

Episode 45: Trinidad and Tobago

Summary

Nick's friend Cathy is from the country of Trinidad and Tobago. In this conversation she talks about her family background and Trinidad's history and culture.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Cathy about her home country, which is Trinidad and Tobago. And so, firstly, where is Trinidad and Tobago?

Cathy: It's in the West Indies, it's in the Caribbean, it's an English-speaking island, 'cause we were colonised by the British and we gained independence in 1962.

Nick: OK, so in that area, there's a lot of different islands that are all, kind of, individual countries now.

Cathy: Yes, there are at least, uhh, I would say maybe about 100 islands. Some were colonised by the Spanish, say Cuba for instance. Then you've got the French islands, like Martinique and Guadeloupe. You've got Dutch regions like, umm, Curacao and Aruba, and we're part of the English-speaking Caribbean.

Nick: Right, and as you said there's this term called the West Indies, which kind of encapsulates all of those ... is that just the English-speaking islands?

Cathy: That's just the English-speaking islands, and that would include, uhh, islands like, umm, Barbados, Jamaica, Grenada, little ones like Carriacou for instance.

Nick: And when I was little, growing up in Australia, especially in the 1980s, umm, Australia would play cricket against the West Indies who were the best team in the world at that time. So it wasn't just one country, it's this combination of a series of countries. And do you think that there's a kind of unity within those countries, at all to create this West Indies, or are they kind of rivals, are you rivals with these other countries?

Cathy: Yes, there is some unity, especially as far as the cricket team is concerned¹. Otherwise I would probably say no. We did try to have a sort of federation, umm, many years ago, uhh, when I was a child and the problem is that we tried to

¹ as far as ... is concerned: regarding that, in terms of that

become a sort of, uhh, United States of the West Indies or a European Union of the West Indies and that didn't work out. I think there were about 10 islands who got together and at the time, Jamaica was, say, the equivalent of what Germany is to the European Union today. So Jamaica was in the lead, umm, but Trinidad had the money because we have oil and, uhh, well, the relationship foundered² because, uhh, someone wanted to call the shots and it was mostly the Jamaicans and, uhh, our prime minister, I think, did not want to pay the bill. He didn't want to foot the bill³ for everyone. So people pulled out, we pulled out and, umm, as our prime minister at the time said, 'One from 10 leaves nothing.'

Nick: Yeah, I think once you've devolved into individual countries it's very hard to kind of bring it all back together again.

Cathy: Yes.

Nick: When different islands have their own national interests.

Cathy: Yes and it was a stupid thing to do because, uhh, we would have had economies of scale, had we become a sort of, at least a loose federation. For instance, we could have had one national airline instead of 10 little ones. That's just stupid.

Nick: Yeah, yeah, that's true. And so you're left with, your country's Trinidad and Tobago, that are basically next to each other. Is that right?

Cathy: Yes.

Nick: And Trinidad is quite large compared with Tobago.

Cathy: Trinidad is larger, and Tobago, you can crisscross the island in about, I would say, four hours.

Nick: OK.

Cathy: You can go north to south, yeah, east to west in about four hours.

Nick: And so because you've only got these two islands making up one country, is it harmonious between the two islands or does Trinidad kind of dominate the nation, being larger?

Cathy: Yes, it is harmonious, but Trinidad does dominate. Because Trinidad has the money because of oil, but Tobago is much prettier. So for instance, there are some beaches in Trinidad where, if you sit on the sand, you get up with a tarred bum, because of the oil, whereas Tobago is pristine.

² foundered: failed, became wrecked

³ foot the bill (fixed expression): be responsible for paying for everything

Nick: OK.

Cathy: Uhh, sexy but poor, as the mayor of Berlin describes his city.

Nick: OK, so in Trinidad you can literally dig into the sand and, uhh, almost, and you get oil.

Cathy: Sort of, and for instance the fishermen blame the oil companies, uhh, like, umm, Texico and so on, Petrotrin, for the oil slicks⁴ and they say this is what's killing their fish. And the people who work for the oil companies say, 'But, oh, you've been complaining about dead fish for so long. It's not true what you're saying. Fish just die.'

Nick: I think we can probably believe the fishermen and not the oil companies, perhaps, in that case. So in terms of the people who live there, you've got people who were brought from Africa or descendants of people who were brought as slaves, or not?

Cathy: Yes, umm, well originally, the Spaniards came. They were the first colonisers. So with Christopher Columbus in 1492. And we all had to learn, well he came with three ships, the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, OK. And he called it Trinidad because he saw three peaks. So, first the Spaniards, they decimated⁵ the indigenous peoples, the Arawaks and the Caribs. Then the next wave of colonisers was the French, and then after that, the British. So they imported African slaves, the colonisers, but the problem was that after slavery, they needed people to work in the cane fields and they tried first, uhh, the Portuguese and they died off like flies. Then they tried the Chinese. That didn't work out either. And then they tried the Indians and they were used to rice plantations and they thrived⁶.

Nick: OK, but of the original population, there's no one left?

Cathy: There's no one. There's no one.

Nick: And so what's your own personal family history?

Cathy: Umm, my great-grandparents came from India. Uhh, I knew my maternal grandmother. My mother was the first person in her family to marry a non-Indian and my grandmother did not speak to her until I was born. Umm, my father was half-Chinese, so my maiden name⁷ is Chong. It was originally Tam Chun, but the

⁴ oil slicks: areas of water that contain oil, usually due to an accident or mismanagement

⁵ decimated: destroyed, ruined

⁶ thrived: did very well

⁷ maiden name: the last name of a woman before she gets married and (possibly) changes her name. A *maiden* is an old-fashioned word for a young girl or unmarried woman.

British couldn't pronounce it, so it became Chong. And his mother was half-Scottish and half-African.

Nick: Wow, that's a big mixture.

Cathy: Yeah.

Nick: OK, and so because of that, umm, in terms of your education, because the way you speak English is not the way that it's typically spoken on the island or you don't have this very thick accent, uhh, that you have in the West Indies, right?

Cathy: No, when I was at university, uhh, an American linguist, she was doing a survey of accents and of the different islands, I think what she said was that people from Trinidad had the least pronounced accent.

Nick: Oh, is that right?

Cathy: Yes, it was the Jamaicans for instance who had the strongest.

Nick: So yeah, we kind of think of the Jamaican accent as just being throughout the entire West Indies, and so is your accent, then, quite typical of Trinidad?

Cathy: Yes, but as an Australian friend said to me once, 'There's Australian and educated Australian'. So I think that's the difference, that's nuance.

Nick: Yeah, for sure. And so, uhh, if you ... if people were to go to Trinidad, I mean you said Tobago was the place to go for paradise beaches and things like that. Umm, why else would you go there? What are the other attractions?

Cathy: There's the Carnival...

Nick: OK.

Cathy: ...which rivals Rio's Carnival. Umm, it's, of course it's smaller, but it's very organised. It's a lot of fun, it's, uhh, exhausting, but definitely worth it.

Nick: And are the people religious in general or has the Carnival kind of now become just an excuse for a nice party?

Cathy: No, I think people are very religious, certainly people of my parents' generation, people of my generation when I go back, my school friends, yes, they are very religious. I mean, they leave voice messages with a psalm or something like that. For me it is too much.

Nick: And in general, do people look back on the colonial period that you mentioned with the Spanish, the French and the English as a kind of negative period?

Cathy: I think nobody wants to be colonised, again. Umm, we have an ambivalent, ambiguous relationship with slavery. It was there, it was there for centuries and, umm, in many ways the economic situation is similar. For instance, most of the white people still control the economy, I would say. And they're only two per cent whites, now. However, we have a black government, black politicians, we had an Indian prime minister. So on the face of it⁸, we've gone past colonisation and slavery. But now as well...

Nick: OK, but it's still an important part of the heritage, I guess.

Cathy: It's there. It's definitely there. It's definitely there, still. And now we have many Syrians and Lebanese. They came after the war. They were Christians and they came as itinerant peddlers⁹. They really would go door-to-door selling, umm, goods, and now they are actually the richest people on the island.

Nick: OK, so it's ...

Cathy: Because they were merchants and they prospered.

Nick: OK, so it's a real melting pot¹⁰.

Cathy: It's a real melting pot.

Nick: Alright, Cathy, thank you very much.

Cathy: You're very welcome.

⁸ on the face of it: on the surface, at first glance

⁹ peddlers: people who sell products door-to-door or in the street

¹⁰ melting pot: a place where many different cultures co-exist together

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the two things related to unity among the islands in the West Indies that Nick and Cathy spoke about?
2. What are the main features of each of the two islands of Trinidad and Tobago, according to Cathy?
3. Why does Cathy think that the colonial period hasn't really finished?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. She is marrying her high school sweetheart later this year. She has decided to keep her _____ and not take his last name.
2. He was struggling in his previous job, but ever since he switched departments, he has really _____. He might be promoted soon.
3. At our annual Christmas dinner next week, I'm going to order the most expensive things on the menu, because the company is going to _____!
4. The indigenous populations in many countries around the world were _____ when colonisers arrived.
5. _____, he should have been happy with his life because he had a good job and a loving wife. But deep down, he was battling depression.
6. It's always sunny there so we should have a great holiday, _____ the weather _____.
7. London is perhaps the biggest _____ in all of Europe. You can meet people from virtually every country in the world there.
8. The city's bid to host the Olympic Games _____ because there was not enough public support.
9. One of the consequences of the BP oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 was the creation of one of the biggest _____ in recent memory.
10. The streets of the popular tourist village are always lined with _____ selling souvenirs and handicrafts.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to the Caribbean or, if not, would you like to go? What do you think are the main attractions in the region?
2. Cathy describes the society in Trinidad as being very multicultural, containing people from different backgrounds (Chinese, Indian etc). What are the advantages and disadvantages of this type of society?
3. Cathy talked about the failed attempt to make a federation of countries in the West Indies. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of having such a federation?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Cricket, because the West Indies play internationally as a unified team, and a previous failed attempt that Cathy described to create a federation between the islands of the West Indies like the European Union.
2. Trinidad is larger and wealthier because it has oil, and Tobago is smaller and prettier.
3. She says that the white people still control the economy despite representing a tiny minority of the population.

Exercises

1. maiden name
2. thrived
3. foot the bill
4. decimated
5. On the face of it
6. as far as ... is concerned
7. melting pot
8. foundered
9. oil slicks
10. peddlers