The Tobago Heritage Festival
TOBAGO HERITAGE FESTIVAL

• The Tobago Heritage Festival takes place over two weeks from mid-July to Emancipation Day on 1st August. It is an annual celebration of the dance, song, music and cuisine of Tobago, and strives to preserve Tobago’s unique cultural heritage.
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• The Tobago Heritage Festival was first staged in 1987 and many consider it to be the main event on the Tobago cultural calendar. It has become accepted as the island's signature event, becoming for Tobago what Carnival is for Trinidad.
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• Popular presentations are the Ole Time Tobago Wedding in Moriah (a re-enaction of an 18th century wedding procession), Folk Tales and Superstitions in Golden Lane and Les Coteaux, Games We Used to Play, the Belmanna Riots, Salaka Feast and Invocation Dance. Productions are held every evening in different villages around Tobago spreading the celebration around the island.
• Tobago’s history has taken different twists and turns from Trinidad’s. It was never seen by Columbus, but instead claimed by English adventurers for their king. They had to contend with the original inhabitants who were by all accounts fierce defenders of their island, and who had cultivated and smoked tobacco, the plant for which the island was named.

• The island changed hands several times among European powers including the Dutch, Courlanders (a Baltic principality) and the French. A fertile salubrious island, Tobago was “the jewel of the Caribbean” and home to an elite planter class that depended on African slaves who acquired land after the abolition of slavery in 1834.

• In 1889, Tobago was joined with Trinidad as a British Crown Colony. Since then, the two islands have remained one administrative entity, acquiring independence as one nation in 1962.
• Tobago remains different from Trinidad in its thriving tourism industry, and a lifestyle rooted in village life. The Tobago Heritage Festival celebrates traditions that are largely African, and climax in a j’ouvert (pre-dawn street “jump up”) and street parade on Emancipation Day (August 1), and a Great Fete early in August.

• The heritage events are hosted in different villages and feature dance performances of Bele (or belair), Jig and Reel, all based on 18th and 19th century European formal dances; the Ole time Tobago Wedding with its procession of the bride and groom, wedding guests and gifts, accompanied by the music of fiddle and tamb’rin (a circular skin drum).

• New generations of Tobagonians are inducted in community ways through story-telling, folk tales, superstitions and morality plays. This is theatre in the rough, mainly for Tobagonians, but everyone is welcome.