

November 11th 2022

OUR TOURISM INDUSTRY COTINUES TO GROW BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS

Introduction

Since the demise of our banana industry and the failure of the inept former government to prepare adequately through diversification, for the fallout that would follow, our country entered the 21st century with an economy that was lagging behind those of our neighbours. Other countries in the region, faced with similar situations had begun the process of diversification and those that didn't have economies based primarily on agriculture, worked to strengthen each of their economic sectors, mainly tourism and services seen as key sectors. Importantly, most of the countries around us, except for the Commonwealth of Dominica had an international airport at the time of their independence meaning that they didn't have to bear the cost of building one. Saint Vincent and the Grenadine and Dominica were therefore the only two countries that faced the challenge of constructing their international airport. It is undeniable that the absence of an international airport in SVG was a distinct disadvantage in our quest for sustainable economic development as comparatively, those countries in the region with an international airport were able to see significant investments and growth in various sectors. Imagine if our country had an international airport 25 years ago, that allowed for international direct flight, the opportunities that would have presented themselves, in the trade of goods and services would have been numerous. It seems therefore an element of pure logic, that any government would make the construction of an international airport a priority, since so much hinged on this vital piece of infrastructure. Instead, the previous administration played petty politics with the issue of airport development and dangled the idea in the face of Vincentians at every General Election but delivered nothing. And so it was, at the dawn of the 21st century, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines remained without an airport that could accommodate direct international flights, a situation that had us securely at the back of the line. Finally, in 2001, out of much frustration from a lack of hope, Vincentians decided to reject the corruption and mismanagement of the NDP and elected the Unity Labour Party to govern our country and only did we begin the process of airport development.

Argyle International Airport, the Game Changer

To the ears of many, the name “Argyle International Airport” is a dirty word and to others, the sight of SVG’s largest capital project conjures up resentment and anger. The AIA which should stand as a beacon of hope and a reminder of the tenacity and resilience of our people, determined to undertake a task previously seen as impossible, unfortunately stirs up the worst emotions in an unpatriotic few. Nevertheless, its construction has been the catalyst, providing the impetus needed to accelerate growth and development in the very important tourism sector, while creating avenues where other sectors can benefit directly or indirectly. Since the construction and operationalization of the AIA, a number of things have happened as a direct result and it is important that we keep them in mind.

From the very beginning, comrade Ralph assured Vincentians that the airport was necessary and that his government would do all everything within its power to complete it. In responding to the questions surrounding the construction of the international airport, the comrade responded consistently and confidently “build it and they would come” and very soon this became an oft repeated mantra for the citizens of this country. Since its completion Vincentians have seen the arrival of a number of international airlines offering direct and non-stop flights to this destination that include: Air Canada, that will offer 3 flights per week during the months of December and then return to its regular twice weekly flights; American Airline that currently offers two direct flights per week, but will soon be offering daily flights to this destination during its peak period; Caribbean Airline and Virgin Atlantic that operates a twice weekly direct flight service to our destination. The fact that this country was able to attract 4 international air carriers, in such a short time after the opening of the airport has been hailed as a miracle even by members of the opposition.

There have also been increases in investments with the successful completion of the AIA, including major hotel brands that have expressed their excitement at the opportunity to operate in SVG. The Sandals brand, with their Beaches resort will invest approximately US\$200 million, with other investors that include, Royal Mill, Myah’s Luxury Suites Hotel, Black Sands as well as the government funded Holiday Inn and Marriot hotels. Without the AIA, none of these investments would have happened and thus we must recognize, appreciate and applaud the vision of the comrade to ensure that his government saw the airport project through to completion. Other sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and the creative industry inclusive of our local performing artistes will benefit directly from this much larger tourism sector with the completion of these hotels. The Argyle International Airport has and continues to be a game changer for the economy of this country.

Conclusion

The words “build it and they would come” is now a self-fulfilling prophecy as Vincentians can see the fruits of the projects as planes, visitors and investments continue to come to SVG in greater numbers since the opening of the airport. The AIA is a reality and our country can boast the newest airport in the region, where the customer service is unmatched. As we look towards a record-breaking cruise season, we can realistically expect a tourism season with increased visitor arrivals by air that can surpass pre-covid levels and reach new record numbers. This growth and expansion in our tourism sector is as a direct result of vision, and policy initiatives of the government that promote investment in this sector of immense potential. Over the next few years, with the completion of hotels offering more rooms, and as flights increase in frequency we can expect further growth in our rapidly improving tourism sector. Our tourism sector is in safe hands and will continue to develop and grow to the benefit of SVG’s economy, as a result of the vision, leadership, and exceptional governance of the ULP over the last 21 years.