
Johnny Coomansingh

Department of Geography, Geology and Planning
Southwest Missouri State University

An Apparent Solution but a Plethora of Problems

Emerging from a colonial past, Trinidad and Tobago continues to struggle for economic freedom. Although there are certain elements, which serve as lures for tourists in Trinidad, Tobago with its scenic beauty and warm beaches has captured the position for large-scale tourism development. This twin-island republic has not had a history of a “real” tourist industry. Petroleum production, refining, and exploitation of large natural gas reservoirs are the factors that govern the economy. These industrial and economic facts, coupled with observations taken on two field visits in 2004, concluded that the tourism industry has not been given the attention required for success.

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By Johnny Coomansingh

Department of Geography, Geology and Planning
Southwest Missouri State University

Address: Department of Geography, Geology and Planning
316 Temple Hall
Southwest Missouri State University
901 National Avenue
Springfield, MO 65806

Telephone: (417) 836-4897

Facsimile: (417) 836-6006

Email: joc232f@smsu.edu

Johnny Coomansingh's research focus is primarily concerned with tourism issues in the Caribbean region. His research surrounds topics such as the incidence of HIV/AIDS and its relationship to tourism in the Caribbean. He is also a keen observer of the budding tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago. Among other things, he is certified in food safety (ServSafe), and has received training in public relations, restaurant and hospitality management. Some of his other research interests include cultural diffusion, and contested sacred space.

Purpose of Study:

Since the murder of Michael Theophilus Melville on Tobago's Pigeon Point Beach (eRTR, Vol.2, No.1, 2004) the government of Trinidad and Tobago has made an attempt to acquire the land, which constitutes the Pigeon Point Estate. The intent of this paper is to put into context the piecemeal plans of the Trinidad and Tobago government, and lack of follow through with respect to the development and maintenance of tourism infrastructure. Several pressing issues need to be addressed with regard to tourism in Trinidad and Tobago if the industry is to be competitive.

Findings:

Fieldwork observations taken in January and June 2004 in Trinidad and Tobago indicated that several serious issues are to be addressed with respect to the tourism industry on both islands. Some of these issues/problems include:

- Tourism worker fears and insecurities
- Tourist safety
- Food/health safety issues
- Hostility, violence and crimes committed against tourists
- Lack of infrastructural maintenance

Solution?

This report follows an article published in the e-Review of Tourism Research, Volume 2, No.1, 2004 about tourism development in Trinidad and Tobago. The article focused on the nasty aspects of tourism development, and presented a situation where a young man was fatally shot on

the Pigeon Point Beach (Coomansingh, 2004). Since then, as part of the solution, the government took steps to acquire the Pigeon Point Estate. Prior to the acquisition, fieldwork was conducted to ferret out some of the problems facing the tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago.

The fear of massa continues

A recent visit in January 2004 to the Pigeon Point Beach Club (PPBC) proved that the “native” employees were operating under stress. After a little coaxing, one of the female workers explained in detail what was happening to Tobagonians who worked for the PPBC. Quite noticeable was the segregation of the White tourists and the people who serviced the club. No verbal or non-verbal interaction occurred between tourists and workers except for the woman who was employed to distribute lounging chairs on the beach. The woman revealed that tension around the club was high since the shooting of Melville. All ancillary workers (beach cleaners) were of African descent. This could be owing to the fact that of the 50,000 people inhabiting Tobago about 49,000 are black or it could be as Craig (2001: 2) stated: “...Tobagonians are the ones getting the lowly paid jobs.” The workers seemed extremely manipulated and “afraid.”

Who is in, who is out, and who could stick around

Pigeon Point’s history is laced with the lack of consideration for fisher folk, reef-tour operators, and other stakeholders operating in the Buccoo Reef Marine Park area (Potts, 2003; Leotaud, 2001). According to Shah (2000) the Pigeon Point Beach Club (PPBC) was designed to exclude ordinary people. In view of this, Craig (2001: 2) mentioned that citizens are finding it difficult to gain access to many parts of Tobago’s coastline. The conundrum of exclusivity has always been contentious in Trinidad and Tobago. It is an unwritten rule, but the vestiges of the White plantocracy are still covertly operating in the system. Shah (2000: 1) stated the nature of the situation this way:

It seemed almost predictable, the shooting to death of a beach-trader ... at Pigeon Point. When rumblings over access to the pride of Tobago's aquamarine beach began a few months ago, I sensed they would lead to a confrontation that had race and class connotations that would be in nobody's interest.

The murder of Melville is seen as a symptom of neocolonialism (deBlij and Muller, 2002; Rowntree, et al, 2002). Potts (2003) stated that the new tourism industry has caused severe inconveniences for all stakeholders. An interview with a souvenir booth operator in Store Bay, Tobago revealed that the Pigeon Point Estate was the bone of contention for the people of Tobago. He declared that the present owner/lease holder of the estate was ruining the Pigeon Point fishing grounds, and fisher folk were experiencing difficulty to land a decent catch. Efforts of fisher folk to compromise a cooperative solution with the PPBC for co-existence were futile.

With respect to the strong-arm tactics employed by the Ansa/McAl Group who operated the PPBC and the subsequent death of a citizen, the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) initiated the process "to effect compulsory acquisition of the entire Pigeon Point Estate for public purposes" (Chamber Column, 2003: 1). Apart from charging a US\$3 (about TT\$20) fee, the PPBC erected chain link fencing around the entire property to keep out nationals who could not pay. The fencing also posed severe problems for the fisher folk (Leotaud, 2001). With regard to this lack of access, Shah (2003: 1) posits: "In the case of Pigeon Point, there have been many battles waged for ordinary people to access the beach.

The good news coming out of all the problems surrounding the PPBC was that the government eventually acquired the 60-acre Pigeon Point Estate (Manmohan, 2004). Tourism is the mainstay of Tobago's economy and this acquisition is certain to add a fillip to the tourism effort on the island. According to Manmohan (2004: 1) Orville London, THA Chief Secretary with regard to the acquisition said: "We have come a long way and we have arrived at a point

where we wanted to be, where we in Tobago have an opportunity to utilize part of Tobago's heritage for Tobagonians.”

Plethora of problems

Despite the special plans to create a better tourism product, many items that impact quality tourism development in Trinidad and Tobago are lacking. More attention should be given to safety precautions when boarding a boat for a reef tour. Tourists who wish to go on the tour have to wade out in the water at Store Bay to board the flat bottom boat rendered unstable by the waves. It is only a matter of time before someone sustains serious damage or death. Tourists must take great care also about where they purchase food. Not all the food vendors in Trinidad and Tobago are safe to eat from. Not enough is being done in Store Bay, Tobago and elsewhere to prevent strands of human hair, and other “inert” materials from appearing in food. The crabs that are prepared as part of signature food preparations (curry crab and dumplings) are definitely too small and it will not be long again before Tobago destroys a vital part of the marine ecosystem.

In the Piarco Airport terminal in Trinidad, there was an absence of hand washing soap, and toilet tissue. The smell of the restrooms was also deplorable. And although the facility was recently refurbished, the lavatories were already showing signs of unusual wear and tear. Soap dispensers were visible in Store Bay Tourist facility but again, no soap! Maps of Port of Spain were “sanitized” by the Trinidad and Tobago Tourism and Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO) as a means of directing people away from the slums and shanties that constitute the violent, hillside suburbs. Tourists should know that Port of Spain, Trinidad, especially during carnival time is not as safe as it appears. An American tourist was murdered in the carnival celebrations of 2000 (Coomansingh, 2002). In recent times there have been quite a lot of

murders of locals in these slum areas. The incidence of HIV/AIDS is on the rise. The Tobago Today (December-January, (2004), issue #51 advised that HIV/AIDS is a souvenir that tourists would do well not to take home with them. Over 20,000 people in Trinidad and Tobago are HIV/AIDS positive. All is not well in paradise.

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