

Tourism's cautious revolutionary

INTERVIEW WITH **STÉPHANIE BALMIR VILLEDROUIN**

MINISTER OF TOURISM, REPUBLIC OF HAITI



**STÉPHANIE
VILLEDROUIN**

graduated from Puntificio Universidad Madre y Maestra (PUCMM) in the Dominican Republic, where she studied Hotel Management and Tourism. She began her career as part of the team that opened the restored Hostal Nicolás de Ovando in Santo Domingo's colonial zone, and spent the next five years as the manager of the Hotel Le Montcel, a mountain lodge in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Kenscoff, before being appointed Minister of Tourism in 2011.

Since taking over as Haiti's Tourism Minister barely a year after the 2010 earthquake, Stéphanie Balmir Villedrouin has already made significant strides in implementing a step-by-step rebranding and rebuilding strategy for her country's travel sector that has already yielded a landmark result.

"For the first time in 23 years, Haiti is being offered as a destination by an international travel company," she says, referring to an agreement with Canadian tour operator Transat, which began offering package trips to Haiti at the end of last year. Its brochures highlight the country's rich cultural heritage, encouraging the visitor to get to know Haiti, rather than just lie on its beaches.

Ms Villedrouin says it took her the best part of a year to convince the Canadians, an example of her careful approach.

"We had just inaugurated our new airport terminal in Port-au-Prince, so I gave the people from Transat the opportunity to come to Haiti and visit two or three places. We received a lot of feedback from them, which was very helpful," she says.

She chose Canada because she knew that the country had been an important source of visitors up until the 1980s, since then Canada has also become home to

a significant number of Haiti's four-million-strong diaspora: a key target sector in her plan to make tourism a major foreign currency earner.

Ms Villedrouin, who studied hotel management in the Dominican Republic, and managed the Hotel Le Montcel, a mountain lodge in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Kenscoff for five years, says the cornerstone of her tourism masterplan is based on establishing Haiti first and foremost as a cultural destination.

This is why she took Transat's people to Jacmel, where her ministry is working on a US\$40 million tourism development project. A historic town developed in the 18th century as a coffee exporting port, Jacmel is the cultural capital of Haiti and has produced some of Haiti's best-known painters, writers and poets. Relatively unaffected by the earthquake, it remains one of the major production centres for indigenous arts and crafts.

"We took them on different excursions, to visit small islands, to visit the mountains, and they were completely convinced that Haiti has a product to offer. The visit was last November. Two months after, they launched a new package in Haiti. And we just received our first group of Canadians, in February: Just 35, but it's a start."



Life's a beach:
Anse à Pirogue,
Arтеbonite, Haiti

The deal with Transat is for one group per month, says Ms Villedrouin, saying she is more concerned about small groups of people spreading the word about Haiti's unique cultural heritage than trying to bring in large numbers of visitors, until the necessary tourism infrastructure is in place.

Half of the first group was from the Haitian diaspora. "We're working to get the second generation of Haitians living abroad to visit their country of origin. That's one of our strong markets that we're definitely trying to attract. The second part is to come up with a concept where you don't just have an all-inclusive, but rather an 'all-inclusive original,' and I think we achieved that with Transat."

Having established a presence in Canada, Ms Villedrouin says that she will turn her attention next to New York and Miami, where there are also large diaspora communities. "We have a deal with Delta, which is ready to promote Haiti on their vacation package from New York and Atlanta. Since they have this partnership with the SkyTeam alliance, with Air France, Air France has also booked some packages to go to Haiti from Miami. So I'm confident that this new partnership with the big airlines will help us increase the number of tourists. We're starting small, with three flights per month, but I'm confident that by the end of this year that will increase."

She also sees the potential of 'regional circuits', establishing an agreement with Haiti's neighbour on the island of Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic, and is in regular contact with Mexican tour operators. Regarding the UK, she is pleased that the British Embassy in Port-au-Prince is due to reopen shortly,

and sees potential in the UK market, if direct air links can be created.

Ms Villedrouin's masterplan is ambitious in its reach, but modest in its approach, she says: "In the past, Haiti's Tourism Ministers prepared master plans with big goals, but I want to start with existing facilities, and look at how to upgrade them and give them the knowledge to be competitive in the market."

She says her first objective is to develop the existing potential in the southern coast, using the hotels that are already there, and the people working in them.

"We have to meet the highest international standards, and to do that there is a need to have properly trained people. So we started with training. Last year, in January, we reopened the hotel school that had collapsed after the earthquake through a strategic partnership with the prestigious Institut de Tourisme et d'Hôtellerie in Quebec. We trained the teachers of the school, and made some strategic contacts with, for example, Amadeus. Now, we're opening the first tourism and hotel school in the south of Haiti."

She has also set about establishing quality control procedures, establishing categories for hotels, guest houses, lodges, and other accommodation. Hotels will be classed using the country's national flower, the hibiscus. "We will be harmonising service and standards in our hotels, and for the first time the sector will have a team of 21 inspectors, trained in Canada, who will monitor hotels from now on."

Ms Villedrouin has already taken steps towards rebranding the country with a new logo to help visually identify and connect with the brand, in this case a hibiscus flower with the slogan *Haiti, Experience It!*

The government's tourism masterplan is based on establishing Haiti first and foremost as a cultural destination



The hills are alive:
Haiti's Route de Seguin

The first objective is to develop the existing potential in the southern coast, using the hotels that are already there, and the people working in them

Aside from the diaspora community, many of them now second-generation, who have never visited their parents' home, Ms Villedrouin says that she will be trying to attract overseas visitors interested in a cultural experience that will put them in contact with local people, a policy that benefits communities, giving them a stake in developing the sector: "Haiti is the soul of the Caribbean. We have the added value that few of the other islands can match: we have Vodou (Voodoo), we have a unique cuisine that combines French traditions with local delicacies, and we have vibrant, friendly people. The beaches – and let's not forget that there are miles and miles of unspoiled white sands along the coast outside Jacmel – are secondary. We want people to come to Haiti and participate in life here: we can offer classes in music, in dancing, painting, cooking, and local arts and crafts like papier maché."

In her approach to developing areas like Jacmel, Côte de Fer, Chouchou Bay and Ile à Vache, Ms Villedrouin has set the following objectives: To build clusters around the attractions and sites. "We spent a lot of time looking at what was available for visitors to do and see near their hotels. We identified five or six sites per region. And then we had to develop the infrastructure to allow people access – after all, even

the most spectacular waterfall is not a tourism area until you have built the infrastructure and amenities that visitors require."

The appointment of Ms Villedrouin signals a clear change in Haiti's approach to developing its tourism sector, which, despite the efforts of successive governments over recent decades, has traditionally contributed only a small fraction to the nation's GDP. The most recent data, for 2006, puts the figure at 2.5 per cent – in the same year, the number was around 11 per cent for its neighbour, the Dominican Republic. The DR receives around four million visitors a year, while estimates for Haiti before the earthquake – when tourism was slowly taking off – were around 900,000, but most visitors came aboard Caribbean cruise ships, and spent little time and money on the island. In Aruba, by contrast, tourism makes up as much as 80 per cent of GDP. But in both Aruba and the Dominican Republic, the private sector plays a key role in the tourism sector.

For that to happen in Haiti, says Ms Villedrouin, the government must continue to rebuild and repair infrastructure, while her ministry presses ahead with its multi-pronged strategy to improve hotel and service standards, and further honing its delicate rebranding exercise. **F**



The jewel in the crown:
Citadelle Laferrière