

DAY THREE

TRAVELS NEAR AND FAR – SENSE OF TASTE

I spent twenty-two years of my life in the twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago, seven miles from the Venezuelan coast at its nearest point, and separated by the Gulf of Paria. Air travel is 470 miles. Jamaica, my native land and Trinidad and Tobago share similar histories, with slight variations, and these have influenced the ethnic mix and culture of each country. For example, Trinidad remained a colony of Spain for a longer period than Jamaica, which resulted in a more visible Spanish influence in the names of places and people, and the use of the language in some villages. Proximity to Venezuela has resulted in migration both ways, thus strengthening the Spanish influence.

Another deviation from Jamaica is that a higher number of East Indian indentured workers from northern India were brought to Trinidad and Tobago, (primarily to Trinidad). This, together with subsequent migration, has resulted in the majority of the population consisting of African descendants and East Indians, while Chinese, European make up the rest. Jamaica on the other hand is 76% African, with the rest consisting of East Indian and European Chinese and more.

The landscape in Jamaica is also more mountainous. There were other subtle differences but all in all, both countries share more in common than differences.

I received a warm welcome in Trinidad and Tobago and enjoyed a stellar career during the years I lived there. My welcome was due in no small part to the presence of my in-laws. I had married a Trinidadian in Winnipeg, Manitoba, shortly after we completed our first degrees at the University of Manitoba.

In Trinidad, the larger of the two islands where I resided and worked, I had the best of times. I formed firm and lasting friendships there, some of which are still among my best. I immersed myself into the culture after realizing that I could not live in two countries at the same time, and that, as the saying goes, I should grow where I was planted. I missed my family dearly but compensated for this by travelling to Jamaica at least once per year.

I worked in Trinidad during the last four of the “oil boom” years, (1973-1982) and also for most of the years during which the oil prices collapsed (1982-1992) and one Prime Minister become known for his admonition to the population and coined the phrase “Fete Over - Back to Work”.

Travelling to Venezuela on shopping trips was common place. In fact, my second trip to Caracas, was supposed to be another ordinary jaunt. My friend and I set out to fly to Venezuela early one morning, thinking only of the fashionable bargains that awaited. Of course, Caracas was vibrant, teeming with life and activity and people hurrying in all directions. There was a lot of talking back and forth and vibrance in the atmosphere. The scenery was colourful, even extending to the slums on the hills surrounding the city where shacks were tightly packed and

precariously perched. I could not help but think of what would be their fate in the event of torrential rains or God forbid, an earthquake.

Since the flight was early, we had missed our first meal for the day and became very hungry. Our focus was to spend as much time as possible shopping, so we decided to stop at the nearest restaurant, and order the staple meal of broiled chicken and cassava. A nondescript meal, if ever, but boy was I in for a treat. Where do I start? The chicken was crispy on the outside, each bite, tender yet firm, releasing juices, sweet yet savoury, spicy and hot. All of my taste buds were activated in the most surprising and pleasant of ways. The cassava seemed to have been boiled then grilled with butter, however its magical taste was also one I could not forget. The texture was smooth, the taste buttery, and chewing dissolved the cassava which slowly mixed with all the other juices, and slid easily down the throat. A simple, ordinary meal in an ordinary setting was not expected to hit all the right spots, or taste so good. To this day I cannot pin point exactly what made that meal so special. Since then, I often yearn to repeat the experience, willing to fly back to Venezuela, for the sole purpose of enjoying that meal again.