

Port-of-Spain hotels full for Carnival

...but small hotels not seeing much benefit





The Brix Autograph Collection, Cascade, is reporting high occupancy for the Carnival period PHOTO BY ROBERTO CODALLO

Carnival accommodation in Port-of- Spain is already in high demand ahead of the February 16 and 17 festivities, with major hotels either fully booked or offering limited rooms at premium rates, highlighting the pressure on visitors trying to secure last-minute stays.

Checks with several leading hotels revealed that from today, there are no available rooms in Port-of-Spain.

The Hyatt Regency confirmed it was fully booked from February 12 to 19, with no rooms available under either local or standard rates. Limited availability is open briefly on February 17 and 19. When rooms become available, the average

nightly rate was US\$640.01 before taxes, excluding breakfast, and US\$660.56 including breakfast and taxes, subject to change depending on demand.

Brix Hotel also confirmed it was fully booked for the same period. Reservation staff indicated that room rates during the Carnival window reached approximately US\$700 per night for single occupancy, with prices increasing for double or triple occupancy.

At the Trinidad Hilton and Conference Centre, availability was similarly scarce.

The reservations staff confirmed that only two rooms remained for the period from February 12 to 19, priced at US\$920 per night before taxes. Breakfast was not included, and the booking terms required full upfront payment with no cancellation or modification permitted.

The Radisson Hotel reported no availability for Carnival Thursday, with its next opening only on Saturday. Room rates were quoted at US\$615 per night before taxes, with breakfast included.

Outside of Port-of-Spain, the Business Guardian called two major hotels in south Trinidad, with the Royal Hotel in San Fernando, confirming it still had rooms available for the week of February 12 to 19. Those rooms are being offered at a weekly rate of \$5,500 (US\$847) for single or double occupancy with a complimentary breakfast.

Cara Hotels in Claxton Bay reported a Carnival-week rate of US\$245 per night for foreign guests, inclusive of breakfast, available through February 19. After the carnival period, rates drop to US \$205 per night.

In Trincity, the Holiday Inn Express indicated there was no availability from February 12 to 17, and the rooms were being offered at US\$225 per night, including breakfast. However, only five rooms remain at this rate for the period of February 18 and 19.

Against this backdrop of sold-out rooms and premium pricing at larger hotels, the experience of smaller accommodation providers has been far more uneven.

President of the Small Tourism Accommodation Owners of Trinidad and Tobago (STAOTT), Denise Aleong, described a Carnival season that is thriving in central Port of Spain but leaving many small operators behind.

“As far as I’m aware, the properties in and around Port-of-Spain are more or less 100 per cent booked. I haven’t heard anybody talking about cancellations,” Aleong explained. “But some properties outside of Port of Spain don’t have any bookings at all.”

She confirmed that at least one member property in Tobago received no Carnival-related bookings, despite the traditional trend of visitors extending their stay beyond Trinidad.

“I know Carnival is not taking place in Tobago, but normally, for Carnival, people will go to Tobago as well.”

Airbnb, spillover and uneven demand

Aleong believes the lack of spillover to smaller properties outside the capital is not accidental, but structural.

“Usually, when the town is booked out, people look for elsewhere and just rent a car,” she noted.

“That’s not happening this time.”

Her main concern centres on the growing influence of Airbnb accommodations and other short-term rental platforms.

“One of my suspicions is Airbnb. They are a competitor to our small, traditional properties,” she said. “Not to say that some of our properties aren’t listed on Airbnb, but there are no regulations, and everybody is opening their place, especially around this time.”

She pointed to the clustering of short-term rentals around Port-of-Spain, suggesting that visitors are opting to stay close to events rather than branching out to surrounding areas.

“There are other properties in and around Port-of-Spain that are listed on Airbnb, and probably they get the bookings,” Aleong observed. “That’s why the others outside of Port-of-Spain may or may not be getting anything.”

While Carnival bookings remain intact, Aleong finds it notable that security concerns raised elsewhere have not affected the festival itself.

“We haven’t had any Carnival cancellations as far as I’m aware,” she said.

“Strangely enough, there’s no concern with security when it comes to Carnival.”

This contrasts sharply with cancellations experienced in January and in March, particularly from international student groups.

“These cancellations happened pre-January,” she explained. “In my case, one student group postponed from January to March and then eventually said they’re not coming at all.”

She linked the decision to external geopolitical concerns, particularly perceptions among overseas universities.

“The universities were concerned about sending students here,” Aleong said. “Even though I tried to convince them otherwise.”

She described the reasoning as difficult to reconcile with the packed calendar of pre-Carnival events.

“There’s no evidence on the ground that indicates any threat to their safety and security,” she added, pointing to festivals, fetes, and government-supported activities taking place across the country.

Small hotels, procurement and policy gap

Outside the Carnival window, Aleong said many small properties continue to struggle with inconsistent bookings and lost traditional business.

The Small Tourism Accommodation Owners currently represents 20 properties and nine affiliate members. That number has declined since the pandemic, as operators reassessed their business models.

“We’re on an ongoing membership drive because we’ve lost members for different reasons,” Aleong explained.

“Post-COVID, some have changed their business models, and others are doing different types of business with their property.”

She also raised concerns about the redirection of Carnival-related bookings away from small properties.

“Some small properties that would normally receive bookings from Carnival entities like pan groups have not received those bookings this year,” she noted.

“They are being redirected to the larger hotels, which we find very strange.”

Aleong questioned how this aligns with the Government’s recently launched buy-local campaign.

“If you’re talking about buy-local, it has to be true to its name,” she argued. “That includes services. It should include small, traditional, authentic accommodation facilities.”

Procurement rules, she believes, remain a significant barrier. Many small accommodation providers are not registered with the Office of Procurement Regulation, limiting their ability to secure government bookings.

“If a ministry wants to pay for accommodation in a small property, that property has to be on the Office of Procurement Regulation (OPR) register,” Aleong explained.

“A lot of people are not registered, and there isn’t enough support to help them get there.”

She also pointed to the absence of regulatory frameworks governing accommodation providers in Trinidad.

“There is no law governing the establishment of a small accommodation facility,” she said. “That’s why the previous administration started the process of a tourism authority and national tourism policy.”

While Tobago operates a certification programme through the Bureau of Standards, Aleong noted that the same system is not functioning in Trinidad due to the absence of a memorandum of understanding with Tourism Trinidad Limited.

“There was an MOU in the past that allowed properties to be voluntarily certified. That is not in place now,” she said.

Without regulation, certification, or consistent procurement access, Aleong believes the playing field remains uneven, particularly during high-demand periods like Carnival.

“There is no law to manage the sector,” she said. “Until that changes, small accommodation providers will continue to feel the squeeze, even when the country is full.”

Despite the challenges, she remains hopeful that policy clarity and structured engagement can still emerge, ensuring that the benefits of T&T’s biggest festival extend beyond the city centre and into the wider tourism economy.