



Strengthening the Caribbean in the world tourism market

Victorin Lurel, President, Regional Council of Guadeloupe (RCG)

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Implementing a real cooperation policy in the Caribbean with regard to tourism may seem paradoxical. Indeed, tourism is one of the economic sectors where competition is fierce and every country in the area could logically be tempted to keep the benefit from its assets to itself. However, Guadeloupe has rightly made the choice, since 2004, to undertake regional cooperation actions in this field with its neighbours.

The Caribbean has in fact for decades been one of the world's main tourist centres. But for all that, as we are well aware – and even more so since the events of 11 September 2001 – positions in the international tourism market are very fragile. It takes very little for one part of the world, however attractive it may be, to find itself on the receiving end of a certain loss of interest or to suffer as a result of the rise of a rival zone. Consequently, cooperation becomes a route enabling the attractiveness of the Caribbean basin to be reinforced and I am convinced that rather than competing with one another, we must see ourselves as competing with Southeast Asia, the Middle and Near East or even the countries of southern Europe. And if cooperation must have an aim, it is precisely that of enabling us, together, to make the most of the wealth of attractions and cultures of our islands, and to promote sustainable tourism, which respects social and environmental equilibriums. We must be in no doubt about this: when the Caribbean scores points, it is all the territories of which it is composed which benefit from the positive dynamics.

The ACS is in this respect the major partner in this strategy and that is why, since my election in 2004, I have persistently tried to further involve Guadeloupe in this necessary, common task, in tourism and in other fields, redirecting our efforts towards economic cooperation, which will create added value and jobs, beneficial for all partners. Consequently, symbolising this increasing involvement, the Regional Council

of Guadeloupe has in turn been rapporteur of the Special Committee on Trade and Investment in 2005, then Vice-Chairman of the Special Committee on Natural Disasters in 2006 and elected Vice-Chairman of the Special Committee on Sustainable Tourism in 2007, while being rapporteur of the Special Committee on Transport.

In each of these jobs, the RCG has striven to undertake specific actions. Consequently it hosted the Business Forum of the Greater Caribbean in October 2005. It also successfully negotiated in 2006 the entry of the ACS into the working group between the European Union and the CARIFORUM/FOD/OCT group on the subject of Natural Disasters. It was also the host country for the 16th Special Committee on Transport during May 2007. And, with regard to tourism, I wanted the RCG to co-finance two far-reaching projects: a study aimed at the creation of the Centre for the promotion of languages and cultures of the Greater Caribbean and the project relating to the extension of the Caribbean's Sustainable Tourism Zone.

The question of languages in the Caribbean basin is, in fact, fundamental. And our ambition is to allow Guadeloupeans to be able to express themselves in at least two of the three most spoken languages in the Caribbean, namely French, English and Spanish. The development of the leisure society has led to increased travel to and from our archipelago and now everybody has a better understanding of how it is inconceivable to want to make Guadeloupe a major tourist destination without giving ourselves the means to have a better command of foreign languages. This ambition is aimed both at the employees of the tourism sector and the population, who are part of the quality of the welcome. Cooperation in this field with our English-speaking and Spanish-speaking neighbours is therefore naturally essential to promote language learning. And we, in return, can offer them a



window onto a French-speaking world also very fond of travel and changes of scenery. The Guadeloupe hotel and tourism school in Gosier, started up by the Regional Council of Guadeloupe, is therefore open to all partnerships with neighbouring countries to implement cross-training and teaching exchanges, like those which have arisen from the cooperation agreement concluded between the Regional Council and the province of Havana in Cuba.

Similarly, we share the vision of the other Member Countries of the ACS, which consists of envisaging the Caribbean as a geographical space which must assert itself as a Sustainable Tourism Zone, enabling investors to consider it as an area of strong potential and visitors as a safe region, capable of providing a diversified and branded offering. This Sustainable Tourism Zone may in time become a veritable brand image which would give the Caribbean an even stronger and more concrete identity than the one already in the minds of tourists the world over. Better still, it is a very realistic path towards that increase in regional integration which we all desire.

Therefore, the RCG expects these projects to network agents in the zone who are working on similar or complementary tourism problems, but who do

not necessarily know each other. The creation of new partnerships with Venezuela, Panama and Trinidad, for the Centre for the Promotion of Languages and Cultures of the Greater Caribbean, and with Tobago and St Vincent, for the Sustainable Tourism Zone, looks promising. Those two projects are co-financed up to €162,000 by community funds, of which €100,000 comes from the Guadeloupe Region's own resources. The European Union, through its structural funds and through the Regional Cooperation Fund, was approached for the Languages Centre, and the Sustainable Tourism Zone project, for its part, comes within the framework of the INTERREG IIIB "Caribbean Space" programme. The principal objective of all these programmes is to enable the French Overseas Departments to finance their participation in cooperation actions in relation to the Caribbean zone and they find in that a particularly exciting aim of contributing to strengthening the weight of the Caribbean and its territories in world tourism.

But we can go even further in cooperation and integration in the tourism field by raising the stakes of multi-destination tourism and, through the ACS, by building inter-institutional partnerships through campaigns to promote the Caribbean tourism space. Guadeloupe has begun exploring that avenue with

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several of its neighbours, aware of the tremendous potential we have extracted from our status as an archipelago composed of seven islands (Basse-Terre, Grande-Terre, les Saintes, La Désirade, Marie-Galante, Saint-Martin and Saint Barthélemy). This mini-basin has enabled us to create a rich tourism product incorporating the sea and the mountains, ecotourism and seaside tourism, luxury and authenticity, water sports and diving. These seven islands have seven very particular characteristics for which Guadeloupe is famous. Such an approach may prove equally positive by building a multi-destination offering between neighbouring islands which are at the same time so geographically close and yet so different through their topology, culture and the activities offered there. Together with Dominica and Antigua, we have undertaken this task of defining an innovative tourism offering and it is, for us, the symbol of a win-win cooperation.

Such an approach, however, assumes that other efforts at cooperation will be intensified, in particular regarding inter-Caribbean transport, without which the scope of these initiatives will inevitably be limited. Regulation and development of air and maritime links between our islands is indeed one of the conditions

for intensification of regional cooperation. We know, moreover, that coordination of actions is not always easy, as the operating mechanisms of community institutions and funds do not always match those of the rest of the Caribbean, and that makes the implementation of our projects complex. That is why I ask for the favouring of the emergence of a veritable projects engineering centre which would make functional cooperation between the Secretariat of the ACS and the RCG more operational.

Together, we have already produced some fine achievements. The “Digital Guadeloupe” high speed undersea telecommunications cable, initiated by the RCG, has allowed the undertaking of a real digital roll-out policy for the Caribbean, from North to South, financed by European and international institutions funds. Other projects are beckoning us in the fields of not only tourism, but also energy and transport, to say nothing of the Economic Partnership Agreements which now link us ever more closely. In a few years, a new level has been reached regarding regional integration and cooperation. The responsibility is on us to enable our companies and people to appreciate the improvements brought into their activities and lives by this choice for the future. ■

The diversity found in the seven islands of the Guadeloupe archipelago has enabled the Region to create a rich tourism product

