

Caribbean Tourism: A New Era Or More Of The Same? - By Bevan Springer

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Despite the serious challenges facing the Caribbean's tourism industry, from new passport regulations to a slowdown in the United States economy, the Caribbean region can be cautiously optimistic about its future as leaders begin to pay greater attention to this, the Caribbean's basic industry.

Tourism, now acknowledged as the lifeblood of the region's economy, has always played an important role in generating precious foreign exchange revenues, and has become even more essential with the marginalization of traditional staples like sugar and bananas in an era of trade liberalization.

At the recent Caribbean Marketplace on Paradise Island in the Bahamas, Bahamian Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham, the new chairman of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), made a resounding call to protect, preserve, expand and improve Caribbean tourism which now is expected to take a more prominent role at Heads of Government meetings.

On the face of it, the intricacies of the industry are now better understood, but is it just more rhetoric or is it music to the ears of officials in the private sector, who for years have bemoaned the apparent slighting of the industry by the political directorate?

When CARICOM Heads of Government meet this Summer, the agenda fixing meeting in the Bahamas this weekend at the Heads' 19th Inter-Sessional Meeting envisaged a one-day meeting on tourism. The intention is to make tourism a permanent fixture at all CARICOM meetings and not just to discuss it when the industry is in deep crisis.

The new priorities can be attributed not only to the experience of Prime Minister Ingraham who recently returned to power in the northern Caribbean nation, but to another son of the Bahamas, Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, who is using his rich experience of directing the Bahamian tourism revival to help transform the region as the new Secretary General of the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO), a regional organisation which represents Caribbean governments.

Together with St. Lucia's Tourism Minister, Senator Allen Chastanet, now CTO's chairman, they have been successful in restructuring CTO's Board to have Ministers of Tourism meet separately and apart from directors, thereby distinguishing the crafting of regional policy from its implementation.

At least that's the intention of the restructuring and, despite our Caribbean propensity to renege on regional commitments when we localise our politics, we must hope our tourism officials will stick to their guns and commit resources to regional branding efforts as they meet their national priorities.

"There is a heavy Government involvement in tourism development, but Governments are not designed to be innovative. Governments are designed to follow rules. In fact, Governments make it very hard - if you don't follow the rules, they will make sure they shut you down very quickly," said Vanderpool-Wallace at the 11th full edition of Counterpart International's Caribbean Media Exchange on Sustainable Tourism (CMEx) last December in St. Lucia.

"The problem is that a lot of the people who are in the high positions in Government are the people who followed the rules in order to get there, so they require everybody else to follow similar rules. So there is a systematic aversion to changing things in Government, when we are talking about being a great deal more innovative in doing some of these things."

Given this reality, Vanderpool-Wallace, Senator Chastanet and their colleagues in the public and private sector deserve laurels for their creation of the Caribbean Tourism Development Company (CTDC), a for-profit marketing and business development unit owned equally by the CTO and CHA.

Top on its agenda is a groundbreaking conference in Washington, DC in June to focus on the economic future of the Caribbean region.

"It's no secret that tourism is a pivotal industry for the Caribbean," said Allen Chastanet, who shares the chairmanship of CTDC with Barbadian Peter Odle, CHA's president. "It's also no coincidence that we're holding the summit in the national capital of our largest source of business, the United States. This will be a time when all investors, political and tourism influencers will be called upon to help the Caribbean get on the path to realizing its economic potential."

But will it be another talk shop or can CTDC in fact transform the thinking of Caribbean people beyond the reefs of our individual island homes?

Vanderpool-Wallace appears optimistic. "I have come to understand through the years that no great story ever began without the word 'despite'. Despite the forces that we see in government, despite the forces that we see in our small societies and despite the forces that we see in our educational systems, I see the beginnings of an age of enlightenment and innovation emerging in Caribbean tourism."

In spite of today's challenges, tourism remains one of the most resilient industries in the region and the world, and it is especially important to the economies of small island developing states. The industry in fact represents the largest voluntary transfer of resources from the rich to the not-so-rich in history.

British tourists for example, bring, and leave, more cash in the Caribbean than the British government gives in development assistance and aid.

With the vision articulated, will the Caribbean step up to the wicket to take a greater market share in one of the world's powerful industries? We can only guess, but we should also hope.

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