

FULFILLING TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO'S TOURISM PROMISE

A DREAM STILL WAITING TO HAPPEN



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The story of Trinidad and Tobago's tourism over the last 50 years is one of unfulfilled potential and lost opportunities. With its abundance of oil and natural gas fuelling downstream energy-related projects, coupled with an initial rejection of tourism at the political level, it is really surprising that the industry has survived in even its present limited form.

Since the death of Eric Williams, who was unabashedly opposed to the development of tourism in Trinidad and Tobago, which he derided as creating a nation of bus boys, successive governments have flirted with tourism as the key to diversifying the national economy, yet each has stopped short of grasping the nettle, and taking the necessary actions to make it happen.

While Trinidad and Tobago was developing its energy-driven economy, the rest of the Caribbean was building a tourism-based future.

After the second World War, Caribbean tourism was primarily centred in Cuba, just 90 miles off the coast of the United States. Castro's 1959 revolution changed all that. Then with the advent of jets the rest of the region became accessible in hours instead of days, and the islands soon became fertile ground for the tourism explosion that was to follow.

But it was not all easy sailing, Eric Williams was not the only politician with misgivings about the tourism sector, many other Caribbean politicians also saw it as an insidious form of commercial neo-colonialism, and found it difficult to rationalise the dichotomy between service and servitude.

Recently the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA), in celebration of its own Golden Jubilee, published a definitive book on the history of Caribbean tourism, entitled *The Caribbean: from Pirates to Hoteliers*.

There are of course a number of political risks entailed in a full-blown tourism thrust.

The cost of investing in new hotels, subsidised airlift out of crucial source markets, and the use of adequate promotional funds to move Trinidad and Tobago out of the 'best kept secret' column to become a demand destination, all invite criticism from an electorate which tends to think that all such funds should be used for improvements in social services.

All industries, however, not least in the energy sector, require an initial investment to get going, but with tourism there is an upside that comes in the form of a broad range of professional employment opportunities, that offer excellent career upward mobility, not to mention extensive cross sectoral linkages, and substantial hard currency earnings.

It now seems probable that the People's Partnership, under the guidance of its newly appointed Tourism Minister, whose demonstrated outreach to key private sector tourism stakeholders, and an apparent willingness to reach beyond to external professional expertise, is ready to reignite interest in tourism, and certainly the timing could not be more opportune.

The argument of when our oil and natural gas will run out misses the point. One thing is absolutely sure, these are finite commodities and they will run out, sooner rather than later. We can only hope that there is enough lead time, and the necessary political 'cojones', to do all those things that will be necessary to establish a viable tourism industry before that happens.

As a result of Trinidad and Tobago's long held determination to remain outside the Caribbean tourism mainstream, and public skepticism about its economic relevance, there are presently very few within the country who have the knowledge, and more importantly the experience, to be deployed in any new tourism thrust. Consequently there are many who continue to doubt Trinidad's capacity to develop and operate a successful tourism sector.

TDC's current promotional efforts are

principally focused on the domestic market and the diaspora, perhaps because its easier, in contrast to the much less familiar, yet considerably more lucrative business of international travel.

To open up international tourism markets, however, all those involved will need to acknowledge that it is not our job to dictate what the visitor should have, but rather to understand what the travelling public wants, and then find a way to match what we have to fit those needs.

As a starting point we need to recognise that in Trinidad and Tobago we have two quite different products, which need to be developed and marketed independently under separate but related brands. Tobago is a quintessential Caribbean beach destination, but one that is blessed with great physical and ecological diversity, and backed by the cultural and entertainment resources of Trinidad.

The overriding problem is Tobago's lack of a critical accommodation mass with which to guarantee airlift out of its existing and potential source markets. Add another 1,500 quality hotel rooms, preferably including those international chains with recognisable brands, and access to the US, Canadian and continental European markets would rapidly become a reality, and with it a very desirable mitigation of Tobago's over-dependence on the UK market.

In addition, if a proportion of those new rooms were to fall into the luxury category it would open up a new and lucrative demographic market segment to work with. It would also add a welcome lustre to Tobago's market resonance.

By contrast, Trinidad offers a completely different array of vacation options, similar in many ways to Costa Rico, Dominica or Colombia, all of which boast an exciting range of visitor attractions based upon their cultural, physical and ecological diversity, rather than simply a beach experience.

In contrast, Trinidad, while possessed of

excellent metropolitan hotels, lacks any resorts that could be used to attract visitors to vacation here, or even to extend their business trips for a few extra days of R&R. The addition of high-end resorts with related recreational facilities on the North Coast, in Las Cuevas or Chaguaramas, for example, would completely transform Trinidad's tourism market potential.

Very few destinations, however, have ready-made attractions that do not need some embellishment, and Trinidad is no exception. The Northern Range is replete with hiking trails to wonderful waterfalls, all of which would be the better for being cleaned up, signed and made safer. In addition there are many exciting commercial opportunities for canopy



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An embarrassment of riches: one of Trinidad's many waterfalls

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walkways/tramways, with zip lines for the more adventurous, whose inclusion would only enhance the rain forest experience.

Man-made attractions are no longer the exclusive purview of Walt Disney, and are now common throughout the international tourism world – the London Eye, the water park at Atlantis, Cancun in Mexico, the Bellagio fountains in Las Vegas, and cable cars up into the Alps, the Andes, and the mountains in China for example.

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Almost all the elements of a Trinidad vacation require some measure of enhancement to make them internationally competitive, more importantly they need to be professionally managed, packaged and promoted.

Vincent Vanderpool Wallace, the Bahamian tourism visionary, accurately parodied Bill Clinton’s election saying “it’s the economy stupid” to become; “it’s the experience stupid”. That means everything that happens to the visitor from the moment they arrive to their time of departure, including the places where they stay, the restaurants where they eat, the places they visit, the things they do, and the people they meet, all are of critical importance.

Getting all that right is not rocket science, but it does require total political commitment to get all the moving parts in place. To some that may seem like a Herculean task, but it really is not. It is simply a sensible investment in a diversified economic future for Trinidad and Tobago, one that is bound to yield significant dividends in economic growth and meaningful employment for the future.

Can it be that tourism is finally about to take its proper place in Trinidad and Tobago? ■



Trinidad’s rugged and beautiful north coast

All Photographs: Stephen Broadbridge