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Canadians showed strongest growth to Caribbean in 2008, up 14% outpacing both U.S. and Europe

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NEW YORK — Because of its relatively small size and allegedly cheap spending habits, the Canadian travel market has often been taken for granted or overlooked.

No longer.

Canadians have continued to hit the road while others, especially Americans, have stayed closer to home. And both U.S. States and other countries have noticed and are paying more attention to Canada.

Despite the current economic challenges facing the travel and tourism industry, the Caribbean Tourism Organization's statistics show that interest remains high in the Caribbean, particularly within North America where the core of the region's tourist arrivals originated and especially from Canada.

Tourist arrivals to the Caribbean steadily increased in 2008 from the previous year. With a total of nearly 2.5 million Canadian visitors, the Canadian tourism market accounted for an outstanding 14% growth overall.

"Canadians have been long-time supporters of the Caribbean and have nearly doubled their tourism numbers to the region since 2005," said Hugh Riley, interim secretary general of the CTO and co-chief executive officer for the Caribbean Tourism Development Company (CTDC). "The latest statistics underscore the importance of Canada as one of the Caribbean region's top tourism markets."

Canada is showing strong support of the Caribbean region from tour operators as well as additional investments from air carriers. Airlift from new gateway cities, particularly from the West have been added including WestJet's new direct service to Nassau from Calgary and Transat's new direct service to Jamaica.

Barbados, Jamaica, Dominican Republic and St. Lucia all gained new airlift this past winter season, and both Air Canada and Sunwing commenced additional flights to new destinations throughout the Caribbean region.

The Caribbean, in turn, is continuing to invest in new products throughout 2009, with hotel and resort developments and openings across the region.

Canada outperformed the U.S. market (which required passports for many islands for the first time) to virtually every spot in the Caribbean in 2008 with 25.7% growth to Antigua & Barbuda (compared to 6.8% for the U.S.); 37.3% to Aruba (7%); 21.8% to the Bahamas (-5.7%); 11.5% to Cancun (6.9%); 8.3% to the DR (1.1%); 23.9% to Jamaica (1.6%) and 41% to St. Lucia (-4.3%).