

Caribbean is top tourism destination

For the first time ever, the pace of growth of Caribbean tourism outperformed every major tourism region in the world.

"Caribbean tourism grew by an estimated seven per cent to 28.7 million visits, much higher than the projected four to five per cent," the Caribbean Tourism Organisation's secretary general, Hugh Riley, told journalists yesterday morning in Barbados during the State of the Industry press conference. This performance, he said, was above the global rate of growth, which the UN agency, the World Tourism Organization, quotes at 4.4 per cent. "Our region has set new arrival and spend records in 2015, far surpassing expectations," he added, pointing out that in that period, visitors spent over a billion dollars more than they did in 2014, contributing approximately US\$30 billion to Caribbean economies. "That's 4.2 per cent higher than the US\$28.8 billion spent during the previous year," he stated. 2015 is the second year in a row that the region has done better than the rest of the world, and the sixth consecutive year of growth for the Caribbean. Riley said this solid performance by the Caribbean was based on several factors, not least of which was the sustained demand from major source markets. "The region benefited from a rise in consumer confidence in the United States where a strong dollar encouraged outbound travel among Americans. Other factors include increased air capacity and persistent marketing by many Caribbean destinations and resorts plying for business in the United States." The US remains the region's largest source market, up 6.3 per cent at 14.3 million, with Canada placing a far second, up 4.5 per cent at 3.4 million visitors, and the UK holding a solid 10.1 per cent growth at just over one million. The United States accounted for approximately 50 per cent of all arrivals, while Canada's total share dropped marginally from 12.1 per cent to 11.8 per cent, said the CTO secretary general. "The European market made significant gains in 2015, recording its best performance in seven years," said Riley. Unlike stay-over visits, the cruise sector's performance was not as robust, although there was a rise compared to 2014. Demand for Caribbean cruises was relatively high in the first four months of the year, averaging a 4.8 per cent rise. There were strong gains also of 3.5 per cent in June and 3.8 per cent in November, he stated. However, this stout performance was undermined by declines in the summer months associated with the traditional redeployment of vessels away from the region. "Consequently, there were an estimated 24.4 million cruise visits in 2015, an increase of 1.3 per cent over 2014." Jamaica, Grenada, Martinique, Antigua and Barbuda, and the British Virgin Islands were the only countries that recorded double-digit growth in cruise passenger arrivals.