



Remarks by Hugh Riley

Secretary General, Caribbean Tourism Organization

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Tourism Industry Performance Review and Press Briefing

CTO Headquarters

Warrens, St. Michael, Barbados

As you heard in the report from our Head of Research, Ryan Skeete, arrivals to the region hit a new record in 2017.

30.1 million stayover visits, and visitor expenditure of US \$37 billion. In short, 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 our highly competitive tourism product, has quite some distance to go in order to realize our full potential.

We'll say more about that in a minute. But first:

Coming up in the weeks and months ahead are occasions when the CTO will be sharing with the public and with industry stakeholders, more and more details on the plans to better capitalize on the opportunities that are available to the Caribbean.

**MARCH 21 & 22, there's the Organization of American States Ministerial Congress in Georgetown,** under the leadership of the Department of Tourism in the Ministry of Business, in Guyana.

The Congress will assemble policy-makers and industry executives to propose strategies for bringing the countries of the Americas closer, in the pursuit of sustainable tourism. All Ministers of Tourism in the Americas are invited to attend.

**Caribbean Week in New York 2018 – June 2-8**

An annual CTO event, showcasing the diversity of the Caribbean in one of the region's major source markets, New York City. The week starts with a Caribbean Travel Fair on June 2 and ends with the exciting Rum and Rhythm event on June 8. The spire of the Empire State Building is lit with the colors of the Caribbean.

**Later that month there's Rum and Rhythm Toronto: Billed as *The Ultimate Caribbean Epicurean Experience* – June 23, Toronto, Canada.**

**The CTO's State of the Tourism Industry Conference is October 23-26, at The Atlantis Resort on Paradise Island, The Bahamas.**

This year's theme is: *Rejuvenate, Recreate, Reconnect; New Directions for Caribbean Tourism.*

As you will be aware, 2018 is the Year of Rejuvenation in the Caribbean, and so, many of our CTO member-countries have embarked on programs that connect to the multi-billion dollar rejuvenation, spa and wellness industry.

**The following month, November, the CTO's Human Resource Conference will be in The Cayman Islands.**

*Building a Resilient Caribbean Tourism Workforce for Global Competitiveness* is the theme. In fact, Human Capital Development is one of our seven strategic areas of focus for the region this year.

We urge you to keep visiting **OneCaribbean.org** for details. Don't be left out of these important opportunities to hear from the industry, to challenge the experts, and to let your opinions be heard on the direction for Caribbean tourism.

Two weeks ago at meetings in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the CTO's Board of Directors accepted our Strategic Plan for 2018-2022; and with that decisive action, the Board approved seven Strategic Functional Areas, and reinforced the CTO's mandate to *Position the Caribbean as the most desirable, year-round warm weather destination.*

But if that really is to happen, we cannot simply stop at the results we reported to you today.

As a region, we must acknowledge that to rebuild, develop and sustain the infrastructure and the image of the Caribbean, is an immense task. Resources will need to be developed, and realistic attention will need to be paid to the length of time it takes to rebuild an economy and repair a brand seriously affected by natural disasters.

Reinforcing the value and the attributes of the Caribbean brand, educating the public and the travel industry on the geography of the Caribbean, and generating demand for the region's tourism product will take time, careful strategy, and money. In other words, establishing leadership of the Caribbean Brand requires more than just sparsely funded, ad hoc efforts.

Our first order of business as a region is to stop treating tourism as some sort of casual pursuit. Tourism is a serious business. It employs, directly and indirectly, 13.7% of the people in the Caribbean, and it contributes, in total, from 7% to over 80% to Gross Domestic Product across the region.

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.

Therefore, we should worry when we're not using this job-creating, tax-generating, foreign exchange earning machine to its full potential. We should worry when the rate of occupancy across the region is still below 70%; which means: Of every hundred rooms available in the Caribbean, on average, at least 30 are going empty every night. This tells us that we have an opportunity – indeed a responsibility – to market ourselves more effectively, to improve the quality of our service substantially, to enhance the value of our product significantly, and to fill those empty rooms.

Until we do those things, we are not capitalizing on the substantial investment we have already made to build the plant in the first place, and we are leaving ourselves vulnerable to further erosion of our competitive position.

When we talk about truly engaging our region's population in the business of tourism, our countries must institute the Tourism Satellite Account systems that allow us to follow the tourism dollar through the economy, so that we can help our countries to truly understand the number of visitors it takes to outfit a school with computers, or a hospital with the latest equipment. Yes, this business can truly be the lifeblood of the Caribbean. But we have to treat it more seriously.

To be clear, we are thankful for the results which the region achieved in 2017; we have to celebrate our

victories, and we do; but unfortunately, there are bigger celebrations occurring in the places that are stealing our market share. Their unemployment rates are falling, their economies are growing; their tourism product gets consistent visibility, and we must get to that point too.

The Caribbean Tourism Organization and the Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Association (CHTA), are working hand in hand with other industry partners, to implement a plan that will address these issues.

The funding for a short-term Caribbean regional marketing campaign is starting to come in, and the arrangements are in place to tell the world we are serious about using our God-given assets to put our region's economy in the position of strength where it belongs. In this highly competitive business we have to keep fighting, and we have to win.

I'm going to pause here, and introduce an industry partner who certainly knows about winning.

Alex Zozaya is the Chief Executive Officer of Apple Leisure Group, (ALG), a hospitality powerhouse comprised of Apple Vacations, Travel Impressions, CheapCaribbean.com, AMResorts, Amstar dmc and Unlimited Vacation Club.

Alex, as AMResorts' Founder and President, has guided the Group's record-breaking growth and secured ALG's status as the world's #1 provider of North American vacation travelers to the Caribbean and to Mexico.

On the phone now from his office in the United States, is Alex Zozaya.