

Pricing shocks among factors driving fewer cruise visits



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Passengers disembark from the Azamara Quest cruise ship after docking at the Port of Scarborough, Tobago, in December 2025

T&T's cruise sector is facing a difficult period, with the 2024/2025 season showing a steep drop in arrivals.

Data from veteran cruise agent Charles Carvalho revealed that Port-of-Spain handled just 12 cruise calls—down sharply from 37 in the 2023/2024 season.

Tobago experienced an even more dramatic decline, falling from 67 calls to only 21 over the same period.

Projections for the 2025/2026 season point to an improvement for Tobago, with 33 cruise calls expected. But Trinidad is expected to have ten cruise calls in the current cruise season, which is a slight decline from the previous season.

Early forecasts for 2026/2027 indicate further, a bit of increased activity, as Trinidad is estimated to welcome 13 cruise ships and Tobago is projected to see 30 calls.

This country's cruise season officially starts in November, and April the following year marks the end.

In taking a closer look at the data, Carvalho, who has served the industry for 41 years, said the drop was not surprising as he viewed it as a consequence of long-standing structural and administrative problems that have never been addressed.

A combination of escalating operating costs, inconsistent policy support and a lack of strategic marketing have eroded the country's competitiveness at a time when cruise lines are tightening itineraries and trimming fuel consumption to meet new emissions rules, he explained.

Pricing shocks also have made a bad year worse.

For instance, Carvalho said buses hired for cruise tours in Tobago have raised their rates by about 40 per cent, while

similar services in Trinidad have increased by about 10 per cent.

These spikes, he added, have reduced the destination's competitiveness especially when cruise lines are aggressively managing costs across their networks.

Beyond costs, itinerary design and environmental compliance are reshaping cruise decisions.

Carvalho further stated cruise lines have tightened schedules and shortened sailing distances to meet emissions targets and cut fuel burn.

Geography matters: Trinidad, at the southern end of the Caribbean chain, is a longer sail, particularly for Eastern Caribbean circuits.

Tobago, meanwhile, benefits from geography: many ships transiting between the Eastern Caribbean and South America use Tobago as a convenient intermediate stop, with routes like Tobago to Devil's Island taking roughly three days' sailing.

That convenience, Carvalho said, is why Tobago is holding steady even as Trinidad stumbles.

He also pointed to a cost stack that is out of step with regional cruise norms.

Passengers already pay a US\$5 head tax to disembark; on top of that, tour operators are charged roughly US\$1.50 to US\$2.00 per passenger to take those same visitors on tours—a practice Carvalho called “double taxation” that he hasn't seen elsewhere.

“The only country in the world charging that tax is Trinidad. It's a tour operation fee. The only port in the world charging that fee. It's a double taxation. It's like Piarco saying we have a departure tax but with Caribbean Airlines saying before you come onto the plane you have to pay me another tax because I'm taking you up. That has to stop,” Carvalho asserted.

The industry also currently suffers from a lack of brand recognition.

In taking the industry forward, Carvalho suggested marketing as the missing pillar.

“The cruise lines themselves tell me the passengers don't really know where Trinidad is. It's the passengers who push the destination, not the cruise lines. What they need is a marketing effort from the destination to show that you are doing good.”

He argues that Trinidad missed a window when the country was frequently in international headlines due to developments in Venezuela.

“That was the time to market the country—people were finally seeing where you are on the map. It would have cost less to act then than it will cost now,” he added.

Further, Carvalho insisted that cruise lines do not dislike Port-of-Spain as a destination, but they do take issue with the physical environment. “ “When passengers step off in other islands, they see beaches, boardwalks, entertainment areas. When they step off in Trinidad, they see cranes, containers, and industrial cargo operations. It doesn't feel like a Caribbean holiday port,” he stated.

Carvalho further noted that medical tourism has the potential to become a significant income generator for the country, particularly when visiting crew members require major surgical procedures.

A significant barrier, Carvalho contended, is weak communication between industry veterans and officials.

He said his attempts to brief Satyakama “Kama” Maharaj, Minister of Trade, Investment, and Tourism, have fallen flat.

According to Carvalho, he sent proposals, requested meetings, and even arranged a lunch on board a ship for a practical, on-the-ground view of how the business works.

The meeting was cancelled, he said, and no replacement was set.

Carvalho added there was no response to his follow-up emails.

Guardian Media also reached out to Maharaj but calls and WhatsApp messages to the minister went unanswered.

Despite the current headwinds, Carvalho believes T&T still has everything cruise passengers want—culture, cuisine, nature, music and heritage—and that Tobago’s geography provides a natural foundation to rebuild volumes— but unless costs drop and genuine partnerships form, the country would continue losing ground to its Caribbean neighbours.

Tobago responds

The Tobago Division of the T&T Chamber of Industry and Commerce is seeking clarity following reports that taxi fares charged to cruise ship visitors may have recently increased.

President Curtis Williams told the Business Guardian that it was neither consulted nor notified beforehand about any proposed adjustment to rates associated with the island’s cruise operations. As a result, the organisation said it is still trying to understand the circumstances that led to the reported change.

“As such, we do not have clarity on the specific factors that triggered the increase.

Tobago’s cruise sector is a delicate and highly competitive space and pricing decisions—particularly those affecting first-time visitors—must be handled carefully to avoid unintended negative perceptions of the destination,” Williams explained.

With many cruise passengers setting foot on the island for the first time, pricing decisions can significantly influence their overall impression of the destination.

Williams also emphasised that sudden or unexplained increases risk unintentionally shaping a narrative that Tobago is becoming less accessible or less visitor-friendly, an outcome it hopes to avoid.

As such, Williams advised that the situation highlights the need for more structured communication among the key agencies and groups involved in cruise facilitation.

“We believe this matter underscores the need for structured dialogue and coordination among key stakeholders, including the taxi associations, cruise operators, port authorities, tourism service providers and the Tobago Tourism Agency,” he further suggested, warning that without coordination important decisions may be made in isolation, leaving other stakeholders unprepared for the potential impact.

The chamber is proposing a collaborative meeting to allow stakeholders to examine the issue together to:

- Understand what is driving cost increases
- Assess the impact on visitor experience and destination competitiveness
- Explore fair, transparent and sustainable pricing structures
- Ensure Tobago remains welcoming, affordable and well-positioned in the regional cruise market.

Reaffirming its role as a partner in Tobago’s economic development, Williams reiterated the chamber is ready to support any initiative aimed at improving coordination and strengthening the island’s tourism reputation.