

Crime and Violence: the Tourism Product Rotting Away in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

Apart from the dilapidated conditions of many roads, road signs, bridges and barriers especially in rural areas, many historic buildings are left to rot away and crumble to the ground. Dangerous landslides are everywhere. After heavy rains, muddy water and debris rush down the hillsides of the Northern Range to Port of Spain and other cities below. Many beaches are littered with garbage left by beachgoers. Traffic jams are ceaseless and lines at public and private places such as banks are unending. Coupled with these yet tolerable factors, Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing an unprecedented crime problem. Murders are occurring on a daily basis and banditry and police corruption are rampant in the system. Illegal drug running remains an extremely serious problem on the landscape. Several countries including Britain, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand have issued travel advisories to their citizens concerning the worsening crime situation against tourists in Trinidad and Tobago. Personal observations during annual visits to the islands from January 2004 to January 2009 will complement articles extracted from local, regional, and international newspapers for pertinent information relevant to crimes against both domestic and foreign tourists.

Keywords

Tourism Industry, Crime, Violence, Police, Problem, Beach, Spain.

Introduction

The nascent tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago is facing a daunting task towards becoming sustainable. Crime and violence on the English-speaking, democratic republic are taking their toll on tourism. Although the sister isle of Tobago is more amenable to the promotion of the tourism product, recent developments in criminal activity have put a terrible stain on this once quiet and beautiful island. It is quite probable that the illegal drug business is now part of Tobago's entrepreneurial activity. Trinidad, the bigger and more industrialized of the two islands is undergoing an unprecedented increase in criminal activity. All the weekly and daily newspapers are showing that murders are occurring on a daily basis; no wonder, the country is now referred to as the murder capital of the Caribbean (Sanchez, 2009). Callous banditry, kidnappings for ransom and rape are contributing to the country's demise. It is well-known that Trinidad and Tobago does not have a true history of tourism because of its dependence on hydrocarbons, and

this fact alone is enough to prove that Trinidadians do not see tourists as return business. Personal observations conducted over the five-year period January 2004 to December 2009 indicate that there is much discomfort, distress, dissatisfaction, and fear among the masses.

Many researchers tend to shy away from the dismal facts about certain destinations, but it has become necessary to allow tourists to have ample information and a good level of transparency about places they would like to visit. It is understandable that tourists be introduced to the *raw* culture of a place in order to obtain a true and lasting experience, but danger to life and limb should not be part of the travel package. Tourists need sound advice, guidance, and truthful information to ensure their security and safety. Unbeknownst to them, some tourists would at times wander into dangerous situations and activities. On the other hand, other more adventurous tourists may want to experience the danger resident in a particular place, for example, wanting to experience the terror of a hurricane. However, such tourists are few. This bit of research aims to provide and put in context a synopsis of the social condition of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to violence against tourists [both domestic and foreign], the crime wave in Trinidad and Tobago, and basic infrastructure as it relates to the safety and security of tourists.

Violence Against Tourists: An International Problem

From what the literature on violence against tourists has revealed, there seems to be a burgeoning international problem. Although there is a paucity of research articles in refereed journals about this topic of tourist related violence, the few cited examples accessed from the World Wide Web, nevertheless, has highlighted that violence against tourists is a worldwide phenomenon. This will set the stage for the surge of violence against tourists in Trinidad and Tobago. Violence against both domestic and foreign tourists occurs intermittently; however, the pre-Lenten, Trinidad Carnival serves as an avenue where more intense violence is meted out to unsuspecting victims over a shorter period of time. According to Heeralal (2005), a United States government website issued warnings about the “carnival of crime” in Trinidad. A look at some of the international scenarios with regard to violence against tourists will set the stage to open up the topic.

The Australian newspaper, *Herald Sun* informs: “A bomb in Cairo has killed a French tourist and wounded 22 in the first deadly violence against westerners in Egypt since 2006” (al-Atrush, 2009:1). Twenty holidaymakers died in the Red Sea resort of Dahab in April 2006 as a result of bombings. In 2005, two tourists were killed and 18 wounded in a previous bomb attack in Cairo (al-Atrush, 2009). In yet another horrible report was the gruesome robbery and murder of four French holidaymakers in Mauritania. The article states: “Four French holidaymakers,

including two children, were robbed and then shot dead while they picnicked at the side of the road in Mauritania..." (Times Online, 2007). In Koh Samui, Thailand, Bowes (2006) reports: "The brutal murder of Katherine Horton is but the latest in a series of crimes against tourists." Thailand is a destination that many British people seek to visit. However, since 2003, 17 British nationals, including tourists, were murdered in Thailand (Spooner, 2008). Islamic cleric, Abu Bakar Bashir incited violence against Australian tourists. In one of his sermons he described non-Muslims as "worms, snakes, and maggots" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2010). Posted on the web in September 2008, the headline "China not as safe as you think: Incidences of violence against tourists on the rise," heralds a situation that even in such a "tightly controlled political system...foreigners are increasingly targeted" (Anna, 2008: 1). In the article, Anna (2008: 1) states:

In cosmopolitan Shanghai in recent months, a foreigner had a knife put to his throat and his money taken. Another was tricked into paying up to \$1,000 for a \$7 taxi ride. Four thugs surrounded an English boxing star, Ricky Hatton, and stole his \$8,000 Rolex.

With reference to Gay and Lesbian Tourists (GLBTs), Wakefield (2008) in his article, "Violence against GLBTs becoming a Jamaican tradition," and supported by Wayne Besen (activist and author) in his book, *Bashing Back: Wayne Besen on GBLT People, Politics and Culture*, both have given a clarion call to Jamaica bound travelers. He said that travelers should "boycott the island in light of atrocities uncovered by the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine*" (Wakefield, 2008). These incidents are but the few more important ones found when examining online news stories. However, many of the petty crimes against tourists all over the world go unreported. Trinidad and Tobago is no exception. Concerning this twin-island state, international news media and the dailies carry headlines such as: "\$12,000 fine for robbing tourist," "Tourism woes worsen: stakeholders worried after attack on British couple," "Death stalks Trinidad and Tobago again," "Trinidad and Tobago: Tourist beware, caution required on beaches," "Swedish couple hacked to death on Tobago," "Trinidad declared danger zone by Britain: Tobago even worse," and "Trinidad and Tobago now murder capital of the Caribbean." What impact would such news have on tourists who may want to visit Trinidad and Tobago? Such headlines and news are indeed frightening.

Many tourists, who read about Trinidad and Tobago and other tourist destinations for that matter, remember only the "good things," the music, the food, the excitement, the novelty, and the fun and laughter that are projected by marketers. In fact, marketers do their utmost to hide the "bad things" occurring from day to day on the islands. A classic example is the *sanitization* of a map of the capital city, Port of Spain, distributed by the Tourism Development Authority [TDA]. This map

shows only the highly developed “safe” areas of the city and omits the inclusion of the economically depressed “hostile” areas (Coomansingh, 2005a). In others words, the map counsels tourists to avoid the hostile suburbs of Port of Spain such as Laventille, Morvant, Sea Lots, John John, and Gonzales; all hotbeds of high unemployment (Downes, 1998) illegal drug-running, banditry, violence, and murder (Heeralal, 2003). Nevertheless, these depressed areas were once the nursery of the internationally famous steelpan instrument (Coomansingh, 2005b; Mangurian, 2002; Stueple, 1995; Liverpool, 1994), the development of calypso, and the world famous Trinidad Carnival (Mason, 1998; Koningsbruggen, 1997; Cowley, 1996). Despite the wonderful news about the steelpan, calypso, and all its festivals (Coomansingh, 2006), Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing a metamorphosis; however one involved with crimes against tourists, both domestic and foreign. In light of this, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom issued travel advisories to tourists concerning Trinidad and Tobago. Sanchez (2009: 1) adds:

You should be aware that there are high levels of violent crime, especially shootings and kidnappings,” states a travel advisory issued by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in October 2008... “British nationals have been victims of violent attacks, particularly in Tobago where law enforcement is weak.” A US travel advisory issued about the same time warns travelers that armed robbers have been trailing tourists as they depart international airports in Trinidad and Tobago... “Violent crimes, including assault, kidnapping for ransom, sexual assault and murder, have involved foreign residents and tourists (and) incidents have been reported involving armed robbers trailing arriving passengers from the airport and accosting them in remote areas...the perpetrators of many of these crimes have not been arrested.”

Massive Crime Wave

Presently, an extremely serious crime wave is now sweeping Trinidad with hundreds of murders occurring annually (Jacobs, 2004). From January 01 to February 08, 2009, there were 71 murders. “In less than 24 hours, seven deaths were recorded, five of which were murders, bringing the murder toll to 71” (Dowlat, 2009:1). The situation today is about the same. Subhas Panday, minister in the Ministry of National Security said: “...with 56 murders in 42 days, bandits are holding the country to ransom” (Ali and Asson, 2011:1). From personal observations especially on the urban and suburban landscapes, almost all houses are heavily burglar-proofed with wrought-iron fabrications. Information extracted from many people living in such houses adjacent to squatter settlements indicates that

there is a growing fear and terror among the population. They fear for their lives and their property. During travels in the town of Fyzabad in the southern sector of Trinidad, a house with wrought-iron burglar proofing from the eaves right down to the ground was openly noticeable. It is as though the occupants were living in a huge birdcage. On the two islands, gated communities with round-the-clock security guards and security systems are ubiquitous.

The fight among gangs for drug turf is an everyday occurrence. Murders and shootings also occur almost everyday. According to Braithwaite (2010), "the flourishing business of guns for hire is a well-recognized outgrowth of drug trafficking." Many of the illegal firearms and ammunition that enter Trinidad and Tobago come from the South American mainland. Fishing boats known as pirogues are used for the transport of both guns and narcotics. Even the beaches in Trinidad are not safe. On Sunday December 02, 2007 at the Las Cuevas Beach in North Trinidad, 20 people lost their belongings at gunpoint. The bandits also intimidated the victims with attack dogs and machetes. Even the parking lot at the world famous Maracas Beach is not safe. Recently thieves went on a rampage and broke into several vehicles. The beachgoers lost many of their valuables. "Tuesday, February 2nd 2010, while visitors basked on the Maracas Beach on Sunday, thieves were breaking into cars and stealing their valuables. Locals and Carnival tourists lost more than \$8,000, 15 cellular phones, gold jewelry..." According to (Danny-Maharaj, 2010: 1), one foreign visitor swore never to return to Maracas Beach...the tourist said, "I always wanted to visit Maracas, because I hear it's the flagship of beaches in Trinidad, but now all I want to do is get out of this country." The experience of this foreigner does not sound too nice for the sustainability of tourism.

Kidnappings for ransom are also wreaking havoc on the landscape (Stapleton, 2007). The robbery of tourists is another nasty element in the society (Renne, 2007). There is fear among the Trinidadian masses that future celebrations of pre-Lenten Trinidad Carnival will be more violent. It is quite possible that middle class tourists are seen as representative of authority, colonialism and oppression, and as vestiges of domination. Their presence alone puts them at risk in certain situations. Commenting on this aspect, deBlij et al, (2004: 136) posits:

Caribbean tourism also has serious drawbacks. The invasion of poor communities by affluent tourists contributes to a rising sense of local resentment, which is further fueled by the glaring contrasts of shiny new hotels towering over substandard housing and luxury liners gliding past poverty-stricken villages.

The rebellion exhibited by the underclass during the era of slavery in Trinidad did not go away. That self-same rebellion manifests itself today in one form or another against tourists. Carnival, as well as other cultural festivities, reeks of

danger, murder, rape, and illicit sex (Coomansingh, 2002; Linger, 1992). Because of the several killings (murders) that occurred in 2002, Port of Spain businessmen suggested that it would not be wise to stage carnival celebrations in coming years unless there is proper security for celebrants (Maharaj, 2002). One of the murdered victims during the 2002 carnival celebration was an American engineer who died from stab wounds under the cover of darkness during the *jouvay* (Bharose, 2002). On February 14, 2002, an editorial excerpt from the Trinidad Express Newspaper reads:

Weapons were, and are just about everywhere with police on Monday (Lundi Gras) seizing a horde ranging from a salad fork to a hatchet. Just before the start of Jouvert (early Monday morning masquerading), police, acting on robbery information, raided some of the more suspect Port of Spain streets. By the time they finished, fully 51 men and women had been detained with weapons such as guns, daggers, cutlasses (machetes), hammers, and ice picks. Instructively all those held were young people ranging in age from 14 to 31 years...the truth is, Trinidad and Tobago continues to be a criminal state with mounting evidence to suggest that not even the institutions so charged can guarantee even the partial security of the citizenry.

Did the pattern change for the 2007 carnival celebrations? The *pattern*, because of its continuance, appears now as a *process* (Nostrand, 1964). The style did not change. The 2007 report from Trevor Paul, Police Commissioner (Renne, 2007) in the Trinidad Express newspaper reads:

...200 persons were arrested in connection with possession of weapons, narcotics, obscene language, resisting arrest and outstanding warrants and also said that his officers seized 145 weapons during the carnival celebrations, among them 81 knives, 29 cutlasses (machetes), 33 ice picks, a pair of scissors, a shotgun and cartridge.

Perhaps carnival should be for Trinidadians only. Could this exhibition of violence toward tourists be a form of resistance laced with anger? Brazil, Venezuela, and Panama have similar problems (Coomansingh, 2002). Not only are tourists warned to be extremely careful about where they go and with whom. They must also keep in mind that certain basic amenities, infrastructure, and security are more or less lacking. Sanchez (2009: 1) explains:

With a steady rise in violent crime including an alarming increase in homicides, Trinidad and Tobago has overtaken Jamaica as the “murder capital of the Caribbean.” While homicides increased two percent in Jamaica in 2008, murders were up a staggering 38 percent in Trinidad and

Tobago. Although much of the violence is gang-related, in recent years tourists have increasingly become targets for robbery, sexual assault and murder.

Basic Amenities, Infrastructure and Security

Although Trinidad is blest with huge asphalt deposits, many roads, especially in the rural areas, are riddled with potholes and landslides. The surfaces of sidewalks, even in the capital city, Port of Spain, are cracked, broken and irregular in surface. There are places where sidewalk manholes are unevenly covered or left open with a piece of timber protruding out to apparently warn the pedestrian. In one instance, the sidewalk on George Street in Sangre Grande came to an abrupt end with no barrier or low wall to prevent the user from plunging about six feet into a drain. Bridges, barriers and road signs are in dire need of repair and replacement. A retaining wall in the beautiful seaside village of Matelot on the north coast has been shifting for many years toward the sea. Now it is literally occupying the entire roadway. On August 23, 2009, the ancient Balandra Bridge on the Toco Road collapsed and fell into the river because of the excess weight of a construction crane. Commuters, many of them beachgoers and campers, were stranded for over one week because there was no other route to leave the area.

Apart from the poor roads, the hostility of drivers on such narrow roads leaves much to be desired in terms of road safety. Visiting Charlotteville on the northern tip of Tobago is a wonderful idea, but tourists driving on the Windward Road in Tobago are out for a time of their lives. The local Tobago drivers on such a precipitous and winding road are sometimes absolutely discourteous. This is no exaggeration; the road could easily become a death trap if Tobago drivers are sharing the road with any tourist.

Noise pollution is another aberration in the society. Noisy vehicles with their huge speakers constantly pierce the silence of residential districts at all hours of the day and night. Some of these drivers speed at 100 to 120 kilometers per hour in residential areas. Historic buildings are forgotten, abandoned, and sadly left to rot away. Due to uncontrolled squatting, the steep hillsides of the Northern Range become denuded. Flash flooding with the attendant deposition of mud and debris plagues Port of Spain, Curepe, Tupuna, Saint Augustine and several other cities on the East-West Corridor. Zoning is non-existent in certain parts of the country; cash-crop gardeners from the outlying rural districts scatter themselves all over the sidewalks to sell their produce in Port of Spain, San Fernando, Siparia, Chaguanas, Arima, and Sangre Grande.

People seeking shelter continue to squat, even in forbidden areas such as the Aripo Savannah, a government forest reserve earmarked for scientific study. Feral

dogs roam all over Trinidad and Tobago. In almost every major town, vagrants rummage through garbage bins and dumpsters for food and clothing. Soap and paper towels are always in short supply in the airport restrooms. Used paper cups and plates, Styrofoam products, plastic bags, bottles and other detritus could be seen lying around on some of the beaches. After a “River Lime” (*Lime* means to hang out, party, shoot the breeze) the rivers experience pollution with the entrails of animals and feathers. Some religions, after certain rites are performed, throw human hair and other foreign matter into the rivers, for example the Caura River. Mention must also be made about the constant destruction of the foliage around these sites. Poaching of the fauna in the Nariva and Caroni Swamps is an eternal problem.

It is difficult not to behold young strong youth literally ravaging a garbage truck on the Beetham Highway as it slows down to enter the Port of Spain dump. In the south of the island of Trinidad, citizens and tourists are warned to be extremely careful when visiting the world famous Pitch Lake at La Brea. Muggings and robberies are common at this location. With respect to the world-famous Pitch Lake at LaBrea, an individual on the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian newspaper blog succinctly describes the situation:

We can kiss tourism goodbye, as far as Pitch Lake, beaches and the like are concerned. You think any British or other Euro-laden tourist is going to come to Trinidad or Tobago to see rainforest or go down to La Brea or go to Las Cuevas? Eh? Certainly not after reading of the savage attacks on the British couple in Tobago and the heartless burglarizing of their home a few days ago, the chopping and robbing of German tourists in the Tobago rainforest in recent years, and the hunting-dog beach robberies at Las Cuevas. You honestly think many American tourists will want to come after reading about the young American lady whose hand was severed in the recent atrocious boating accident at Chaguaramas where it is alleged that a soldier rammed their boat recklessly? Ah mean, the bandits and robbers and murderers doh even have respect for we, the local people, far less for tourists. As far as tourism goes, the only hope seems to be carnival, panorama, together with other events and festivities in the country. Until the unlikely event that we can straighten out our act, a la Barbados, RIP tourism.

It is even unsafe now for locals to visit the beach. With reference to the situation in Tobago, Sanchez, (2009:1) states: “In October 2008, a Swedish couple was chopped to death in their hotel room in Tobago. Just ten days later in Tobago, two British females were robbed and sexually assaulted by a bandit who forced his way into their holiday apartment.”

The central question regarding Trinidad and Tobago is: Is the tourism product rotting away? This above description is only the tip of the iceberg when one considers the corruption occurring in the security services of Trinidad and Tobago. A few months ago members of the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force were found guilty of kidnapping and murdering an American citizen and war veteran. Renne, (2009) reports:

A major kidnapping ring involving members of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force Special Forces Unit was unearthed when three soldiers were arrested and charged with offences arising out of the kidnapping and murder of US war veteran Balram “Balo” Maharaj. In 2005, Trinidad and Tobago recorded an unprecedented high in kidnappings for ransom. So well-organized were the operations that investigators were baffled about the complexity of the organization and identity of the criminals. There were 28 kidnappings for ransom in 2004, with one victim being found murdered. In 2005, this figure rose to 58, with three victims being murdered. In 2006, 17 persons were kidnapped, eight of them being found murdered and with three victims still missing to date.

Recent reports also show that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) have been plagued with negative events as some members of the TTPS were found to be involved in stashing illegal narcotics, guns and ammunition in the ceiling of their offices and at their homes (Simon, 2010). Security officers have also been found guilty of renting out their firearms to bandits “to commit heinous crimes, including murder” (Kowlessar, 2011).

Conclusion

With regard to the tourism industry, the picture presented could be described as gruesome and hopeless. It is highly apparent that Trinidad and Tobago is being reactive instead of being proactive. Sadly, it is the way the system often “works.” Doing it right the first time is certainly not one of the management tools exercised in the tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago. The same is probably true for Total Quality Management (TQM). Tourism as a multi-pronged industry demands that every aspect involved must work in tandem, as if in a dance, but as Henry-Kunzel (1994) posits, Trinidad and Tobago has never had a true history of tourism. This fact alone is sufficient proof as to the reason[s] why the country is undergoing such stress when it comes to tourism.

This article does not deny the fact that Trinidad and Tobago has all the necessary ingredients for an excellent tourism product. Among the human ingredients are music, song, dance, fine art, poetry, drama, sports, cuisine, the pre-Lenten carnival and the myriad of annual festivals, religious and otherwise.

Physically, the islands are blest with wonderful landscapes and seascapes, rainforests teeming with fauna and flora. The coastlines abound with beautiful exotic beaches. These variables are more than sufficient to create a powerful tourism product. Headlines such as “Carnival violence leaves five dead,” (Clarke 2008), and “Cruise ship company turns away from Trinidad because of terrorist warning,” (Smith, 2003) do not bode well for any tourist industry anywhere. Somehow, and for some reason, the tourism product is rotting away before it can truly ripen. The ministry for tourism development is probably doing its utmost in its attempt to procure a more dynamic experience for visitors, but in the wake of the constant violence and murder that has gripped the islands, the sustainability of the tourism product is a hard sell. To effectively provide for a good tourism experience, an experience where tourists can go about in peace and safety [even to leave their valuables unguarded on the beach and go for a swim], much effort must be made to first ensure their security and safety. Education of the masses, vis-à-vis the acceptance of tourists and the tourism industry must become a priority; tourism must be visualized by everyone as return business. Unless the citizenry becomes aware that tourism dollars would assist in bolstering the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, the violence against tourists will continue to abound. Pertaining to the violence occurring in Trinidad and Tobago today, many citizens of Trinidad and Tobago would prefer to ignore the negative description that Trinidad and Tobago continues to be very unsafe for tourists. Becoming indifferent to the atrocities committed by bandits and murderers in any country will only serve to propagate continued violence, unrest and insecurity. Although this bit of information is bleak, it must be understood that at present there are nuances of instability in the government of the country; confusion reigns, and the tourism product continues to rot away. In the concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution as purported by Butler (1980), the crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago is presently having serious negative implications for the management of tourism as a resource.

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