands, which all create a maze of currents and cross-currents. All that moving water flattens the area's prolific barrel sponges and feeds a profusion of fish. Reef fish are plentiful—including schools of creolefish, creole wrasse and chromis—but none are more abundant



Top: A drive along the Northside Road offers spectacular views of the coast's many scenic bays. Above: A blue-crowned motmot. Left: After nine years of bottom time, the wreck of the *Maverick* is covered with growth.

Looking for a way to spend a leisurely afternoon following a couple of morning drift dives? Try one of these ...

BIRD-WATCHING TEA AT ARNOS VALE. Every day at 4 p.m., visitors gather for a bird-watching tea at Arnos Vale Hotel, where hummingbirds are as common as mosquitoes in other places. For US\$10, you get to enjoy tea and snacks on the hotel's balcony and watch the menagerie of bird life that comes within arm's reach to eat at the many feeders the hotel staff sets out at tea

time. Regular visitors include blue-crowned mot-mots, rufous-vented chachalacas, blue-gray tanagers and several species of hummingbird.

TOBAGO FOREST RESERVE. This spectacular rainforest preserve is a cool, lush retreat and offers the best bird-watching in the Caribbean. You can enjoy the forest by setting out on the trail on your own, but you'll get much more out of a tour with a knowledgeable guide, who can introduce you to the forest's flora and spot birds you'd never find. Ask your hotel or resort to recommend a reputable guide.

ARGYLL WATERFALL. The most easily accessible of Tobago's waterfalls is an easy 15-minute hike from the parking area near Roxborough. The price of admission includes the cost of a guide, who will share natural points of interest along the way. Once you reach the falls, you can cool off in the lowest of the falls' three pools, or make the somewhat tricky climb to the upper pools.

DRIVE THE NORTHSIDE ROAD. From Speyside, cross the mountain ridge into scenic and quiet Charlotteville on the north coast. From there, drive west, where you'll hit a series of picture-perfect bays like Parlatuvier and Englishman's.

You may find a group of men working together to pull in a long seine net, weighted with lead, to check the day's catch. Feel free to pitch in and do a little pulling—it's hard work, but all hands are welcome and it's a good way to connect with the locals.

HIT THE BEACH. Find a scenic stretch of sand along the Northside Road, or if you're in the Crown Point area, head for Pigeon Point, a popular and pretty palm-lined beach (US\$3 admission). There's no admission fee to Store Bay Beach, another popular local spot that features food vendors offering fresh local fare. Try the crab and dumpling.

than bicolor damselfish, which seem to hover over every square inch of the reeftops here. Horse-eye jacks, black jacks, rainbow runners, tarpon and barracuda also cruise Speyside waters.

Named for an upright pair of rocks that rise from the surface of the water, **Bookends** is a fast-current ride over a reef slope of hard and soft corals until you reach a bowl-shaped arena patrolled by big tarpon. **Black Jack Hole** is a sloping reef featuring enormous barrel sponges and schooling creolefish, tomtates and bar jacks. Watch the current, which picks up steam quickly as you move away from shore. **Kelleston Drain** features a garden of giant barrel sponges, and **Coral Gardens** is the site of what many believe is the world's largest brain coral head, at some 14 feet across.

BYOND SPEYSIDE Around the northeast tip of Tobago from Speyside, the small group of rocky outcroppings that form the St. Giles Islands are a magnet for divers looking for adventure. Speyside dive operators make the run to St. Giles in 20 to 30 minutes. Currents can be strong here, but so are your chances of swimming with pelagic visitors, including sharks, mantas and a variety of jacks. Dives here are made on the big chiseled rocks that surround the islands underwater and on

sloping walls that shelter lobsters and nurse sharks.

The topside landmark and signature dive of St. Giles is the rock arch known as **London Bridge**. The site is as dramatic underwater as it is above, with a thrilling passage through the arch itself, swirling schools of fish and the chance to see hammerheads. Other sites include **Marble Island** with impressive granite walls, **Sail Rock** with its many nooks and crannies and brain coral garden and the shallow **St. Giles Drift**, where nurse sharks and eagle rays are commonly sighted.

Continuing west down the north coast of Tobago, you'll eventually reach another group of rocks that offers more underwater thrills. The **Sisters Rocks** group are five large seamounts that break the surface of the water and are accessible by dive boats from Castara, Arnos Vale and Charlotteville. Underwater, the pinnacles are shelved and subject to sometimes strong surge. Large schools of fish swarm the pinnacles, and hammerhead sightings are common from December to March. Look for groupers, jacks and snappers on the deeper portions of the pinnacles and scorpionfish, a variety of moray eels and lobsters higher up. SD

GET THERE > For more information on Tobago, turn to *In Depth*, page 91, section 2.



Above: A short hike near Roxborough brings you to Argyll Waterfall, which features three separate pools.