

Castara Retreats: Notes for Visitors

Introduction

Do take the trouble to read these notes; they are intended to help you to enjoy your stay and to know a little more about what to expect.

The basic principle is looking after yourselves in well resourced self catering accommodation. As part of our fee, we arrange for fresh towels and bed linen every 3-4 days as well as a light clean up.

There is additional back up and support available such as laundry and cooking. This can be arranged on your behalf by Porridge who, with his wife Jeanell, looks after our accommodation. Such additional services are charged for. These costs are reasonable and should be discussed with Porridge after your arrival.

We have designed the house to be open to the wonderful landscape of Castara with its beach and rainforest whilst also being furnished simply but well. Birds and bats fly past, sting rays can be spotted in the sea from your lodge, and rain showers can be seen approaching, obliterating the hill for a short time, and departing again. You are likely to spot fireflies above your mosquito net at night, and wake to the light of the sun and the dawn chorus. In this way the house resonates with its setting - there are no cappuccino bars in Castara, and you are much more likely to encounter crab n' dumpling or calaloo soup than Spaghetti Bolognese in the village restaurants. This is a stunningly beautiful and unsophisticated place.

Nearly all our guests have truly enjoyed their stay at Castara Retreats. Occasionally someone stays who is not entirely happy with their experience and we are keen to receive feedback so that we can continue to improve what we offer. Please let Porridge know as soon as there is anything that you are not happy with and he will do his best to resolve any issues.

However, it is important for us to be clear with our clients that we are not a hotel. This means that we do not offer some of the services of a hotel, such as staff in residence, air conditioning, daily maid service and phones, but it also means it is free of the constraints and protocols of such establishments.

To enjoy Castara Retreats may require you to recognize the worth of such unsophistication. There are days when the electricity is off for a while, or the village phone doesn't work, or Max's supermarket is shut, or.....you get the picture! At the Coco Reef Hotel you would be supported through such hassles; at

Castara Retreats you may need to be a little more resourceful, prepared, or patient. Tobago works best when we let go and go with the flow.

Our Local Management Team

Porridge and Jeanell are our local managers and are at the heart of this team and Porridge will call by most days to make sure everything is OK with our clients and answer any queries: Tobago is a new experience for many people, and though many of your questions will get answered on this web site by browsing through the visitors' notes, more will arise once you arrive, for sure. Then Porridge will be at hand to help until you get your feet on the ground. He will also help you organise trips, take you on trips, take you limin' down to Sunday School, set up a barbeque, explain bank opening hours, and so on.

Jeanell is also very much part of the team, not only organising the accommodation practicalities, but also arranging meals on arrival, or any time during your stay. Marieta, our neighbour who lives in the house below Castara Retreats, will usually cook for you: as Porridge would say- don't be shy, just ask. Be sure to agree the price beforehand to avoid any misunderstandings.

Jeanell and her team of local ladies clean the accommodations and change sheets and towels.

Carrington, who is around four days a week, is responsible for keeping the garden looking lovely, and developing it on a week-by-week basis. Ask him what is in season so you can enjoy, quite literally, the fruits of his care and attention.

Flights from the UK, and Frankfurt

<i>Operator</i>	<i>Departures</i>	<i>from</i>
Golden Caribbean/Monarch	Wednesdays	Gatwick
Virgin	Thursday	Gatwick
British Airways	Monday & Friday until March 31 st – from April 1st Thursday & Saturday.	Gatwick
Condor Air	Monday	Frankfurt

Contact information for flights from the UK and Frankfurt

Golden Caribbean operates flights to Tobago from Gatwick via Grenada on the way out. The return flight is direct. Reservations and bookings can be made at www.goldencaribbean.co.uk

Virgin flights from Gatwick direct to Tobago can be booked on www.virgin-atlantic.com

British Airways flights from Gatwick go via Antigua and can be booked on www.britishairways.com

Condor operates flights from Frankfurt to Tobago on Sunday. Book on www.condor.de

Flights from North America

Caribbean Airlines (www.caribbean-airlines.com - 1-800-538 2942) – flies direct to Tobago from New York and to Port of Spain, Trinidad from Toronto, Canada. Most major American carriers also fly to Port of Spain and then you can get the Caribbean Airlines flight onwards to Tobago.

Sky Service operates a charter service from Toronto to Port of Spain, Trinidad through www.titantours.com or phone 1-416- 925 2050.

Air Canada (www.aircanada.ca or 1-888-247 2262 \$20 booking fee applies if you don't book online) flies daily from Toronto to Barbados. You can then get a LIAT flight from Barbados to Tobago (takes 55 minutes). LIAT details below.

Flights from the Caribbean to Tobago

Caribbean Airlines (www.caribbean-airlines.com or (868) 627 5160) flies from Port of Spain to Tobago 12 times daily from 6am to 9.15pm and returns 12 times daily from 6.40am – 9.55pm. It costs \$25 U.S. one way and the flight takes 20 minutes. Tickets can now be obtained through travel agents or from www.yes-tourism.com in Tobago. They charge \$5 U.S. for this service. Here's a link to the relevant page on their website - www.yes-tourism.com/airbridge.htm.

We have, by the way, no financial interest in Yes Tourism nor do we take any responsibility for any aspect of this service.

LIAT (www.liatairline.com or 1-268 480 5601/2 from U.S.) also flies from Barbados and Antigua to Tobago.

Please note that flights can be booked up quite a long way ahead during festivals or carnival. It's wise to check with the airlines before you book your accommodation to make sure you can get the flights you want.

Flights to Venezuela

You can fly from Port of Spain, Trinidad to Venezuela by contacting www.aeropostal.com – look for an English button top right to translate the website for you.

Ferry Service

The ferry leaves Port of Spain once a day (Monday – Friday 2pm, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays 11am) and takes five and a half hours. You can only buy tickets at the ferry office from 7.30am-4pm Monday to Fridays and your car must be boarded two hours ahead of departure time. There is a fast ferry (two hours) too. Schedules for Sundays and Public Holidays vary. Please use the following link for the latest ferry timetables and prices - www.patnt.com/ferry_schedule.shtml

Please note that ferries can be booked up quite a long way ahead during festivals or carnival. It's wise to check with the airlines before you book your accommodation to make sure you can get the flights you want.

Travel Agents

If you have trouble sorting out your North American flight, ask a travel agent for assistance. Most now charge a small fee but sometimes it's worth it particularly if you find booking online a struggle.

Airport Pick-up and Arrival Time

If you wish, we can arrange on your behalf for you to be met at the airport by

Porridge (who will be holding up a sign saying 'Porridge!'). You can request the pick up via our on line booking procedure for the accommodation. Porridge charges \$250 tt to meet you at the airport (assuming there are 1-2 people in your party). For a party of four, he charges \$400 tt, and for a group of six he charges \$600 tt. He does not usually charge for children under the age of 16 years. We believe his prices are competitive and his service and goodwill is exceptional.

As part of what he provides he will offer to stop at a well provisioned supermarket en route to Castara provided your flight arrives before they shut, and he will see you settled into your accommodation.

Everyone knows Porridge and you will easily see him when you arrive. However, if anything goes wrong, his phone numbers are:

Home: 868 660 7702

Mobile : 868 766 3656.

BE SURE TO TAKE THESE NUMBERS WITH YOU IN YOUR HAND LUGGAGE IN CASE YOU NEED TO GET IN TOUCH WITH HIM.

Please note that whilst we act as a “go between” in assisting you to make these pick- up arrangements with Porridge, we have no commercial involvement in this business, seek no reward or commission and are not responsible for his service to our clients.

If you are in Tobago before your stay at Castara Retreats, then Porridge will meet you in the Castara Retreats car park. Normally we will have arranged for you to meet with him at 3pm (check in time). It is very important that you arrive on time, as he will be waiting at Castara Retreats to show you in. Please ring him if you are delayed for any reason. If, by arrangement, you arrive before 3pm, then you can leave your bags in a store room. Whilst we have had no security problems re the baggage store, we cannot guarantee security so your decision to use the facility is at your own risk. There is also a shower and changing room available for you if you want to go down to the beach or eat in a café while you are waiting for your accommodation to be prepared.

Wherever you are being met, Porridge will show you where you are staying, carry your bags in, hand over keys, and explain anything that needs explaining e.g. where the spare tank for the cooker is etc.

If you would like Porridge to take you back to the airport on your day of departure then please discuss this with him during your stay. He charges the same price as for your arrival.

The Accommodations

General

In 2006 we completed a new driveway onto the land so that clients no longer have a steep walk up the hill when first arriving. There is a small attractively landscaped car park for three cars between Coasthanger and Birdsong. However, in the daily routine of visiting the village and beach, our accommodations are located about 75 yards up a paved, well-lit footpath that winds uphill.

Porridge will visit most days to check everything is OK, but do ring him if you need his help or guidance on anything.

One of our housekeeping team will visit your accommodation every 3-4 days to change sheets and towels and do a light tidy up, usually between 10 am and noon; if you prefer not to have this, please let Jeanell or Porridge know in advance, since our housekeeping team will have been scheduled specifically to provide this service. If you skip this service, they will of course come 3-4 days later, but we are not able to change the schedule outside of that morning slot. House towels and bed linen are provided; we ask you to bring your own beach towels.

Hairdryers, irons and hammocks are available in each accommodation as well as security safes.

Washing

One of our cleaning ladies will do washing for you, though you need to set that up via Porridge or with one of them directly (50tt dollars a load, washed, dried and folded).

Water and electricity

The house is on mains water, and there is hot and cold running water. However the water is stored above the house in storage tanks, and the water supply can occasionally be interrupted on the island, so we ask visitors to be mindful in their use of water. The tap water is perfectly OK to drink.

The electricity supply is 110 volts (same as Canada and the USA) so many appliances made in Europe will not function, although mobile phones can be charged provided you have brought an adaptor for the socket – this is the same

as for the USA and can be purchased at most airports.

It is quite common for the electricity to be cut off for short periods. Please take sensible precautions to reduce the risk of fire and do ensure that if you use night light candles that you place them in the glass holders that we provide.

Rubbish

There is a rubbish collection point in the car park area at Castara Retreats – ask Porridge to show you. We ask our clients to take rubbish disposal seriously because of the tropical climate and suggest you take it down to the disposal point on a daily basis. We recommend that you avoid leaving it outside your accommodation as it attracts chickens and dogs who tend to strew it about. Porridge also requests clients to keep cooked food that you want to dispose of in your freezer compartment until you are ready to take your rubbish bag to the disposal point. This helps to reduce the rate of decomposition and smells.

There are also compost areas that Porridge or Carrington can show you. It is important that only raw vegetable and fruit matter is placed on the compost heaps as otherwise stray dogs, chickens and mice will be attracted.

If this is your first trip to this part of the world, the rule of thumb is 'if in doubt, keep food in the fridge'. Remember you are in tropical rainforest country - if you leave bread, sugar or bananas out overnight, for example, they will be demolished by bananaquits (a delightful local bird) or ants. There are also plastic containers in each apartment for other perishables.

Facilities for Music

We are very pleased to say that we have just installed good quality iPod docking systems in all our accommodations. Previously, we provided CD players only in the lodges because we were worried about noise sensitivity in the apartments. However, we had great difficulty finding good quality players and they broke down a lot so we have got rid of them. Now, more and more people are arriving with their iPods so we have decided to go ahead with the new systems.

We are happy to this but please be mindful of volume level particularly later in the evening so you do not disturb your neighbours. For the benefit of everyone, we have a clear policy that music can only be played if it does not disturb your neighbour. Over many years we have had almost no complaints about this. You can also use your iPhones and MP3 players on the iPod docking system provided you have a "Mini Jack to Stereo RCA Cable" to make the connection. These can

be bought at Dixons at Gatwick Airport.

By the way, no local would understand the concept of quiet music, so if there is a party on the beach, do join in. Occasionally there is a village wide party and the music goes on into the early hours. The Fishermans' Festival in late August is an example. Such events happen maybe three or four times per year.

Personal responsibility, safety and security.

There are seldom problems to do with security in Castara and few stories of crime within the village. In the last ten years there have been only two incidents of petty crime that included thefts at holiday properties including Castara Retreats. However the thieves were quickly identified and pursued by the police. Although there has never been any violence, we take these incidents very seriously and our manager has discussed them in the village and with the police and we are satisfied that they are very unlikely to be repeated. Nearly all our clients feel very safe in Castara and compared to most family friendly tourist destinations Castara experiences very little crime. However, we recommend that everyone take the usual precautions and care with regard to your valuables. There are security safes in each accommodation. We recommend that you use these for all valuables, cash, passports etc. Likewise on the beach, it is sensible to keep valuables or cash out of sight and not to tempt people by leaving them in the open whilst you go for a swim.

Steve Wooler, who runs the definitive website about all things to do with Tobago, has this comment on <http://www.mytobago.info>

“Although there is considerable room for improvement in police forensic and detection methods, visitors should have no doubt about how seriously the authorities view crime, and particularly crime against tourists, on the island. Even stealing a few dollars from a visitor can result in several months in jail with hard labour. This is little consolation to those affected, but the vital thing to remember is that most incidents of crime against tourists could have been avoided if the visitor had applied the same commonsense precautions that they would have adhered to at home. For example, walking around late at night with flash jewellery and wads of cash are not sensible actions anywhere in the world.”

We rent our accommodation to our clients on the understanding that they take full responsibility for their own safety whilst they are in Tobago and at

Castara Retreats. Please consider the environment that you find yourselves in and take sensible precautions.

Consider the ocean, for instance, and do not take risks - even strong swimmers can get into problems. There are lifeguards on the beach and a flag indicates the level of safety for swimmers. We recommend that you familiarize yourself with its position and what the different colours mean.

Also please take care around the accommodation and the garden. We are located on the side of a hill, so do watch where you are walking, and use the handrails on the steps. You need to take special care after a rainfall as the hardwood walkways and decks and the concrete paths can be slippery when wet. These are regularly swept and cleaned but you need to be alert particularly immediately after a rainfall.

Most of our accommodation is constructed of wood, so please do not create a fire hazard. Take proper precautions if you use candles or burn mosquito coils by making sure they are prevented from dropping onto the wood. Please do not use the bird feeders to burn night-lights or candles in.

All accommodations have fire extinguishers. When you arrive, check where they are positioned and read the instructions on the bottles.

We strongly recommend that as soon as you book your accommodation that you take out full travel and health insurance so that you are well covered in the event of cancellation, accident, illness, and loss of belongings and valuables.

Check out and departure arrangements

On your day of departure, we ask you to vacate your accommodation by 11 am, so that Jeanell and the cleaning ladies can get in and prepare for whoever is coming after you. We have been aware for some time that this can be difficult for those clients with evening flights home. So, we have built a special facility where you can securely lock up your baggage, shower and change after a swim and sit quietly on the patio with a book, until you have to go to the airport. The baggage store also has security safes for you to use on your departure day. Porridge will show you where it is. Please note that we cannot guarantee the security of your baggage and your decision to use this facility is on the understanding that it is at your own risk.

Please respect the check out requirement, as there is no other solution to Jeanell's need to fully clean and prepare for incoming guests. Remember to check with Porridge several days before you leave to agree what time to meet him if he is taking you to the airport.

During your stay, please talk with Porridge and arrange for him to take you to the airport if you need this service of him. He charges \$250 tt per couple.

Visa Requirements for Trinidad & Tobago

Visas are not required for holiday visitors from the following countries:

- **EEC Countries:** Belgium, France, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom
- **Commonwealth Countries:** All - except Australia, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda
- **USA:** On vacation for 3 months or less.
- **Other:** Austria, Brazil, Colombia, French Guyana, Guadeloupe, Iceland, Finland (3 months or less), Israel, Liechtenstein, Martinique, Netherlands Antilles, Norway, Suriname, Sweden (3 months or less), Switzerland, Turkey, Venezuela (14 days or less)

Further Information: For information about work and residence visas, or clarification of any of the above, see www.gotrinidadandtobago.com.