

The Caribbean sees record tourism growth

By **Ronnie Lovler** on March, 13 2018 | Industry News



It was a record year for tourism in the Caribbean last year, with the islands reaching a milestone number of 30 million visitors in 2017.

The Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) said never before in the history of the region's tourism industry have such high numbers been reached.

Tourism to the islands increased by 1.7% in 2017, according to the CTO. The numbers released in the organization's State of the Industry report showed that total visitor expenditure reached US\$37 billion, much of which was spent by stay-over visitors.

Not surprisingly, most came from the United States, where nearly 15 million travelers enjoyed Caribbean vacations, up slightly from the previous year. The growth was recorded despite two hurricanes - Irma and Maria that caused devastating damage to some islands, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, among others.

That may be an explanation for why the growth was so unevenly spread, according to CTO Secretary General Hugh Riley, who says there is still "more to be done," given that the numbers show tourism dollars were not equally divided.

On hurricane-impacted islands tourism fell by as much as 18% as the storms caused widespread damage to tourism infrastructure. On the other hand, Saint Lucia, which did not suffer much hurricane impact, experienced double-digit growth of 11%.

But Secretary-General Riley says no island can rest on past successes, and that the nations of the Caribbean have to work together. Local media reports quoted Riley as reminding Caribbean stakeholders not to be complacent.

"Despite the severe challenges of 2017, more visitors arrived in the Caribbean and they spent more. But is that enough? Is our work now over? Not by a long way. The Caribbean, with a highly competitive tourism product, has quite some distance to go in order to realize our full potential," Riley said

The CTO Secretary-General suggests that Caribbean destinations take greater ownership of their product. "The first order of business as a region is to stop treating tourism as some sort of casual pursuit. Tourism is a serious business. Tourism is the business that delivers foreign exchange every time a plane lands and a cruise ship docks.

"It reduces unemployment and delivers massive amounts of tax dollars to our national treasuries. We should worry when we're not using this job-creating, tax-generating, foreign exchange-earning machine to its full potential," Riley said.

The CTO has developed a strategic plan for the next five years that covers seven key areas, including human capital development sustainable product development, tourism brand leadership, market intelligence and resource mobilization and sponsorship.

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