

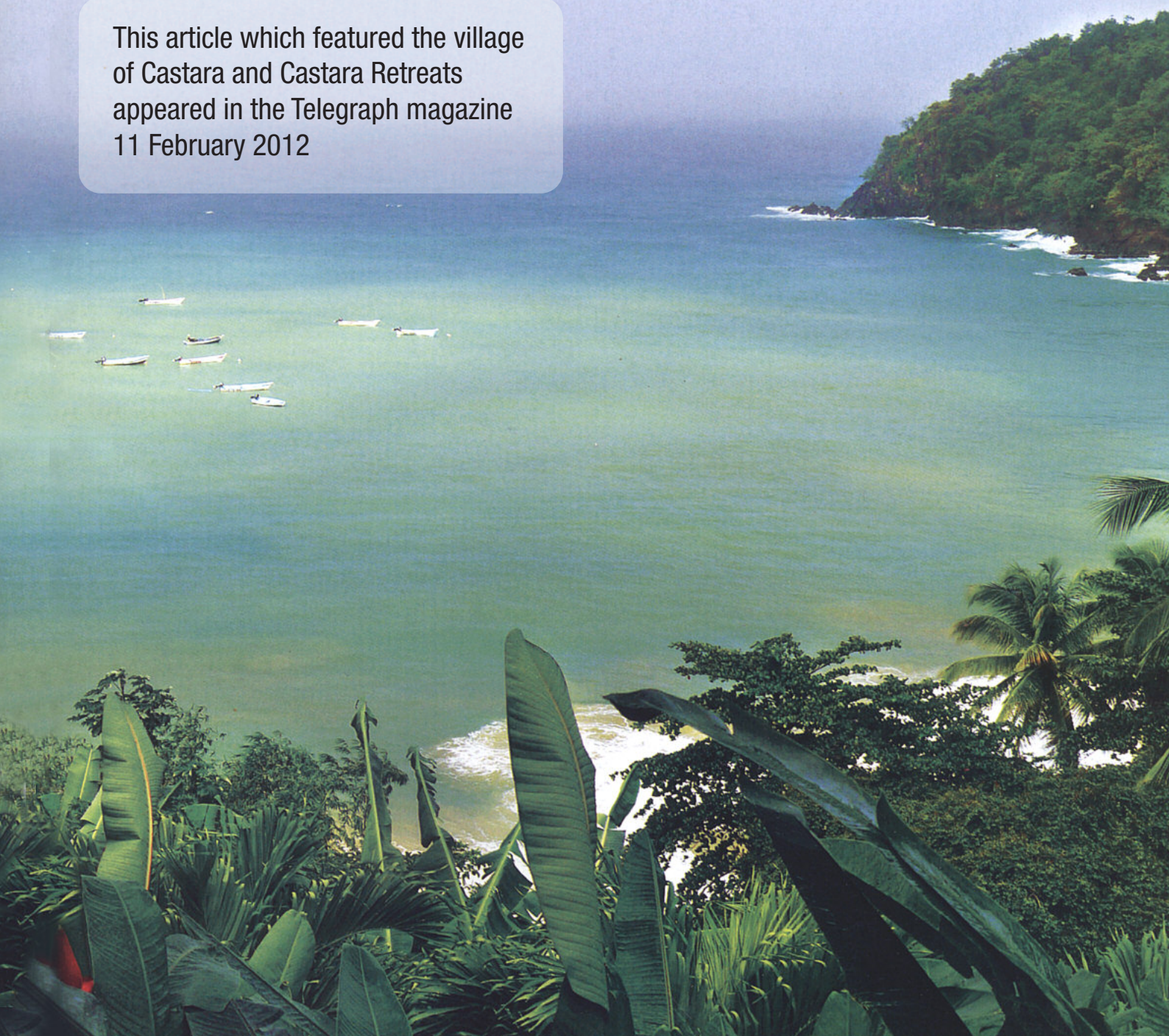
Telegraph magazine

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The travel issue

Eco-tripping in Tobago Strange times in Madagascar
Solitude in Skagen The Uruguayan riviera **Off-peak in Corsica**
The Ile de Ré on two wheels Feasting in Puglia

This article which featured the village of Castara and Castara Retreats appeared in the Telegraph magazine 11 February 2012



Woken by awe. 'Awesome!' shouts the figure in pyjamas leaning over the balcony. 'Come and see, come and see this now!' A bay 100ft below us with a scattering of narrow fishing boats at anchor, houses with metal roofs embedded into hills of palms and banana, the sound of waves. And magnificent frigatebirds, known locally as the man-o'-war, skeletal black calligraphies, sweeping and diving into azure. Disbelief at dawn. Fishermen seem to be dragging a seine net into the shore. There seem to be flocks of parrots. We seem to have made it.

We left London early on the third day after Christmas, slamming our front door on a house strewn with the detritus of wrapping paper, and arrived into a muggy tropical night, the moon

Who could resist any bird with a name as appropriately extravagant as the rufous-vented chachalaca?

slung the wrong way round in the sky, too many stars, a tiny airport alight with proper Christmas decorations. Waiting for us, as promised, was a man called Porridge with a minibus to take us an hour up the leeward coast of Tobago to our lodge in the fishing village of Castara. A meal of rice, peas and baked chicken, and a pizza had been left for us. There was pawpaw and beer in the fridge. Groggy with tiredness, we took in little beyond beds beneath mosquito nets.

This was a journey that began around a question. Could we take our three cheerfully argumentative children, two of them ethical vegetarians

Natural highs

Beaches, bats, bamboo and bananaquits – **Edmund de Waal** discovers the best combination for an eco-minded family in Tobago

Overlooking Castara Bay, the lodges of Castara Retreats combine simplicity with luxurious touches such as iPod docks and coffee machines.

Photographs by Edmund de Waal







This is about as good as it gets. A solitary boat in a solitary place. A fire with grilled fish and a piece of lime

Above from Castara Retreats, the beach is reached via a winding footpath.

Below Matthew takes a watermelon break

and all of them eco-warriors, to a place where they could experience something completely different? We played a sort of family poker game. When asked where I wanted to go I had suggested Oslo. Or Odessa. The children had – rather plaintively – suggested somewhere warmer and also somewhere less literary. Tobago won. For my wife, Sue, it was a return to a place familiar from a childhood in Trinidad, a menagerie of dogs, parrots, rats, tortoises, rabbits, butterflies, the taste of the local sesame bene balls, the sounds of soca at carnival. Tobago was part of a drift of anecdotes of a 1960s childhood, involving manta rays and sea urchins, dangerous boats, and expeditions in search of blossoming immortelles, impossible dreamy trees of orange flowers. It was a chance for her to bring our children into proximity with her earliest memories. For me it was a chance to travel for the first time in years of compulsive walking around cities for a family memoir I was writing to a place that I hadn't exhaustively researched. I didn't even pack VS Naipaul. For Ben, 13, Matthew, 12, and Anna, nine, it was their first adventure holiday.

We booked 10 days in a lodge at Castara Retreats, one of six built into a hillside garden above the village. These lodges seem simple: polished floors and large open verandas and fretted wooden shutters, each one angled to make most sense of the spectacular views. But it is a deceptive



simplicity, for there are hammocks and a dock for an iPod and the kitchen has a proper coffee machine, and the stack of novels turned up books for us all. It is not a hotel. It is owned by an English couple, but managed by a local couple, Porridge and his wife, Jeanell, warm and capable and unflappable in the face of requests. They produced the best book on the birds of Tobago one night, a bottle of disinfectant for a wound another.

The idea of the place is that you make things up as you go along – drop in on a neighbour to ask if she will cook for you, ask for advice from Porridge about boats or how to reach the local waterfall (cross the football field and keep going: it is worth it). This feels very natural, but is completely dependent on you reading the excellent briefing notes properly beforehand. You will not be managed.

For instance, because it is a tropical climate and cleaning is intermittent, it is vital that you get rid of fruit before the ants find it. I can imagine that this could be challenging for families with smaller



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Ben and Matthew swim at the Argyle Falls. These are spectacular but the de Waals recommend going as early as possible to avoid other visitors

children, particularly if you already have to deal with the other realities of mosquitos at night, sun-cream and sandflies on the beach. And from some of the overheard comments of other visitors, the lodges are a little too open to the bats that swoop through the rooms at dusk.

We loved it. Especially the bats. And hanging from the eaves of the veranda were bamboo bird-feeders, so that we could sit and read and watch deep-blue tanagers and ridiculously coiffed antshrikes perform in front of us. Our first breakfast was interrupted by the mugging of fruit, butter and jam by the small cheerful bananaquits, yellow-breasted finches of irrepressible character.

Castara itself offered the chance of easy days. The warmth of the sea was a shock for our children, used to the cold waters off the coast of Ardnamurchan in north-west Scotland, to wet-suits and our studied nonchalance in the face of horizontal summer rain. There was the colour straight from an Indian miniature, lapis ground into liquid, and the joy of playing in the waves, getting knocked over in the surf, the snorkelling. They loved disappearing into the village with a fistful of dollars and returning with fudge (delicious) and a carmine sorrel drink (peculiar). Foraging in the village for supplies was an art. Apart from stocking up on wonderful fruit from Binji, the self-styled King of Fruit, there was little

beyond a village bakery (closed for New Year), about which we heard magic tales of loaves and cakes; the supermarket, with surprising tins and a fridge entirely full of garlic purée; and a cheerful elderly man with a couple of crates of vegetables outside his shop. But if you wanted fish and rice and salad you were in heaven. And this is where the age of the children mattered: they didn't balk at repeated staples.

Our second night was surprising. We had arrived just in time for Old Year celebrations and the evening was punctuated by intermittent explosions, caused, we found out the next morning, by the local youth pouring paraffin into sections of bamboo and setting them alight. When asked what he regretted about the holiday Matthew admitted that this was a skill he had wanted to acquire. New Year was noisier still. A party hosted by a famous Trinidadian DJ started at nine in the evening and finished the following lunchtime. It was staggeringly loud, soca pulsing across the bay. The

children saw the empty beer truck attempting to climb the hill and were suitably impressed. But indicative of the way in which the village worked, there was a sense that everyone needs a party sometime. We could have been back in south London.

For the boys a highlight was the morning spent on a cocoa plantation on the windward coast run by an evangelical chocolate enthusiast. The vast majority of Tobago's plantations were destroyed by Hurricane Flora in 1963, and never replanted. Duane Dove, a large Tobagonian, machete at his waist, with 15 years' experience of chocolate in France, had made this place his mission. He was determined, he explained, not only to show that it was possible to make the best chocolate possible, but to do it sensitively. He blazed with energy.

Duane was frank about the problems. Some were logistical – clearing a precipitous valley of rampant bamboo groves redefines hard work. There was the catastrophic loss of skills, the result of two generations of people finding work away

from cocoa. His single-estate chocolate had just won a Great Taste Awards gold medal and the success he was achieving was also proving complex: to grow the cocoa needed time and a sort of eye-stretching care that precluded expansion; each pod needed netting, as the local parrots could destroy the crop within hours.

But what was so vivid for the boys was seeing how this worked in practice. Elderly ladies from the village were taking tours of the plantations, and children on their Christmas break from the local primary school, proud in their smart brown Tobago Cocoa Estate T-shirts, were sweeping the yard. We stopped en route to taste the fleshy, pulpy seeds of a cocoa pod and a freshly baked piece of cassava bread. And a banana so sweet that it converted one son on the spot. The tour ended with a piece of the chocolate – Fortnum & Mason-stocked – broken from a bar and handed round like the Host. It was so delicious, and offered with such openness, that the whole morning would have turned the hardest and most cynical visitor on to the reasons for fair trade. Ben, a dogged chocolate connoisseur, said it was the best he had ever tasted. For Matthew this was trade, economy, ecology and taste all brought together with a vividness that blew open the discussions of how ethical food can happen in the world. It would go on his blog.

The most keenly anticipated day trip was to the Tobago rainforest. It is the oldest protected forest in the western hemisphere, established in 1765 to make sure that the watershed of the island was not destroyed as land was cleared by the colonists. It straddles the spine of Tobago and it is, quite simply, the glory of the place. We had been advised to book tours with Newton George well in advance and this proved to be fabulous advice. He is an avuncular 60-year-old, the son of the last resident warden of the island nature reserve of Little Tobago, and a man who has made his life as a naturalist. He is a birder of great repute. But it is his ability to communicate that is electric.

He must have made this trek, a four-hour scramble along small and muddy paths through a gorge that could have been painted by Douanier Rousseau, hundreds of times before, week in and week out with recalcitrant families, but he made it live for us. There was a sense of an abundance beyond comprehension, a layering of climbers up trees, liana vines as thick as a wrist descending, groves of bamboo, the sounds of waterfalls. Underfoot was a 100-yard line of leaf-cutter ants returning to a high earth bank of activity, a furious coral snake trapped and lifted by Newton to the gasps of our kids. He had the unnerving ability to find a pair of bats hanging in the shadows of a tree's roots, to point out the menacing pale silhouette of a crab in a burrow, to demonstrate the way in which the trapdoor spider camouflages its lair. He showed us a hummingbird starting to make its nest, shredding a banana leaf to twine it back on itself.

And all of this was cut through by the calls of birds of a beauty I could not have expected. Newton brought a scope with him, a sort of generous telescope on legs that he managed to dexterously angle so that a motmot, an absurd combination of turquoise tail and rufous chest and attitude, came vividly into sight. Binoculars



The oldest protected rainforest in the western hemisphere straddles Tobago. It is, quite simply, the glory of the place

Anna as goatherd on the path to Bloody Bay, four miles up the coast from Castara

can be tricky for children, and doubly so for our glasses-wearing tribe, so this allowed us all to see, and to see quickly. I had imagined flagging children and unseen birds and Too Much Information; instead we had a morning of delight.

I had never really understood how it was possible to fall in love with birds; never recognised that they have such different characters, but this was an epiphany. Seeing them here in this rainforest made sense of those dogged naturalists, collectors, explorers and artists who had tried to map

this place 200 years ago. And who could resist anything with a name as appropriately extravagant as my new favourites, the blue-backed manakin, white-tailed sabrewing hummingbird and the rufous-vented chachalaca?

Our second trip with Newton was to Little Tobago, a couple of miles off the windward coast, a nature reserve that had become famous for an act of Edwardian environmental chutzpah. In 1909 Sir William Ingram introduced to the island 48 greater birds of paradise, natives of New

Guinea, feeling that they would suit the landscape. Though a nest was never found, the birds evidently bred successfully as the colony survived for many years. By 1979 only a pair remained, and Newton was the last man to sight one of these remnants of colonial *folie de grandeur*.

To get to the island you take a glass-bottomed boat across a surprisingly rough stretch of sea, passing the strange abandoned house of Ian Fleming on Goat Island. There is a dramatic jump on to a jetty. And apart from a population of feral chickens, left behind by a warden, we were struck by the immediacy of a place where we don't belong. Climbing up to a small clearing among trees and cacti and catching our breath, we found that we were several hundred feet above a rocky inlet. And there around us was an endless moving panorama of black frigatebirds and the ethereal white shapes of tropicbirds, playing within the thermals. It was pure drama, with the piratical frigatebirds chasing their prey and shaking them until they disgorged their fish. And far away over another rocky island there was a haze of grey above the cliffs, the scene of tens of thousands of them swirling.

Ten days allowed us to plan other kinds of trips, too. I had a boat trip with the two boys – five hours in a small boat crewed by Porridge, a sort of Tobagonian Jack Sparrow, and captained by Sherwin, the local cook in the village. Seeing the island from the sea, the hillsides falling into the surf, made it vivid how scant are the places to land and how crucial the bays. We had a couple of lines out the back of the boat, and by the time we had come into a cove there were kingfish and bonito



The village supermarket in Castara had a fridge entirely full of garlic purée

for lunch. And this is about as good as it gets. A solitary boat in a solitary place. A fire with grilled fish and a piece of lime. A football. Fragments of coral to collect on the beach. Some swimming and some fruit punch.

We hired a car and found that driving in Tobago contains very mild peril. There had been heavy rains throughout the rainy season and the single road that twists its way round the coast had been closed by mudslides. There were points where the going was complex, particularly in a tiny Fiat. But all travelling is accompanied by symphonic honking, greetings and warnings about dogs lying asleep, goats tethered to signposts. It is an easy way to explore, the sights of the occasional shack offering juice or rotis, a pick-up truck of jerrycans

next to a spring, a man with baskets and a sling under a mango tree as vivid as the more touristed crescent bays. Indeed the cadence of life in Castara was so gentle that the more robust tourism of some of the other places we visited felt peculiar. A visit to the Argyle Falls – all of this coast of Tobago has a Caledonian theme – with a compulsory guide felt over-directed. We scrambled up and swam in a couple of the pools but this was more of a packaged experience with the strong presence of people ahead and behind, and a guide with a sense of timing.

Taking the children back to school on a bitter January day, I asked them to tell me what they had enjoyed most. The list started with fireflies, the surf, the chocolate, the sighting by Anna of an agouti (a guinea-pig-sized animal), the bananaquits. As they disappeared they were still listing, and so was I. I was pleased that as we came back from a day of exploring Sue found us a bank of sensitive plant, a small, low scrambling purple mimosa. You tap it and it shudders and furls into itself: a performance. I added in that Sue sang us the Trinidad and Tobago national song, remembered from childhood: 'God bless our isles of tropic beauty rare/Of flaming poinciana/And shady immortelle.'

Edmund de Waal stayed at Birdsong Lodge at Castara Retreats, which offers three apartments and three lodges ranging in price from £105-210 per night (castararetreats.com). British Airways flies to Tobago, from £499 (ba.com). Monarch flies there weekly (monarch.co.uk) and Virgin twice weekly (virginatlantic.com). For more information, visit mytobago.info or gotrinidadandtobago.com