

Jamaica Leads Caribbean Out of Tourism Recession

With recovery in the Caribbean tourism sector now well established, travellers from around the world have been flocking to the region.

Leading the way has been the luxury destination of Jamaica with Tourism Minister, the Hon Ed Bartlett, charting the course of a remarkable recovery along with colleagues at the Jamaica Tourist Board (JTB). Despite a global drop in the number of holiday travellers, Jamaica has managed not only to keep but to raise its market share, posting worldwide visitor figures that show a 3.6 per cent rise earlier this year. The island welcomed approximately 1.3 million visitors between January and August this year. Not that the recovery has been easy. Fears over crime and the merger of Air Jamaica with rival Caribbean Air, in addition to the global tourism slowdown, are just some of the challenges which have recently been overcome by the island. But, as the destination continues to lead the Caribbean out of recession, the question is, what has led to the success? Among recent trends has been its emergence as a regional hub for aviation in the Caribbean. Air Jamaica's merger with Caribbean Air has created the largest carrier in the region, with the new airline now offering unrivalled access to a host of destinations. Caribbean Air has also been joined by Bahamas-owned Western Air, in offering flights to the island. Mr. Bartlett has welcomed the additional capacity. "Getting connectivity to a destination is the essence of the ability of that destination to remain attractive," he explained. "It's no good to have a beautiful, alluring, exciting, enchanting destination with attractions galore, if nobody can get there. Being able to connect to the destination, through airlift, is a very critical part of the strategy that we have adopted to grow tourism in Jamaica," he added. The problems with the United Kingdom's Air Passenger Duty persist however, with Mr. Bartlett visiting the UK this week to lobby the government over proposed changes to the levy. With the arrest of Christopher 'Dudus' Coke dominating headlines around the world earlier this year, the spotlight was inevitably turned on the safety of visitors to Jamaica. However, Mr. Bartlett is quick to reassure holidaymakers. "Every effort has to be made, all around. We in the Caribbean are challenged, because we have had narcotics issues and other anti-social acts which have overtaken us based on, sometimes, the sheer struggle that we have to emerge out of poverty," the Minister stated. "But, notwithstanding that, because tourism offers a great opportunity for job creation, we have to ensure that the visitors who come are safe, and all the necessary arrangements that have to be put in place ensure visitors feel comfortable all the while," he said. The Caribbean is uniquely positioned between the largest exporters of controlled substances, South America, and the largest importers, the United States, making control of the illegal trade of drugs a real challenge for authorities. What can change, however, is global reporting of the problems experienced in Jamaica. During the height of the Coke affair, numerous media outlets were willing to give the impression Jamaica was under lockdown, when in reality a small proportion of the capital Kingston saw a state of emergency. Tourist beaches, some four of five hours travel away, were completely unaffected. A recent marketing campaign has also begun to repair the damage to Jamaica's reputation. Looking to the autumn holiday season, Mr. Bartlett remained "cautiously optimistic", with Jamaica expected to attract a total of 1.9 million arrivals by year end. "We continue to market destination Jamaica in a strong way. We are very pleased that we have recovered, to a large extent, from the limited state of emergency and the problems that emanated from it," he said. Mr. Bartlett also noted that, while the number of visitors expected was approximately 100,000 less than originally projected, the new figure of 1.9 million by year end would be the highest number of arrivals the country has ever seen in one year. JTB chairman, John Lynch, was also positive about the future, outlining the board's marketing strategy ahead of the season. He explained the JTB would be flying in about 2,000 travel agents during September, to get a first hand look at what Jamaica has to offer. Marketing blitzes have also been planned for Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Mr. Lynch also confirmed that television advertisements in the overseas markets will also resume in October. "Jamaica is, undoubtedly, the best product in the Caribbean, in terms of things to do and the condition of the hotels. The private sector has really done their job, so this is really a great destination," he argued. Following a run of unprecedented successes, Jamaica is preparing for the World Travel Awards in October. The event will see industry leaders from across the region compete for some of the most prestigious prizes offered in the tourism sector.