



Top five eco-excursions in Tobago

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The case could be made that Tobago is the eco-tourism capital of the Caribbean. This laidback island isn't brimming over with large resorts, huge waterparks and glitzy nightclubs. Instead, Tobago attracts nature-lovers, birdwatchers and romantic couples looking for quiet times in beautiful natural surroundings.

Tobago has over 200 bird species, a selection of gorgeous waterfalls and a brace of tropical nature reserves waiting to be explored via hiking trails. While there are a few large hotels on the island, travelers will also have a lot of guesthouse-sized properties to choose from, with many of these surrounded by lush nature.



The Argyle Waterfall is Tobago's premier waterfall hike. The waterfall is about a 15 mile drive from Scarborough, Tobago's capital city. (Photo: Trinidad & Tobago Tourism Development Company)

Argyle Waterfall

The Argyle Waterfall is the island's premier waterfall hike. Just a 15 mile drive from Scarborough, Tobago's capital city, the Argyle River and its falls are a part of the Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve, the oldest protected rainforest in the western hemisphere.

To access the falls, hikers will first have to pay a modest admission. There will be plenty of guides around; they work for tips and a percentage of the admission price. Choose a guide displaying an official guiding badge. These guides are a source of information about the plants and flowers hikers pass on their way to the falls, including subtle orchids and bright scarlet and yellow heliconia. Lucky hikers will catch glimpses of parrots in the trees or small caimans in the marsh alongside a section of the trail. The hike also takes travelers past the crumbling ruins of a colonial-era sugar plantation. The hike to the falls takes about 20 minutes and has a few moments where the going is steep. The reward for the exertion is a stunning waterfall — the island's steepest — crashing 175 feet. Bring a bathing suit, since the base of the falls has deep pools, perfect for an invigorating waterfall dip.



The Argyle River and its falls are a part of the Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve, the oldest protected rainforest in the western hemisphere. (Photo: Trinidad & Tobago Tourism Development Company)

Endangered Sea Turtles

Endangered leatherback hawksbill and green turtles are protected by law on Tobago. Sea turtles have enough natural predators without having man hunting them to toss them into the soup pot or to make shiny souvenirs out of their shells.



Endangered leatherback hawksbill and green turtles are protected by law on Tobago. The best beach to see nesting turtles is on Turtle Beach in Stone Haven Bay. (Photo: Trinidad & Tobago Tourism Development Company)

The best beach to see nesting turtles is on Turtle Beach in Stone Haven Bay. The prime months to observe them are March to September, when they come up onto the beach to lay 80 to 120 eggs in a hole they dig in the sand. They cover the hole back up as part of the incubation process, which takes about 60 days. After the baby turtles hatch and make their way to the surface, they begin their scramble towards the ocean. It's estimated that even under their status as a protected species, only one in a thousand of the baby sea turtles survives to maturity.

The most responsible way to experience the turtle nesting process is to hire a local guide. They'll have a lot of salient information to share about sea turtles, and they'll also assure that a visitor doesn't make an innocent blunder by interfering in the process of mature turtles laying eggs or tiny hatchlings making their way to the ocean. [Save Our Sea Turtles \(S.O.S.\) Tobago](#) is a charity run by local forest rangers offering free guiding trips to learn about the island's sea turtles.



200-acre nature reserve Grafton Caledonia Wildlife Bird Sanctuary was once a cocoa plantation. The best time to visit the reserve is around 4:00 pm, when flocks of birds drop in for a bite. (Photo: Trinidad & Tobago Tourism Development Company)

Grafton Caledonia Wildlife Bird Sanctuary

There's a touching story behind the Grafton Caledonia Wildlife Bird Sanctuary's transition from cocoa plantation to 200-acre nature reserve. After a hurricane ravaged the area in 1963, the plantation's owner Eleanor Alefounder felt sorry for the plight of the surviving birds, which had their food source destroyed by the storm. She began feeding the starving birds, a practice that continues to this day. In fact, the best time to visit the reserve is around 4:00 pm, when flocks of birds drop in for a bite, including cocoricos and motmots. The motmots have become so used to sharing their table with humans that the bolder of them will eat directly from a visitor's hand.

There's no charge to visit the sanctuary. In addition to enjoying the sight of feeding birds, travelers can drop into the visitor's center for information on the sanctuary; its history and what a visitor might observe along the sanctuary's network of nature trails. For the ultimate bird watching experience, consider hiring one of Tobago's excellent birding guides.

Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve

Tobago has the distinction of having the oldest forest reserve in the western hemisphere. The Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve was proclaimed a forest reserve by an Act of Parliament way back in 1776. The reserve is the mountainous volcanic spine of Tobago. From the northeast tip, it extends for about two thirds of the length of the island. The reserve was voted the "World's Leading Eco-Tourism destination" by the World Travel Awards in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006.

The 9,780-acre reserve is home to a wide range of birds and animals, including 24 non-poisonous snakes (there are no poisonous snakes in Tobago) and 220 bird species. Keep an eye out for the rare White-tailed Sabrewing Hummingbird, as it was declared an Environmentally Sensitive Species by Trinidad and Tobago's Environment Management Authority in 2005.

Hikers will find lots of freelance guides at the entrance to the reserve's main trail, the Gilpin Trace. You can also pre-arrange a tour by one of the island's recognized experts in birdwatching.



Little Tobago Island

The tiny island of Little Tobago is just offshore its larger sister. A mecca for birdwatchers, Little Tobago is reached via boat from the fishing village of Speyside on Tobago's northeastern shore. The 450-acre island is a prime nesting and breeding ground for a range of bird species, including the Red-footed Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Red-billed Tropicbird, Audubon's Shearwater and the Brown Noddy. Little Tobago is sometimes referred to as "Bird of Paradise Island" since the now extinct Greater Bird-of-Paradise once made its home on the island. A permit is required to hike the trails of Little Tobago.

Some visitors opt to take one of the glass-bottom boats to the island, which affords the chance for a bit of fish-watching during the passage over the stretch of shallow water separating the two islands.

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