



MOUNT IRVINE BAY RESORT

HISTORY OF MOUNT IRVINE BAY RESORT

The Mount Irvine Bay Resort is one of the most iconic properties in the Caribbean. The land on which the resort is built has a rich history stretching back to the 1600s when the Courlanders (ancestors of modern day Latvians) settled in the area and built a fort at Mt Irvine. By the mid to late 1600s, in addition to Courlanders, Mt Irvine was home to German and Scandinavian settlers. Amerindian tribes inhabited Tobago hundreds of years before Europeans arrived but it is unclear if they had established settlements in the Mt Irvine area.

The French, Dutch and British governments made repeated efforts to claim Tobago. The English captured Tobago in 1762 and the **Treaty of Paris** ceded it to Britain in 1763.

In 1764 land commissioners arrived in Tobago from England to sell lands for the establishment of plantations. Brothers Joseph and Richard Steele purchased a 500-acre parcel of land and called it Steeletown Estate. This is the land on which the resort now stands.

Steeletowne was a successful sugar plantation, surviving a slave revolt in 1771 when resistors occupied the Steeltowne Great House, forcing the Manager and Overseer to flee. However, the cultivation of sugarcane was abandoned in 1775, because of crop devastation by millions of ants. Cotton was planted instead. The population of Tobago at that time was about 2,300 whites, 1,050 free people of colour, and 10,800 African slaves.

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Sugar production resumed in Tobago in the late 1700s and thrived until the late 1800s. The phrase “As rich as a Tobago planter” was coined during this period and used in the British Houses of Parliament. Steeletown suffered extensive damage during a hurricane on October 11th 1847, losing 37 houses and incurring £1600 in losses.

In 1862, Steeletowne, now known as the Mt Irvine Estate, was sold to Briton Lord Douglas. He built the sugar mill around which the hotel’s main restaurant is located today. When it was a working sugar mill, it was the largest on the island. The sugar storage house and shipping facility were located at Mt Irvine Bay. The hotel’s beach facility is built off the foundations of this shipping facility and the original walls are still visible. Remnants of Mount Irvine Bay Resort’s sugar heritage can be seen throughout the grounds today in the form of sugar boilers, sugar hoppers, cannons, aqueducts, water tanks, sugar silos, and ancient walls.

Fast-forward to 1962 and the Mt Irvine Estate is a booming coconut plantation owned by Irishman Pat Coughlan. Mr. Coughlan had been settled in Tobago for many years, having made his fortune in rubber in Malaysia. On September 30th 1963 Hurricane Flora, one of the deadliest Atlantic hurricanes in recorded history, made landfall in Tobago, destroying 6250 of the 7500 houses on the island and decimating the Mt Irvine Estate’s coconut crop.

Pat Coughlan deliberated what to do with his now defunct estate. Part of it was subdivided and sold as residential plots. Eventually he decided to build a golf course. Coughlan partnered with Malaysian company Kulim Berhad and in 1968 the Mt Irvine Bay Golf Course was opened.

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The course was designed by world-renowned golf course architect Commander John Harris and is considered by many to be his finest work. The 18-hole championship golf course is carved out of 126 acres of the old coconut plantation and features spectacular views of the Caribbean Sea from several holes. Initially the old sugar mill served as the reception area for the golf club and a few cottages were built to accommodate golfers who wished to stay on island. At the time Tobago had no hotels; accommodation was limited to a few guesthouses.

The golf course was an instant hit and Pat Coughlan again partnered with Kulim Berhad to build the first four-star hotel in Tobago. The Mt Irvine Bay Hotel & Golf Club was opened in 1972. The hotel's green and white logo was a Malaysian palm and two shamrocks.

During the construction of the hotel, many artifacts were unearthed dating back to the land's previous occupiers. Some of these items are now in the Tobago Museum. The hotel's staff quarters were built on the slaves' graveyard leading some to believe that the area might be haunted. Indeed, a skeleton was found during construction.

The Mt Irvine Bay Hotel & Golf Club had 104 rooms, a spa, night club, two tennis courts, and the largest pool on the island at that time. It quickly became a favourite with the international jet set, particularly European travellers, and was used as a location for Hollywood movies.

In 1979 Pat Coughlan sold his interest in the hotel to Kulim Berhad and the hotel became wholly Malaysian owned. The Coughlan family maintains close ties with the hotel up to this day. In 2018 Pat Coughlan's granddaughter and great

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granddaughters stayed at the hotel and met some of the present owners, members of the Yorke-Westcott family.

By the early 1980s, although the hotel continued to be successful, the Malaysians had grown weary of managing a hotel in the West Indies. They sold the hotel to Robert Yorke, a Tobagonian who had long harboured dreams of owning the property.

When Robert Yorke was a child, his father had been beaten by the overseer of the Mt Irvine Estate after being refused a job on the estate. Yorke senior, like most Tobagonians, was banned from entering the estate. Only persons working on the estate were allowed to set foot on Mt Irvine land. This incident made a lasting impression on young Robert.

Robert Yorke went on to make his fortune in steel fabrication and construction. When the opportunity to purchase Mt Irvine Bay Hotel & Golf Club arose, he did not hesitate. Carlos Dillon, who was at the time a director of the hotel and remains so to this day, travelled to Malaysia with Mr. Yorke to complete the purchase.

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of the hotel, Robert Yorke added the Porte Cochère at the entrance to the hotel and the Beau Rivage, a fine dining restaurant at the golf club in 1994. The hotel and golf club continued to win awards and host prestigious tournaments throughout the 1990s. The world's best professional and amateur golfers flocked to the golf course while celebrities vacationed at the hotel.

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Tobago's international tourist arrivals began to decline after 2006 and the fortunes of the hotel along with it. By 2014 the hotel had very low occupancy and was in need of a facelift. With the death of Robert Yorke in 2015, ownership of the hotel passed to his daughter and grandchildren. Robert Yorke's daughter became the new Chairman of the hotel and the decision was taken to renovate and rebrand the hotel as a four star luxury resort.

Thus in 2015 Mount Irvine Bay Resort was born. The new logo represents the lobby roof viewed from underneath. The hotel's board of directors engaged the internationally recognised Brian MacFarlane Design Studios to transform the public areas, creating an inviting oasis unrivalled on the island.

Over a period of eighteen months, all categories of accommodation were upgraded to offer the modern traveller the best in comfort and style while retaining a Caribbean theme throughout. Some areas of the hotel were scaled back to offer a more intimate boutique feel. With the creation of new dining and drinking spaces with a concentration on service excellence, Mount Irvine Bay Resort immediately raised the bar on quality customer experiences.

Destination Wedding and Honeymoons Abroad (DWHM) Magazine named Mount Irvine Bay Resort the best Caribbean Honeymoon Destination in 2017 and 2018. We were delighted to be featured as one of five honeymoon destinations in a special 2018 Royal Wedding edition of the magazine. World Travel Awards named Mount Irvine Bay Resort Tobago's Leading Resort in 2021.

Hand in hand with the hotel upgrade, the golf course has been restored to its former glory as the best golf course on the island. World Golf Awards named the Mount Irvine Golf Course the Best Golf Course in Trinidad and Tobago for

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eight consecutive years starting in 2015. Mount Irvine Bay Resort also won the 2017 trophies for Best Golf Hotel in Trinidad and Tobago, and the Best Golf Hotel in the Caribbean, beating eight regional contenders in this category.

Today Mount Irvine Bay Resort operates as an 80-room boutique hotel suitable for destination weddings and honeymoons, meetings and conferences, and vacations. It is the only hotel in Tobago certified by both CARPHA (Caribbean Public Health Agency) and the World Travel and Tourism Council as safe for travel with respect to its covid-19 policies and procedures.

From the sugar cane sculptures in the lobby to the carefully selected artwork, homage is paid to the land's plantation past. Few Caribbean hotels can claim such a rich history. Mount Irvine Bay Resort is the Grande Old Dame of Tobago – regal, resilient, resplendent.

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