

Clockwise from right: Family matriarch Savitri Deonaire pauses to pose while cooking a Divali feast; celebrations take place nightly at Divali Nagar, a bazaar where visitors can sample Indian food, music and crafts; split-pea flour is soon to become *sahina* in Deonaire's capable hands.



JON WHITTLE (3)

A Passage to India, West

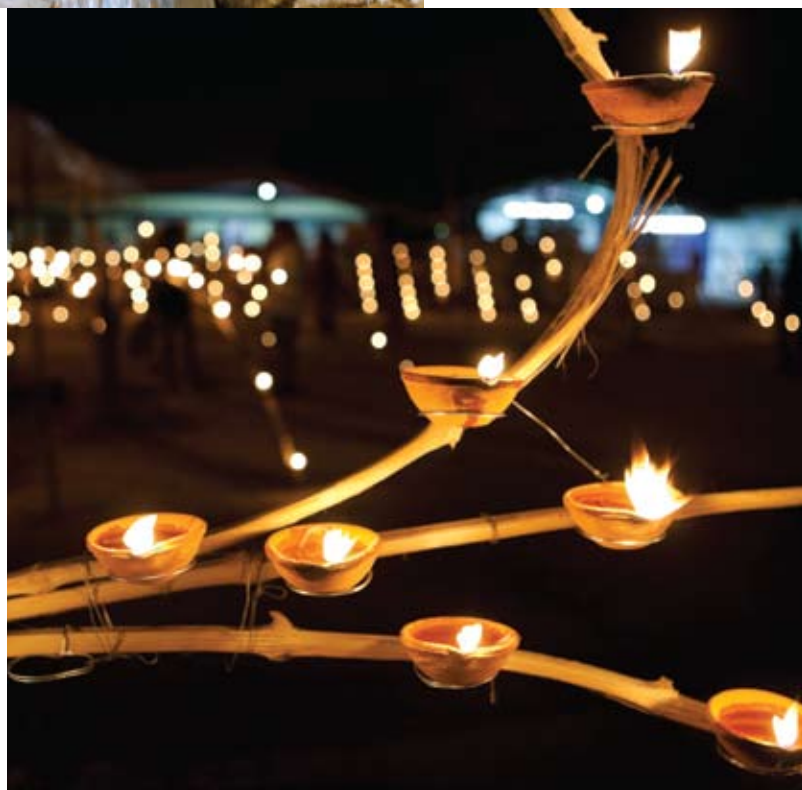
On **Trinidad**, the Hindu festival of lights illuminates a community's history.

WHOLE CORIANDER AND CUMIN SEEDS CRACKLE and hiss as they hit the hot oil, and the air is thick with the smell of onions frying. Savitri Deonaire is perched on a wooden stool in her covered backyard, stirring a pot over a small propane stove. It's impossible to tell her age at a glance; the Deonaire family matriarch could be 60, 70, even 80, with her white hair mostly hidden under a handkerchief and her warm-brown, deep-set eyes both wise and youthful. Her only concession to technology is a mini food processor, which whirs away as it chops the ingredients for the chutney we'll use liberally during tonight's feast celebrating the eve of the traditional Indian festival of Divali.

Deonaire's daughters are inside, rolling out chapati after chapati, cooking the Indian flatbread directly atop the oven's gas flame. Her son and grandson bustle nearby, setting the table, chopping greens, making conversation. In the five generations since the family arrived on Trinidad from India, they and others have kept their native traditions alive, and I'm about to reap the »



Clockwise from left: All the wares, from water pitchers to *deyas*, are made by hand at Radhika's Pottery in Chaguanas; water vessels awaiting the kiln; in a park in Felicity, *deyas* mounted on lengths of bamboo set Divali night aglow.



Light the Night The word *divali* derives from the Sanskrit word *deepavali*, meaning a row of lamps, which you'll see everywhere you go during the holiday. These petite red-clay *deyas*, filled with oil and a small wick, are lit en masse on the third night of Divali in a ceremony of prayer, or *pooja*, to honor Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of light. Pick up some *deyas* at Radhika's Pottery, in Chaguanas, which churns out 30,000 of the 170,000 the island produces from local clay each year for the celebration.

rewards. As preparations wind down, we all sit together and say a prayer of thanks for the feast, which is spread before us on banana leaves the size of lunch trays.

I love India: the Technicolor saris, the scents of cumin, nutmeg, coriander and turmeric hanging in the air, the swirl and sound of humanity and all its accouterments in every public space. And India's influence is everywhere here on Trinidad, a cultural *mélange* of an island tucked seven miles off the coast of Venezuela. Nearly half of the 1.3 million residents can trace their lineage back to the Asian subcontinent, from where they began arriving as indentured laborers on sugar plantations in 1845. By the time the diaspora ended in 1917, roughly 134,000 Indians had made the journey, and after their seven-year term of service was complete, most stayed to build lives here. Accompanying them, of course, were India's riotously colorful festivals, primary among them Divali.

The festival atop most everyone's Trinidad wish list is surely raucous Carnival, but mine has always been Divali, or Diwali, as it's known elsewhere. And while most Caribbophiles are familiar with the former, Divali is still largely unknown, even to most Trini-bound travelers. The annual Hindu festival of lights is a five-day affair each autumn, with days dedicated to themes such as happiness, love and family. The third day, Divali itself, is held on the darkest night of the year and celebrates the goddess Lakshmi and the triumph of light over darkness with the lighting of thousands of *deyas* (see sidebar). Fortunately for me, families such as the Deonaires often open their homes to visitors on tours during the festival, giving outsiders a taste of how the holiday is celebrated hearthside.

The next night — Divali proper — I find myself in a traditional Indian outfit: a hot-pink *salwar kameez* pantsuit embellished with dime-size mirrors and embroidered throughout with metallic gold thread. The epicenter of the island's festivities is in the north-central village of Felicity — aptly named, as I can hardly take a step without a stranger wishing me a *shubh* (blessed) Divali. One entire street, lined on each side with modest homes, gives itself over to decoration each year, streamers



Clockwise from left: Made-from-scratch chapati will soak up the meal's luxuriant sauce; a little girl shows off her finery on Divali night in Felicity; in the Deonaire home, sahina awaits the fryer.



and fairy lights competing for attention with the coconut-oil-filled clay deyas lit on every corner, on every ledge and in every courtyard and climbing bamboo sculptures that fill a public park. I weave through the beaming crowd and am given a candle to light some deyas of my own; I offer up silent thanks to my hosts and my good fortune at being present for the joyous celebration. Families parade up and down the road in their finest kurtas and saris and *salwars*, and I'm again invited into someone's home to partake of the Divali feast. As the sun continues to fade and the lights of the celebration glow in its place, I am thankful also for this amazing convergence: Warm island hospitality has joined seamlessly with heady Indian spirituality to make this a Caribbean festival, and not one only for Indians or Hindus. As my hosts clear the last of the banana leaves from the table, it seems that here on Trinidad, the whole island lights up to ward off the darkness. — BECKY STRAUSS

✦ *Experience Divali from Oct. 31 to Nov. 7 with Gail's Exclusive Tour Services Ltd. Book a seven-night, eight-day all-inclusive stay, including your own Indian garb and tours of the island's sights, from \$1,500 per person. Or get a taste of the festival for a day for \$75 per person. gailsexclusivetours.com*

The Dish on Divali

Trini Hindus seem to have lucked out in the holiday-dish department — where we get fruitcake, they get *sahina*, a flavorful dumpling seasoned with saffron and studded with dasheen, a common West Indian green. It's a standout dish among standout dishes, traditionally served upon banana leaves during Divali. Though most Hindus are vegetarians year-round, many Trinidadians have relaxed the practice and eat meat or fish occasionally. During

alcohol- and meat-free Divali, though, tradition is observed, and all the dishes, combinations of Indian and West Indian ingredients, are strictly vegetarian. Try spreading *ancha*, a spicy mango chutney, on your chapati, or Indian flatbread, and finish off the meal with a bite of *parsad*, a dessert made with condensed milk, sugar and cream of wheat.

Make it at Home // Savitri Deonaire's *Sahina* // 6 large dasheen leaves (may substitute

spinach) // 1 lime // ¼ cup water // 2 cups ground split-pea flour // 2 cloves garlic, minced // ¼ cup onions, finely chopped // 1 bunch chives, finely chopped // 1 tbsp. saffron or turmeric // 2 tsp. salt // pepper to taste // ¼ cup all-purpose flour, seasoned with salt and pepper // vegetable oil for frying // Remove the stems of the dasheen leaves, and wash leaves with lime juice and water. (If substituting spinach leaves, skip this step.) Mix the split-pea flour, all-purpose flour, garlic,

onions, chives, saffron, salt and pepper with enough water to make a spreadable batter. Lay a sheet of heatproof cling wrap on a work surface. Spread a thin layer of batter onto the cling wrap. Place a dasheen or spinach leaf on top, and spread on another layer of batter. Repeat until all the leaves are stacked, ending with a layer of batter on top. Wrap the cling film all the way round, rolling the stacked leaves into a sausage shape like a jellyroll. Twist the ends of

the cling wrap to secure. Heat water in a double boiler or steamer. Cut the *sahina* in half to fit in the pan if need be, and wrap with another layer of cling wrap. Tie both ends tightly. Steam for 15 minutes, then let cool. Unwrap the *sahina*, and cut into 1-inch-thick slices. Coat with seasoned flour, shake off excess, and deep-fry in hot oil until golden brown. Drain with a slotted spoon, and pat off any excess oil on a paper towel or brown paper bag. Serve immediately.