

REFLECTIONS ON TOBAGO'S TOURISM CHALLENGES

PREPARING FOR A REBIRTH OF PARADISE

In May 1956, an aircraft transporting screen stars Robert Mitchum and Rita Hayworth touched down at Crown Point International Airport in driving rain to begin the filming of *Fire Down Below*. It was a momentous day for Tobago and it signalled a turning point in the attitude of Tobagonians, and some Trinidadians as well, towards the value of tourism to the country's economy.

During the making of the film, taxi drivers, tradesmen, fishermen, boat owners and suppliers both in Trinidad and Tobago benefited from the financial opportunities that arose. Hundreds of residents were hired as "extras" on the set. Three major hotels – Bacolet Inn, Robinson Crusoe Hotel and Blue Haven Hotel that together aggregated about 80 rooms – were fully booked; and the few guest houses were also used to accommodate crew and technical film personnel.

When the movie was released in 1957, it introduced the world to a Caribbean destination hitherto unknown. The message was clear: Tobago was a beautiful and pristine island paradise; it was home to a warm and inviting population; and

it was a place where excellent service delivery at all levels was commonplace. The production of *Fire Down Below*, in a real sense, marked the beginning of Tobago's tourism industry.

In the years that followed, tourism in Tobago experienced steady progress. The island possessed a thriving tourism product and recorded robust arrival figures, despite the ravages of Hurricane "Flora" in 1963 and the social unrests of 1970 and 1990. Between 1958 and 1990, four major hotels were constructed, providing approximately 500 new rooms to the island's accommodation inventory. During the period from 1971 to 1990, a further five hotels provided an additional 221 rooms to the island.

Indeed, the industry became the backbone of Tobago's economy. Between 1991 and 2012, an additional four hotels came on stream with approximately 450 rooms and over 2,000 small hotel, guest house and host home rooms were added to the destination's accommodation inventory. Additionally, by 2005, the island benefited from increases in international arrivals by 77.5 per cent within a five year period.



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A taste of Belle dancing
at the indigenous Tobago
goat racing, Buccoo
Integrated Facility

While Tobago has recorded decreases in its international arrivals, its overall visitor arrival numbers have significantly increased over the period 2003-10

The quiet, sleepy coastline of Charlotteville



Like many other Caribbean destinations however, Tobago's tourism sector suffered a decline in recent years. Outbreaks of SARS and Bird Flu, the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, global economic meltdown, as well as several natural disasters in the Caribbean, placed a strain on the industry, while crimes against visitors further eroded the destination's image.

To counteract these effects, the Tobago House of Assembly, through the Division of Tourism and Transportation, has been taking measures to identify problem areas and provide strategic solutions to sustain the industry. The standardisation and improvement of the island's small property room stock was identified as a priority. As a result, the Division launched the Small Property Assistance Programme – a pilot project aimed at elevating smaller properties to three-star quality. Six properties were identified for renovation in the initial stage and, when this

phase is complete, 100 additional marketable rooms will become available.

With the primary goal being to increase visitor spend on the island, the issue of high-end rooms also needs to be addressed. It is imperative that more first class seats on international flights are utilised, but the island must be able to provide appropriate accommodations for this affluent demographic. Several airlines have expressed interest in increasing existing frequencies to the A.N.R. Robinson International Airport, while others are keen to initiate flights to the island, but these plans hinge on Tobago's ability to offer sufficient high-end room stock. In order to encourage investment in the tourism industry, the Tourism Development Act, 2000 was introduced to provide incentives in the development of the sector. The recently introduced Loan Guarantee Programme and Roll Out Plan undertaken with the support of the EXIM Bank will further facilitate the physical improvement of the tourism plant.

Improving the island's room stock is not a panacea for the hurdles faced by tourism practitioners, however. Quality service remains a priority in an industry that relies heavily on customer satisfaction as an effective form of advertising. To this day, Tobago's reputation for excellent service has allowed certain properties on the island to enjoy repeat visitor figures in the region of 80 per cent. It is therefore a great cause for concern when one only has to peruse popular travel sites like Trip Advisor to read the negative reviews that have been tarnishing the destination's good name over the last few years.

Admittedly, tourism in Tobago is afflicted by a shortage of trained and experienced workers. A survey conducted on employment conditions in the sector indicated that wages and working conditions are far from satisfactory. Industry workers are therefore easily enticed away from these jobs by less onerous, better paying forms

of employment, while those that remain can afford to pay little or no attention to quality service as there is a high demand for labour. To address this critical shortage, several properties have turned to the Philippines, Guyana and other foreign countries for suitable labour but the introduction of foreign staff creates a new set of challenges. To its credit, the Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute (THTI) has been doing its part to provide a long-term solution by producing well-trained graduates in a variety of relevant fields. But tourism's private sector must exercise greater creative and innovative initiatives to improve the quality of service being offered to visitors.

Too significant to be ignored, crime has also contributed to the decline. In 2005, a spate of serious crimes against visitors resulted in a significant decline in international arrivals. These incidents prompted the diplomatic missions of foreign countries to tighten their travel advisories for Tobago. The effects of such advisories were not experienced immediately as many visitors would already have booked and paid for their holidays. Instead, the repercussions were felt in the years that followed and the island has yet to recover, even though there has been little or no crime involving visitors on the island in recent years

However, while Tobago has recorded decreases in its international arrivals, its overall visitor arrival numbers have significantly increased over the period 2003 to 2010, due principally to domestic tourism. Arrivals from Trinidad continue to rise both by sea and by air. Unfortunately, the inadequacies of the air bridge service between Trinidad and Tobago frustrate Trinidadians and many affluent travellers opt to pay the exceedingly higher fares to get to other Caribbean destinations, rather than fly to Tobago. To reverse this trend, the Division of Tourism and Transportation has engaged the domestic carrier in discussions and more

recently there has been the addition of several more flights to the daily schedule.

There can be no doubt that Tobago's tourism industry faces several obstacles. Despite these challenges however, recovery has begun as a result of the collaborative efforts being taken by the THA and key stakeholders within the industry. Notwithstanding the economic chaos currently visiting major source markets, new marketing strategies hold great promise for attracting visitors. In addition, product development initiatives are being undertaken that will improve visitor experience. As Trinidad and Tobago celebrates its 50th Anniversary, the Division of Tourism and Transportation will embark on a series of promotional Road Shows throughout the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and North America, which is expected to raise the profile of Tobago as the ideal Caribbean destination. Indeed, Tobago's tourism stakeholders have every reason to move forward with optimism. ■

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Cocoa Dancing - one of the traditional ways of preparing cocoa beans for market

