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Cities of Trinidad and Tobago

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Introduction

The islands of Trinidad and Tobago, nestled in the southern Caribbean, possess a vibrant tapestry of urban life shaped over centuries by waves of migration, colonial history, natural endowments, and the indomitable spirit of their people. From the bustling streets of Port of Spain, teeming with the rhythm of commerce and culture, to the tranquil villages of Tobago nestling by azure bays, the nation's cities embody distinctive stories, traditions, and aspirations. For visitors and residents alike, these urban centers offer a window into the nation's soul, where every street, marketplace, and landmark tells a tale.

Trinidad and Tobago's urban heritage reflects the confluence of indigenous roots, European colonization, African and Indian migrations, and influences from Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Each city and town bears the imprint of these diverse currents—visible in their architecture, celebrated festivals, neighborhoods, and even the names on signposts. This layered history becomes evident as one wanders the elegant squares of Port of Spain, the diverse bazaars of Chaguanas, the royal pageantry of Arima, or the vibrant festival grounds of Point Fortin.

Yet, despite their unique identities, the cities of Trinidad and Tobago share common threads. Economic resilience, communal pride, creative energy, and a zest for life are etched into urban landscapes from the monumental industrial growth of Couva and La Brea to the cultural fervor of San Fernando and the ecological sanctuaries on Tobago. Many cities have undergone rapid transformation—agricultural settlements have blossomed into trade and service centers, while industrial booms have left lasting marks, shaping everything from infrastructure to demographic patterns.

For travelers, these cities offer more than picturesque views: they are invitations to participate in the daily rituals that define Trinidadian and Tobagonian life. Savoring street food in a busy Chaguanas market, marveling at colonial architecture in Scarborough, joining Carnival processions through San Juan-Laventille or witnessing the sacred processions of Divali Nagar—each experience becomes a pathway to understanding what makes these places unique.

This book was created to serve as both a historical primer and a practical guide for those eager to explore the great cities of Trinidad and Tobago. Alongside context and nuance about the development, economy, and heritage of each city, readers will find valuable suggestions for sights, festivals, cuisine, and experiences. Whether you are a first-time visitor, a returning descendant, or a local rediscovering your surroundings, this journey through the cities aims to enrich your appreciation of the country's multifaceted urban charm.

As you turn these pages, may you be inspired to wander, to learn, and to connect with the stories and communities that make Trinidad and Tobago's cities truly remarkable. From the well-known avenues to hidden gems off the beaten path, the adventure of discovery awaits in each corner of these Caribbean isles.

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CHAPTER ONE: Port of Spain: The Heart of Trinidad

Port of Spain, the bustling capital and primary port of Trinidad and Tobago, sits gracefully on the northwest coast of Trinidad. It is cradled between the shimmering waters of the Gulf of Paria and the verdant slopes of the Northern Range hills, a striking geographical embrace. Though it is the third-largest municipality in the nation by permanent population, with 37,074 residents in 2011, its daily pulse quickens considerably, with a transient population that can swell to a quarter of a million people. This ebb and flow of humanity transforms the city into a dynamic hub of activity, a constant whirl of commerce, culture, and community.

The history of Port of Spain stretches back to 1595 when Sir Walter Raleigh first documented the area. Long before any formal city plans were laid, a Spanish garrison had already taken root near the Laventille Hills around 1560, marking an early European presence. Fast forward to 1792, and Governor Don José María Chacón, in a gesture of royal admiration, christened the area San Fernando, honoring the infant son of Spain's King Carlos III. By the time the British took control in 1797, Port of Spain was a modest settlement, little more than a scattering of houses along the waterfront.

Despite its humble beginnings under British rule, the city began to flourish, taking on a distinct Spanish colonial character. A central square, originally known as Plaza San Carlos, was established, situated between what are now King and Queen Streets. Following 1797, key governmental and religious structures began to rise, including a government house, a church, and a jail, all contributing to the nascent city's organized development. This blend of Spanish and later British influences laid the architectural and cultural groundwork for the Port of Spain we recognize today.

The urban fabric of Port of Spain is notably characterized by its geometric arrangement of parks and squares, a pleasing contrast to the residential suburbs that spill into the surrounding hills. At the very heart of it all lies the central business district, the oldest sector of the city. This vital area stretches from South Quay to Oxford Street, and from the St. Ann's River to Richmond Street, a rectangular core teeming with financial institutions, corporate offices, and the ceaseless rhythm of urban trade.

Venturing beyond the immediate downtown, several distinct districts contribute to the city's diverse personality. Woodbrook, located to the west of the central business district, offers a lively mix of residential and commercial spaces. Just north of Woodbrook and west of Saint Clair lies Saint James, a district that was the last to be formally incorporated into the city limits. Since the late 19th century, Saint James has been a significant center for Port of Spain's Indian population, a heritage proudly

reflected in many of its streets, which bear names inspired by cities in South Asia. It's also earned the moniker "The city that never sleeps" due to its energetic nightlife.

Newtown, a northern district, presents a fascinating blend of solemnity and hustle, home to numerous churches, schools, businesses, and diplomatic missions. To the north of Woodbrook and east of Saint James, St. Clair stands as an upscale business and residential enclave, nestled between the iconic Queen's Park Savannah and the Maraval River. This district is renowned for its magnificent mansions, including the famous "Magnificent Seven Houses," architectural marvels that evoke a sense of grandeur and history. Within St. Clair, one also finds elite residential areas such as Federation Park and Ellerslie Park.

Belmont, situated at the base of the Laventille Hills, holds the distinction of being the city's first suburb. Its development began in the 1840s and 1850s, primarily settled by Africans who had been rescued from illegal slave ships, contributing a unique and resilient chapter to Port of Spain's social history. Further north and northwest of the capital are the serene suburbs of Cascade, St. Ann's, and Maraval, offering a quieter residential experience. St. Ann's is particularly notable as the location of the Prime Minister's official residence, a stately home nestled amidst lush surroundings.

Port of Spain's economic landscape is a refreshing departure from the tourism-dominated economies often found in other Caribbean islands. The city boasts a robust and diversified industrial base, a testament to its strategic importance beyond just leisure. Industries thriving here include the production of rum, beer, margarine, various oils, cigarettes, plastics, and building materials. The city also hosts sawmills, textile mills, and citrus canneries, showcasing a wide range of manufacturing capabilities.

One particularly renowned product, Angostura aromatic bitters, an internationally recognized ingredient in cocktails and cuisine, is exclusively produced in Port of Spain. This secret recipe, originating in Venezuela, found its permanent home and production hub here, solidifying the city's place on the global culinary map. To support its diverse industries, technical institutes within Port of Spain provide specialized training, ensuring a skilled workforce for the various sectors. The city's port holds a truly strategic position on international shipping routes, making it a crucial trade center throughout the West Indies, handling a significant flow of goods and commerce.

Culturally and architecturally, Port of Spain is rich with landmarks that tell tales of its past and present. The Gothic-style Holy Trinity Cathedral stands as a venerable historical and architectural gem, its imposing structure a central feature of the cityscape. Equally central, and indeed the city's largest open space, is the sprawling Queen's Park Savannah. This expansive green oval, affectionately known as "the Savannah" by locals, is a beloved recreational area for everything from leisurely strolls to vigorous exercise, and also plays host to major cultural events.

Surrounding the Queen's Park Savannah are several other significant buildings. The President's House, the official residence of the President of Trinidad and Tobago, is gracefully situated within the lush Botanical Gardens, offering a serene contrast to the city's hustle. Whitehall, a historic mansion, serves as the office of the prime minister, while the Roman Catholic archbishop's house adds another layer of historical and religious significance to the area. The Knowsley Building, which accommodates several government ministries, and the Anglican All Saints' Church further contribute to the cluster of important structures surrounding the Savannah.

Another prominent landmark is the neo-Renaissance Red House, which, after being rebuilt in 1906 following a fire, continues to house the Parliament and various government offices. Beyond Christian places of worship, Port of Spain also embraces its multicultural identity with the presence of Muslim and Hindu places of worship, reflecting the diverse spiritual landscape of the nation.

Educational excellence is also a hallmark of Port of Spain, with several prestigious institutions shaping future generations. Queen's Royal College, Fatima College, and St. Mary's College are well-established secondary schools, known for their academic rigor and contributions to national development. While these schools are within the city, the main campus of the University of the West Indies is located approximately 10 miles east of Port of Spain, in St. Augustine, serving as a vital center for higher education and research.

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