

# TRAVEL WEEKLY

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## Caribbean Tourism Organization talks strategy for dealing with downturn

The Caribbean Tourism Organization presented a multipronged plan to counter the economic slowdown, even as it said it was too early to predict the recession's repercussions on the Caribbean.

"No one looking at their books at this moment can tell you with any real certainty what their numbers are going to be by the time travel occurs," Hugh Riley, interim secretary general of the CTO, said Feb. 26 during a press conference in New York. "That booking window has become so narrow."

While the CTO did not reveal arrival figures for January, or give any predictions for 2009, Riley said that in addition to the 1.5% drop in visitors to the Caribbean in 2008, to 23 million, cruise passenger numbers were down between 5% and 6%, to 16 million, in 2008.

To combat the downturn, the organization said that in addition to encouraging greater cooperation from member governments, it was signing an agreement in the next few weeks with the Inter-American Development Bank for a \$1 million project called the Caribbean Hotel Energy Efficiency Action Program.

The energy program is "aimed specifically at finding ways to reduce the cost of operating by looking at more efficient ways of creating energy," said Riley, adding that currently, 90% of the Caribbean tourism industry's energy comes from traditional sources.

The CTO said it had also formed a strategic alliance with Tourism Economics, based in Wayne, Pa., which specializes in tourism analysis. The hope, said Riley, is that the firm can "provide us and our members with information of how tourism is doing in the current economic environment ... and some of the steps that the Caribbean ought to take."

Additionally, Feb. 28 marked the deadline for when funds would begin to be collected from participating countries for a pan-Caribbean marketing program, which Riley said was slated to launch this year.

In response to recent violence and protests in Guadeloupe and Martinique, as well as robberies of cruise passengers in Antigua, Riley said it was critical for the Caribbean region to acknowledge the effects the economic downturn could have on local employment and, consequently, on security.

"Incidents of any sort of negative nature are bad for tourism, they're bad for the image of a brand," said Riley.

He later added that rather than enact layoffs to cut costs, "Is it not better to have shorter hours, fewer work days in the week? So layoffs and employment dislocation are the last resort."