‘Down in the Caribbean – it’s not a dream you’re seeing’
and visits in the sun to Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, St Lucia, Guyana, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Suriname

I suppose most of us when we think of the Caribbean imagine glorious palm filled sunsets and blue waves crashing upon sandy beaches. Some of us - I would - might also think of a Bacardi and Coke and maybe a barbecue. That certainly has been my perception – but seriously if you go seeking there is very much more. There is a great deal of pain and suffering in the respective histories of the islands and sometimes a wretched level of survival which the tourist may never see or even may well be encouraged to overlook.

Sunset over the islands looking towards the Grenadines from St. Vincent

Apart from my first visit to Belize coming up to nearly 30 years ago I've been on two or three subsequent missions to the Caribbean - to the English-speaking islands. My next mission was to carry out an evaluation of European Union aid to the University of the West Indies (UWI) which has three campuses spread over the islands of Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. I also visited UWI's extension which provided courses in Georgetown, Guyana. That was in 1992 or twenty years ago. My more recent mission was for a little over two months based in St Vincent and the Grenadines. On both occasions I spent some time on the island of St Lucia. There I had the privilege of visiting the only secondary school in the world which to my knowledge has produced two Nobel laureates.
At the conclusion of my mission to St. Vincent I took a holiday and visited the island of St Maarten, which is divided between the French and Dutch. I also visited the St Kitts and Nevis Islands. In 2007 my Dutch colleague and I found ourselves working together for the Inter-American Bank to set up and establish a Road Map for education reforms in the Dutch speaking enclave of Suriname. In passing I might say that while we were successful in drafting such a plan the local political establishment could have been a more enthusiastic about adopting it.

The modern Caribbean reflects the domination of the islands by the European powers especially in the 17th and 18th centuries which covered conflicts between the Dutch, the English, the Spaniards and the French. Each of these European-based maritime power cultures has left its indelible mark. All of them and especially the British had a major role in introducing the slave trade and the misery and bestiality associated with it.

Slaves in the English islands were emancipated during the mid-early 19th century. The Dutch surprisingly given their liberal policies in recent times were even slower in following the English example. Subsequently about 20 or 30 years ago the British introduced independence to their islands with a corresponding reduction in financial support subsidies. In contrast, the French established their islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique as part of Metropolitan France and in these islands you will find French signs and cafes, French gendarmes and the French tricolour. The Dutch have departed from Suriname but the Surinamese people have not left the Dutch. Half of the Suriname-born population is resident in the Netherlands. There they are renowned as footballers and have an important role including playing for the Dutch national team. It was surprising to me to meet in Suriname so many Dutch educated doctors and lawyers who have returned but who still have very close connections to other family remaining on in the Netherlands.

Slowly across these islands there has been the development of individual island cultures. The different island peoples with populations of between one and two
hundred thousand are very keen to preserve their separate political status and identities and there is surprisingly little intermingling between even the smaller states. There is CARICOM and other regional organisations and entities covering economic and education issues and the like but the impact for individuals across the islands is far from profound.

Populations are separated by great expanses of water and it appears they like it to be that way. That doesn't mean that they are isolated - far from it - they are quite advanced even in the smallest of the islands in using the web as a means of communicating with the outside world. I was surprised when my taxi driver in St. Vincent told me with a degree of pride that he had ordered his second-hand taxi directly from a supplier in Japan over the internet.

Initially it seems to be a very distant place with its predominantly black populations. It would appear that it could not be further away from the Irish awareness. But there are some islands which still have identified Irish communities; recognisable by their surnames. I met a local black policeman by the name of James Joyce on St. Kitts. He assured me that these Irish communities existed but that traditionally they did not enjoy the best reputations across the islands because of their sense of separateness combined with a questionable reputation for law-breaking.

Up to fifty thousand Irish slaves are reckoned by historians to have been transported to the English Caribbean islands and especially to Barbados. Then there are the Black Irish of the island of Montserrat! In Barbados there is still a small community called the ‘red legs’ who were originally transported as slaves from Ireland by Cromwell and who have their separate identity. Their status amongst the minority white community is not at all high. They are seen to be outcasts.

It appears that they or white slaves generally were not a good investment. There were several slave uprisings which put pressure on the significant English investment in the sugar plantations. Instead, the solution adopted by the English slave trade was to load
their ships in Liverpool and London and Bristol with guns and clothing and trinkets and to sail them down to the West African ports and exchange them for slaves, which they transported across under hideous conditions to the Caribbean islands. There they sold off their cargoes of slaves at a high profit and loaded up valuable cargoes of sugar for the English home markets. It was from the profits of this slave trading called the ‘triangular system’ that the magnificent buildings in the cities of London, Liverpool or Bristol were financed. It’s highly ironic but during a visit to St. Kitts I saw the current sugar crop rotting in the fields. On the other hand Irish ports traded with the Caribbean exporting meat and especially fish so that in an indirect way our forebears may also have contributed to the operation of the slave system and indirectly to have benefited from it. There are few references to these Irish slaves to be found in Irish published histories until quite recently.

It occurs to me that the Negroid skin pigment is more dominant than the white Caucasian. I was speaking to a lady in a hotel in Jamaica whose grandmother came from Belfast. She obviously had married into the Negro community over two generations. She was black but at the same time you could clearly see the sharper Caucasian features. So I early came to a conclusion that we Irish have much more in common with these Caribbean people through the contributions of our white enslaved ancestors. On another occasion in St Vincent I was asked by a black colleague could I explain where his surname Murphy originated? I told them that it was the most common Irish name and that he probably had Irish ancestors. When he pressed me for its meaning in Gaelic I think I amused him by translating it as ‘Sea Hound’.

Given the history of the slave trade along with its isolation superficially – at least - there appears to be little cultural connection attaching the islands to Africa. But this isn't really true. There were many traditions: I suppose voodoo was one, which crossed the ocean. Diet doesn't seem to have changed much in so far as one sees very obese ladies, much more than the men, everywhere. It was my experience that the women in the Caribbean community enjoy a much higher profile in administration and politics than their African sisters. I met several who were heads of government departments; some were politicians and even ministers in government. That's quite a change from what one encounters in many African countries.

In these smaller island communities politics can eat away at peoples’ souls. Politics is the big game from morning till night. It is the reason why certain families are very prominent. The politician and his/her extended family representatives are always the first to criticise and to try to do down representatives of the opposing political party. One educationalist friend of mine on St Vincent was of world stature as an education economist and policymaker but he had been associated for a short period with the previous political party. Following the election of a new government he was kept on at the request of the donor agencies but he was bypassed totally. Over several years he had become quite embittered at being rebuffed on any occasion where he tried to make a professional contribution. We as a team were very happy to have the benefit of his insights. But we had in our report to be very careful, based on his advice, to ensure that nothing was attributed to him. Later when we visited education institutions on other islands his name was often mentioned as the most professional educationalist in the region. When I asked how it could happen that such a person should be so neglected - there was always a shrugging of shoulders. At the same time it could be amusing to negotiate and in some ways to take advantage of the political system. I'll
try to explain this later when I come to describing the way our mission operated in St Vincent.

Finally, in terms of linkages with the international donor agencies I was surprised to note just how active a role the Canadians and Canada played throughout the Caribbean. Very many of the people I spoke to had relatives living in Canada or they themselves had lived for a time there.

Jamaica and a visit to the campus of the University of the West Indies

The purpose of the mission to the University of the West Indies or UWI, as it is called almost universally, was to conduct an evaluation of the impact of financial support provided by the European Union under several Lome Conventions. In addition, there was also a requirement to examine the progress which had been made in rehabilitating student accommodation which had been almost totally destroyed during a recent severe hurricane. UWI caters for all the Anglophone islands in the Caribbean region. Therefore it was essential that there was adequate housing to accommodate the students coming from the remoter islands. The whole of the Caribbean is very vulnerable to hurricanes. One can expect them during all the months with the letter ‘r’ in them. They can cause very serious infrastructural damage to the small isolated
island communities. Indeed during the time I was in St Vincent there still remained damaged house properties from a much earlier hurricane which had still to be repaired.

As the plane touched down at the airport of Jamaica it appeared to my English agricultural expert colleague and to me that the runway couldn't have been more than one foot above the ocean level. We held tight, landed - and our fears were groundless. But the memory remains. We were greeted by an official from the EC Delegation who brought us to meet his senior colleagues.

Personally I was much taken aback by the reception I received from the Dutch Acting Charge d’ Affaires. He was extremely critical of the Irish. My English colleague was very sympathetic to me and couldn't understand this reaction. Neither could I. All the rest of the Delegation staff were extremely friendly and helpful, it was just this one senior officer who seemed to have a down on myself.

Sometime later I discovered the reason. A former Irish Minister of Finance had become the Irish nominee to the European Court of Auditors. As a European Auditor he and his team had not long ago arrived to undertake a detailed examination of the financial administration of the Delegation in Jamaica. Apparently, on the evening of his arrival he had courteously invited the Dutchman along with the staff of the Delegation out to dinner and gave them the impression that the Audit Team’s work to be put into operation would be easy enough for the Delegation to cope with. It would especially avoid raising sensitive issues.

Teams from the Court of Auditors had a horrendous reputation amongst the various European Delegations. I’m sure they still have. Theirs is the French confrontational approach. It is not unknown for them to confront Delegation staff members with “we know you were hiding things from us – we assure you that before we are through with you we will have taken the place apart and we will know what it is you are trying to hide”. Anyway, our Auditor made his departure and left his minions to take the Delegation apart - root and branch. Apparently there had been some serious derogation from EC operating procedures. The Dutchman was held accountable. He spent months working unpaid overtime hours gathering appropriate responses until eventually the auditors were called off. I in my innocence presented him with a target on which he could dispose some of his accumulated bile.

Otherwise, the Delegation was very kind in providing us with appropriate advice and support. There was one very handsome young French man in his early thirties. I remember my colleague waving to me for my attention. There wasn't just one beautiful local lady visitor being entertained in his office - there were three! It was obvious that the man was enjoying Jamaica.

We were introduced to the professorial board of management of the University and we made a presentation on what it was we wished to see and report on. They were extremely helpful again. They were anxious to express their appreciation for the funding they had received from Europe. They went to some pains to explain the benefits which had accrued to the staff development and training and equipment they had received. For our part we were very happy to begin working with them and we set
up arrangements and itineraries and over the next weeks we visited all of the faculties both in Jamaica and on the other island campuses.

We found the Barbados campus almost to be asleep. Everybody was very happy and no one seemed to think that it might be necessary to improve lecture delivery or throughput targets. To the contrary we were advised of the necessity of doing this by one of the Delegation officials, a John Appleby, who was extremely helpful as well as pleasant to us. Sadly he subsequently was transferred to Papa New Guinea where he was murdered; being thrown from a third-storey balcony. In a small world and when later I was on a mission to Papa New Guinea I was given the full details of the unfortunate incident.

Anyway, John Appleby jokingly asked us whether we had heard about the nuclear reactor which had been provided to the Jamaica campus as part of agricultural support? We certainly had not heard of this. He went on to explain with a smile on his face that the reason he knew about it was because of the concern expressed by the American CIA to have such a nuclear reactor so close to the U.S. coast. Certainly, during our inspections of the Jamaica campus we had seen rabbit hutches and all sorts of agricultural machinery and farm buildings, which my colleague had recognised - but about which I had no idea.

Appleby had let the cat out of the bag. We couldn't ignore this. On our return to Jamaica with the involvement of the EC Delegate there was a confrontation with the UWI Board of Management. Prior to the confrontation, the EC Delegate had requested - even directed us - to give the Board members a severe dressing down for the way they had misled the Delegation. We emphasised to the Board of Management that we felt it was a breach of trust for a nuclear reactor, however small it was, to be described as an element of agricultural equipment. All in all it was somewhat surreal. The Delegate explained that he couldn't do this, much as he would like to have done, because he had to continue working with the Board members. The Board members on their part were extremely contrite and polite. Eventually we found a way, a formula of words, to justify the purchase. We were also supplied with the necessary wide range of official assurances regarding nuclear non-proliferation, security, and every other protection one might imagine.

It was in Jamaica that for the first time I encountered the local radio service being widely used as a medium for distance teaching. UWI provided lectures across to even the most isolated of the English-speaking Caribbean islands. These lectures were backed up by seminars and exercises completed by the respective students. I think that the subjects taught had a lot to do with agriculture and basic science. Certainly, we were both as a team impressed at what we came across.

In making our itinerary from Jamaica to Barbados and Trinidad we found that we and our local colleagues were inevitably tracking the cricket matches between the English cricket team and the West Indians - or the “Windies” as they are affectionately known. We were informed so often from all sides that in all the English Caribbean islands the only two institutions that worked effectively - were UWI and the Windies!
Certainly, Jamaica has lots for the tourist. While on the one hand, there was colour and music and the people were extremely friendly and spontaneous - on the other hand, we were advised to look after our security. We knew that as white skinned people we would stand out very prominently and possibly attract some undesirables. We were advised to be indoors by nightfall. Being young, this was an injunction that we didn't always follow. On one occasion, I was shopping during in the late evening when I heard someone shout “Whitey, I'm a coming to get ya” – or something similar. When I looked around I saw a deranged man coming after me with a bottle in his hand. I ran very fast into a supermarket check-in and escaped.

On another occasion, we were staying in the beautiful family hotel called, I think, The Four Seasons, where we met another group of consultants. Among them was the then bursar of University College Cork. We thought that with about a half dozen of us we'd be safe enough. We decided to go to one of the better restaurants. Later, we made our way home on foot in the dark to the hotel. We became a bit anxious when we heard the footsteps of several people following us and catching up. Someone whispered “I don't like this - let's run”. Then the older bursar announced that he couldn't run. With running as an option ruled out I made the decision that “We'd better negotiate!” It turned out that we were being followed by some four or five ladies who were anxious to entertain us. We all were aware that they could well have their escorts with knives somewhere in the vicinity. We negotiated a twenty dollar note as an advance payment, but explained we were too tired on that night. We arranged for another night. The ladies were quite happy with this. Thus, we bought our way out of trouble. There was no repeat. I suppose while we lacked somewhat for dignity we did reach home safely.

Overall, with its flowers and bougainvillea and music I enjoyed Kingston very much although I confess I was a little bit edgy following on my experience with the man and his bottle. To the north of the island of Jamaica there was and still is Montego Bay an internationally renowned tourist area. I was advised that for safety reasons it was completely fenced off and isolated from the rest of the island. Obviously, personal security was seen to be a major issue in successfully developing the tourist
industry. As a team we received numerous invitations to come sailing or scuba-diving, but unfortunately, we just didn't have time to indulge in it.

We also made the acquaintance of a young Irish lecturer, who showed us around some very interesting places. We sat out at night with him and his colleagues discussing the purpose of our mission while being provided with quite interesting insights into what worked and what didn't work so well. This is always the way that missions evolve. There is the official response, and then there are the concerns people you meet have who are looking for change and improvement and are quite generous in sharing their views. In following up on the hurricane damage I also had the pleasure of meeting a number of representatives of the local Jamaican architectural and quantity surveying community. It was interesting to see that already then and some years ahead of Ireland they had adopted a Computer Aided Design (CAD) system for construction. So confident were they as a sector with it that they had decided they would stay with the software version they had rather than attempt to upgrade it to the latest version and so avoid the confusion they feared might arise from changing to it.

This all happened during nineteen ninety two. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. Jamaica has thrived and has evolved into a regional centre for education and technical development and good practice.

Our next stop was Barbados - a small highly populated island. Barbados is one of the Caribbean's leading tourist destinations and is one of the most developed islands in the region with a Human Development Index number of 0.825. In 2011 Barbados ranked second in the Americas (16th globally) on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

There we stayed in a hotel on the beach outside the town of Bridgetown. The walls of the hotel were painted pink, and everywhere it was adorned with bougainvillea and flowers. The island is small and round. There are no hills. I was somewhat disappointed with it. I was even more disappointed returning to it in 2006 when I was required to report to the Delegation in Barbados on the work we have done in St Vincent. It certainly has developed as to be unrecognisable from the place we visited in nineteen ninety two. There are hotels everywhere. There is little direct access for the locals to the coast but through one or other of these super-modern hotels. At the same time Barbados is the commercial capital of the region so I suppose the inhabitants put up with it.

In contrast Trinidad has a distinctly nautical air about it. It was colourful. The university campus staff felt themselves to be at least on a par with the Jamaican headquarters. We visited many of the agricultural facilities and concluded that, all in all, again a good job had been done.

58 Quoted from Wickpedia.
I visited a pub called the Pelican. I think it is one of the favourites in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Trinidad. I was surprised to see chalked on the black painted ceiling of the bar a note to record that the Malahide, Co. Dublin, cricket team had enjoyed a great reception there. I also had a message to deliver to a nurse friend of an Irish friend of mine who was living on the island of Tobago which is a short distance from Trinidad.

From Trinidad we flew down to Guyana, formerly British Guyana on the South American mainland. I found it to be much more backward - in fact, very, very underdeveloped, as compared to the Caribbean islands. Guyana is the land of Demerara sugar. Before I actually saw the great river which was between a mile and two miles wide I had no idea that the Demerara was actually a river. I was also very excited to learn that not so many miles to the west through the jungle was the border with Brazil.

We left the airport and got into a taxi for the capital city, Georgetown. It was simply the oldest and most dilapidated taxi I had ever been driven in. It had huge fibreglass patches all over the bodywork. An all-American gas guzzler, I wondered would it take us over a country road through the forests by night to our destination. The driver
assured us that it would and that he took passengers to and from the airport several times a day. We got in, and he entertained us with anecdotes and songs based on experiences he had been through as we sped along the jungle roads.

During the 17th century Guyana had been colonised by the Dutch. All along the coast when crossing smaller rivers we came across the old lifting bridges. Their successors are to be seen today all over the Netherlands. But these were somewhat rickety and neglected. Under a peace settlement entered into somewhere or another Guyana had been ceded to the British. The British in turn had imposed their own mark upon the landscape with the importation of indentured labour drawn from what is now India and Pakistan. Having had some experience of Pakistan. I found it strange to see the memorials to Muslim saints with their green and black ribbons. Later I was to encounter many more of such settlements when I worked for a while in neighbouring Suriname.

While these latter-day Indian peoples had obviously preserved memories of their saints, along with other cultural traditions there were also seen to have been some departures from earlier practices. Huge amounts of rum were being consumed in sheebeens situated along the road; set up in old metal containers or shacks. It was somewhat disturbing to see the high levels of indulgence by both men and women when we stopped by some of these sheebeens as we travelled across the countryside.

Georgetown is unique in that it is a city whose old centre consists of buildings constructed of entirely white-hart hardwood. It is the same hardwood which is used internationally in harbour construction and offers high protection against water-borne beetle attack. It was amazing to see the walls and arches of timber construction, forming enormously high spires in the local cathedral. In terms of entertainment once
again we were admonished to stay in at night and that Georgetown was even more
dangerous. And this time we took advice and stayed indoors at the expense of being
good tourists.

The Demerara River is really striking. It is fast flowing and presents a huge natural
barrier. I recall crossing the maybe 5 kilometre wide river in an old steam engined
ferry and enjoying myself enormously. Crossing the rivers we saw the local people
going about their various businesses in small canoes and ribs. I remember chatting to
a young man smiling happily and proud of the huge fish he had caught.

Guyana: local transport

The protocols observed between the European Delegations in Jamaica, Barbados and
Trinidad were somewhat peculiar. As the mission was about to leave Jamaica I
undertook to provide the Dutchman with three copies of the mission's preliminary
findings. I did it on the assumption that he would distribute a copy each Barbados and
Trinidad. He replied ‘under no circumstances’. So, instead of a simple posting of the
documents he insisted that it was standard EC procedure that I should send the three
documents to Brussels, where they would be distributed individually to the three
Delegations. Perhaps, the Delegations and their staffs have learned something from
the fierce independence and desire for remoteness which is a feature of the island
populations.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

St. Vincent and the Grenadines or SVG as it is more normally known is an
archipelago of 34 islands and islets located in the Eastern Caribbean. They are
situated in the Lesser Antilles Island arc in the southern portion of the Windward Islands, which lie at the southern end of the eastern border of the Caribbean Sea where the latter meets the Atlantic Ocean. St. Vincent, the mainland, has an area of 133 sq. miles, while the Grenadine Islands which run for forty miles to its southwest have a total of 17 sq. miles. The Grenadines consist of a number of privately and state-owned islands with Bequia, Mustique, Canouan, Mayreau, Union and Palm Islands and Petit St. Vincent being inhabited. To the north of Saint Vincent lies Saint Lucia, to the east Barbados. The country has a French and British colonial history. Most of the nation lies within the Hurricane Belt. It is a densely populated country with over 300 inhabitants/km² and a total of 120,000 inhabitants\(^{39}\) with most of the inhabitants found on the main island. Its capital is Kingstown, also its main port. The majority of the population (approx. 67%) is under the age of 30 years. While miniscule in terms of population it has all that panoply of much larger independent state.

The north of the island consists of an active volcano. Kingston in the south is the main focus of the population and then the roads follow the coast to the east and the west but terminate on the lower slopes of the volcano. Thus however small the island may be there are problems in seeing it in its entirety. We did make some excursions on weekends. We visited the film set of ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ and marvelled at what appeared to be genuine, 17th and 18th century houses and furniture but which revealed themselves to be supported by frameworks of rolled steel joists and cast-iron.

![Image](image_url)

Kingston, the capital of the island with a cruise ship moored alongside. It's a small town of 10,000 population and 2 or 3 bars. Bequia, the largest of the Grenadines is in the background.

For me the most interesting feature of St Vincent was undoubtedly the Botanical Gardens. I regret very much that I didn't have a camera when I visited them. The

\(^{39}\) Information courtesy of Wickipedia.
gardens are the oldest botanical gardens in the Western Hemisphere being founded in 1765. It was here that Captain Bligh of the Mutiny on the Bounty landed the breadfruit he had shipped from Fiji for landowners to propagate. The cheap prolific bounty of the breadfruit trees was used to feed the slaves on the island.

There is simply a fascinating range of plants that I had never encountered before. There were plants which gave off a range of beautiful perfumes along with plants producing a range of exotic dyes, and finally there were individualistic plants that dominated our attention... I suppose the one that impressed me most was the tree that gave off cannonball type explosions during the night as it released its seedlings. Perhaps in the next years during my retirement I’ll be able to dedicate a proportion of my time studying these wonderful plants and hopefully I’ll be able to lay hands on a publication relating to those botanical Gardens.

The economy of St Vincent is highly dependent on agriculture - mainly bananas - as its main source of income. The growth in tourism has made that industry the current high income generator. There are vulnerabilities given the country’s dependence on imported oil, the erosion of trade preferences in bananas, and frequent natural disasters. It has been identified as having the highest levels of poverty in the OECS. It also has a high level of income inequality. Recent studies focusing on the social sector and, by extension, poverty suggest a worsening of the poverty levels with more and more people at risk of being driven into the poverty bracket. A recent sociological review has identified social challenges related to “family life and by extension society continue to be troubled by absentee fathers, domestic violence, teenage motherhood, child abuse and child truancy”.

The majority of the young population have only been educated to primary school level and the adult population and the majority of the existing workforce also suffers from
inadequate schooling. There are serious deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills which impact on the ability of many persons to take advantage of economic opportunities. Our mission had three elements. The primary objective of the first part of the consultancy was to provide decision-makers in the Government of St Vincent and the Grenadines and the European Commission with sufficient information to justify the acceptance, modification or rejection of a project proposal for education. The required first output of the consultancy was a Sector Review comprised of a report reviewing the status of implementation of the Education Sector Development Project with a proposed / updated implementation schedule.

The second task of the mission was to prepare an updated Institutional Master Plan for the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College. The third objective was the provision for the Government of a conclusive concept / strategy as well as a comprehensive implementation plan for improving education through the use of an ICT project, taking into account potential factors, issues and arrangements that are pertinent to the project’s successful execution. Finally, the mission was to prepare the financing proposal for improving the quality and efficiency of education through the use of computers project. So we certainly had our hands full for the two months or so we were based on the island.

The Cobblestone Hotel, Kingston SVG where the team stayed during the mission.

The mission took place during the autumn of 2007, I think. Once again, the mission was to evaluate EC investments in education and to come up with a proposal agreed with the government for a further five years of EC support. There were three of us, an
Italian, who was the architect for the mission, a Dutch man and an old friend who would look after IT aspects and with me as team leader. We based ourselves in the Cobblestones Hotel in Kingston. The hotel faced out onto the ocean and there was always a fresh breeze to reduce the impact of the heat and humidity. We were in the centre of the town and had easy access to government departments, to shops, to the only pub worthy of the name and to the couple of restaurants, which about covers the whole inventory of Kingston.

Our counterparts were two large ladies indeed. The first was the Minister of Education. She dominated the Ministry. She had a good relationship to the Prime Minister. She had in addition very firm views on how to treat consultants such as ourselves. I suppose it would be best summed up by “Take their money – and tell them nothing”. I wouldn't say she was an intellectual but she struck me that by her sheer doggedness and a strong personality she was accustomed to getting her way. She once confided to me that after her children had passed through school she had lost a great deal of interest in education – but not with the political perks - I surmised. She had a reasonably good relationship with another lady we had to report to. This was the National Authorising Officer. This lady was a senior official in the government and very close - at least for the beginning - to the Prime Minister. She was an articulate and intelligent woman, and I did my best to build up a good relationship with her. I confess I had lost hope with the Minister of Education.

Then, finally there was the Prime Minister. He was one of two persons on the island with a Ph.D. The other was his niece with whom I worked closely. His niece was highly critical of the politicians as a group and appeared to be genuinely interested in furthering education and communications opportunities for the young people of the
island. The Prime Minister did not hide his light under a bushel. He was accustomed to lecture the populace on his superior qualifications. Looking back on it I think there must be an amusing story hidden here with such an interesting if not outrageous cast of players.

My two colleagues and I dutifully arranged meetings and covered our itineraries. The weeks went by and we began to draft our initial reports. When they were drafted I looked around to identify to whom we should present them. Neither of the two ladies displayed any interest. To receive them would mean they would have to comment and give feedback. This would commit them to one or other courses of action. As I said they wanted the money, but they were quite content to let education roll along as it had ever done. Change presented risks. Then there was the question as to where previous funding had gone? In the absence of any details I was forced to make some assumptions and to come up with budgetary outturn figures. I recall these budgetary figures indicated depressing pictures regarding absence of investment, poor quality and impact and the like.

Bequia is the largest island of the Grenadines and lies just about 10km from St. Vincent. It's unspoilt - at least it was and we as a team spent several working weekends here. In the far background is the small town of Port Elizabeth where I saw the giant ray descending as the ferry docked!

This was seen to be upsetting to the two ladies, especially the Minister. I and my colleagues began to be accused of abusing their trust. We became somewhat desperate in having a response to our findings because without responses we knew we would not be paid by Brussels, nor would we considered to have carried out our mandate by the Delegation in Barbados. The role of the latter was made a little complex by a clash, an unfortunate clash of personalities. After several years of complaint, with no response, the Prime Minister had written to Brussels demanding the resignation of the Head of Delegation in Barbados. This is the only time I've encountered such a situation and we marvelled that the recipient of quite a lot of European funding was calling for the head of the EC official who had provided that funding.
At one level, I feared that I and my colleagues were jeopardising the peace and tranquillity of this latter-day Eden. On another, I had the feeling there were more sinister things afoot. In parallel with all this my colleagues and I had begun to adapt to local social opportunities. I was given to patronise the only pub worthy of its name, which was owned by the nephew of the Prime Minister. Occasionally, I was accompanied by my Dutch colleague, rarely by the Italian. I developed a friendly bond with the publican, who was most interested in the work of the mission. But traumatically and unexpectedly as the three of us were sitting for our evening meal and wine my learned Italian architect began to proposition the young lady behind the counter. We heard him offer money for sexual favours and frankly we were disgusted; both disgusted as well as alarmed. Given that the three of us were working closely together and had few secrets both my friend the Dutchman and I were appalled that he would do this and that he would do this in front of us. We also were very much aware that the three of us were the only white noses in the whole town of Kingston and were under constant scrutiny. All we needed was for our two ladies to be informed of the Italian’s predilections. I suspected that were it to become public knowledge it would have been a great pretext for them have the three of us drummed out of the island.

St Lucia: Nelson’s Cove where he camouflaged his ships and hid successfully from the Spanish fleet.

This was the first time I had ever experienced this kind of shenanigans. I made a strong objection to the Italian and warned that if anything were to arise from this procurement attempt or any other similar liaisons that I would make sure he was on the next flight to Europe. I was genuinely outraged. I remember e-mailing the office
so as to prepare them and feeling the lash of their indignation in return. Still I see him
shrugging his shoulders and looking at me as if I had come out of the trees and saying
in his Italian accent “But I am a man. I must have woman.”

To return to the situation regarding presenting our reports I had an inspiration. Over
dinner, I asked my friend the publican if he would be so kind as to deliver a copy of
my report to his uncle the Prime Minister. He readily agreed. I reckoned it might upset
my team colleagues so I kept my secret to myself. The next morning, all the whistles
and bells blew from the Minister and from the National Authorising Officer’s offices.
They demanded a meeting that afternoon. My colleagues were somewhat nonplussed
as they had no idea what had transpired. As we entered into the office of the National
Authorising Officer she stood up and waved the copy of my report in our faces.
Turning to me she gave me a piercing look and demanded with some indignation as to
whether I recognised the document? I replied, as graciously as I could that I had
missed it but I thought I had lost it in a pub. I thanked her profusely for finding it for
me. The poor lady was speechless. She knew full well that I had passed the document
to the publican and its significance. She also realised she now had to respond on its
contents to her boss, the Prime Minister, with whom she was no longer on a good
footing. She realised she needed our help for that.

I found it so difficult to keep a straight face when as we left both my colleagues
expressed their amazement at the fact that I could lose a document in a public house
and then to have it reappear in the office of the National Authorising Officer. I
suppose things are not always as they seem. Somehow I think the ladies developed a
certain respect for the way they had been outmanoeuvred. Over the next days and
weeks, we did our best to conclude business as best we could. I'm not sure we ever
completely broke the ice with the two of them but there was some movement and I
hope on the basis of our recommendations that funding was made available and that it
was put to good use.

First explored by the Spaniards in the 16th century and then settled by the English in
the mid-17th century, Suriname became a Dutch colony in 1667. With the abolition
of slavery in 1863, workers were brought in from India and Java. Independence from the
Netherlands was granted in 1975. At just under 165,000 km² Suriname is the smallest
sovereign state in South America. (French Guiana, while less extensive and populous,
is an overseas department of France.) Suriname has a population of approximately
566,000,[1] most of whom live on the country’s north coast, where the capital
Paramaribo is located.[60] Suriname is unique is the only Dutch-speaking country in
South America. They are very proud of this uniqueness. The Dutch language unites
them. Otherwise at home families will use their own inherited language either Korean,
Urdu or the like.

The wealthiest and most progressive community is formed from the Muslim and Hindu descendants of farmers and labourers transported from the Indian subcontinent. It is very cosmopolitan. Currently the breakdown between the main religious groups is Hindu 27.4%, Protestant 25.2%, Roman Catholic 22.8%, Muslim 19.6%, and indigenous beliefs 5%. On a racial origin the breakdown is Hindustani - also known locally as "East Indians"- their ancestors emigrated from northern India in the latter part of the 19th century: 37%, Creole mixed white and black: 31%, Javanese: 15%, "Maroons" their African ancestors were brought to the country in the 17th and 18th centuries as slaves and escaped to the interior: 10%, Amerindian: 2%, Chinese: 2%, white: 1%, other: 2%. There are also communities of Koreans and Japanese. The economy is dominated by the mining industry, with exports of alumina, gold, and oil.

On a more dubious assessment covering illicit drugs the country has been developing as a growing trans-shipment point for South American drugs destined for Europe via the Netherlands and Brazil and as a regional hub point for arms-for-drugs dealing. A feature of travel to Suriname is the heavy, very heavy searches for drugs applied on the European side for immigrants and returning holiday makers – and certainly to us on our return through Schipol.

Paramaribo is the capital of Suriname. It is the centre of a Dutch speaking culture on the South American mainland. All around Suriname there is either Spanish or French or English spoken. There is certainly a charm about this small country. The biggest surprise to us was the fact that the original Dutch settler families who had created the colony have long departed. They had however bequeathed the Dutch language to the descendants of the indentured labourers they had transported to the country from their colonies across Southeast Asia - especially from Indonesia.

Simply put, the town has the widest range of cultures probably in the world for a small city of its size. As one local friend proudly confirmed to us “here we speak every language on the globe – but Russian! This multiracial society is quite happy to exist and to interact democratically. Most of the descendants of those transported from South Asia or Southeast Asia still retain their use of Korean or Japanese or Chinese as
second or third languages. More importantly, they still retain their traditional individual national cousins. I had my first experience of Korean cooking in Paramaribo. Most curious of all me though was their determination to retain their Dutch as the official language of the country. They were certainly proud of their Dutch and for being different. They still receive funding support from the Netherlands, and from the European Union, but recent relationships with the Netherlands had gone through a period of strain perhaps due to a coup mounted by local military people in the 1950s and 1960s.

I suppose the photograph above of the swimming pool in the hotel at Paramaribo says the lot. This is not necessarily what the officials of the Inter-American Bank or even what spouses of individual consultants want to see. Instead, I suppose what they want to see is their loved ones struggling and taking the punishment as they develop proposals and policies for the betterment of mankind. Actually, we didn't stay in this hotel, but in a simpler one, which was equally charming some 2 km outside the city centre.

A further feature of the city is a wide river frontage. The distance to the far side is more than a mile wide, and the panorama overall is certainly dignified and grand. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Germans decided to scuttle one of their warships just off the waterfront. The capsized hull projects above the water and dominates part of the river approach. It surprises me that there have not been demands made to the German Government to have this hazard to shipping removed. Another feature is the very high bridge, built on stilts, connecting the east and the west across the river. It dominates the river scene.
I was riveted as a birdwatcher to observe all the new species of birds - all different to what I have experienced either in Europe or South Asia. Robins appeared to have yellow breasts. Every morning, while we breakfasted they fought with a variety of birds with a beautiful blue and the radiant plumage. It was spectacular to see them.

The interior of the country is very sparsely populated and is recognised to be one of the more adventurous regions to visit. Suriname invests a larger share of national resources in education than many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean Region. Despite the amount of resources allocated to education, the sector is acknowledged to suffer serious problems in the low quality of the service provided and with institutional, organizational, operational and management problems. We were in Paramaribo in response to a request for services from the Inter-American Development Bank to put education reforms in Suriname back on the rails after a period of inactivity and deterioration. The goals of the reforms were to contribute to the development of human capital of the children of the poorest segments of the population. The reform agenda addressed acknowledged shortcomings in relation to the quality and internal efficiency of basic education. The project had been prepared in 2003. In March 2004, Suriname signed a loan agreement to finance it. Two years later in October/November 2006 a Mid-term evaluation was carried out of the project. The results established that apart from some school building nothing had happened.

The team worked together with the persons responsible for the original project to try to build up a consensus as to what needed to be done. We became very aware of the constraints on the small population to identify, select and build up people with the necessary overview, discipline and energy. We organised a number of workshops and presentations and working together with some long domiciled expatriates we thought we had come up with an answer, which could have some chance of success.
We had to take into consideration the need to bridge the divide between education services provided by the government and those provided by the separate religious groups including Christians of various callings, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and others. It was a steep learning curve and in the short time we had we attempted to respond to and placate the criticisms of the representatives of the various groups. At the final workshop I presented on a direct personal instruction from the Minister of Education that the reforms were to be on the basis of a trickle-down: concentrating initially in a limited number of schools and areas of the country. There was intense discussion and people spoke both for and against. The arguments were logical and eventually most parties settled for a consensus where the number of schools would be increased but would be still far short of national coverage. So, we rolled out a report on that basis and submitted it to be Bank and the Government and took our leave.

A few weeks later, we found that the President had unilaterally gone against his Prime Minister and made a decision to reverse this consensus. The path forward was to be total national coverage and with the required capacity building development of materials to be accelerated to meet a completely revised project deadline. This was unrealistic; it far exceeded the capacities of the officials available. We learned that our local counterparts - not to speak of the Bank which was funding the reform - were less than enthusiastic at this change of direction.

We also were informed that elements of the reform policy, which had been prepared for the government by the brother of the Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, had not been paid for. The reason given was that the Government regulation that fees paid to international consultants should not exceed the fees payable to the local experts.
employed by the ministries. This international expert claimed his fees which were substantially higher and with payment delayed placed an embargo on implementation of a range of strategies until they were paid.

A feature of working in poorer countries is the contrast between the rightful needs of girls and boys to an education and the resistances encountered; whether due to political bias, lack of prioritisation or just downright ignorance, which prevents these basic rights being extended. On occasions such as this it is highly frustrating for me personally and from my colleagues to have to accept that an outside consultant ultimately has little influence on such political processes. It is equally frustrating to realise that in such circumstances progress in so far as there will be progress will be determined by expatriate investment in partnership with local elite groups which very often fails to match the aspirations of the neediest elements of the society.

A personal assessment

My perception of the Caribbean has been almost totally limited by exposure to the English islands. I did have some reservations in relation to the abuse of the English language and local usage which is short and brutal. But it doesn't take much to associate this absence of gentility or refinement of the language to the brutality experienced by these populations during the couple of hundred years of the slave trade. On one occasion I was checking into a hotel and after a sort of uncouth conversation I exploded and asked ‘doesn’t anyone here say please or thank you’ and left. Over time it became something of an obsession with me. I suppose I could have been a little more understanding.

Which of the islands did I find to be the most attractive? That's very difficult question to answer. I'll reflect just a small while. As I sit here with my voice recognition equipment – I will let my imagination float to one or two places. The first is the island of St Lucia. It's a haven for yachtsman, with the twin peaks and attractive coastline. It is very unusual indeed unique. Then there are several very pleasant towns and villages to visit with well provided watering holes.

The first time I visited the island. I was very impressed by a deep harbour; I think it was called Nelson’s Harbour. It was said to be the place where Nelson sheltered his ships and camouflaged the mast-tops with pine trees so as to escape from the superior French or Spanish fleet, which was searching for them. There is everything on the island: scenery, history, beautiful restaurants, and overall a very pleasant environment. From there it's only a short hop for the French experience of Martinique. I suppose the point is if I were to go back on holiday I would base myself in St Lucia.

From there too it is just another short hop by plane down along the west coast of St Vincent, with its active volcano, to Kingston. Kingston with its 10,000 people is a staging point for the Grenadines. It has a well-appointed marina, about two miles east on the southern coast. The marine environment there is beautiful, laid-back and altogether a most enjoyable place to spend a few days. Sailing south, whether by ferry or yacht brings you to the northermost of the Grenadines, Bequia, at a distance of about 8 miles. Here on this nearest island to Kingston I and my colleagues spent two most enjoyable weekends finalising our reports. It is simple. It is spectacular. On our arrival by small local ferry from Kingston and in its going-about to moor in the small
harbour we caused an amount of disturbance amongst which I saw a huge ray rising from the depths. I wasn't in any rush to go swimming!

That would be my itinerary. But in going there, you would avoid Barbados, Jamaica and St. Maarten - all of which have a lot to offer. One place, I never visited and which I have always wished to see is Cuba.