

## Who should take responsibility for visitor safety and security?

### **The Business of Tourism**

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The opportunity to relax in an idyllic environment is for most what makes a Caribbean vacation so special. Understanding this, is why the region has been able to grow its tourism product so successfully and cater for almost every type of visitor, whether seeking sun and sea or a cultural experience.

To underpin this the governments and the industry have strived to create an environment that is safe, and as far as possible risk and incident free, despite the grittiness of everyday life for many Caribbean citizens.

This is not unreasonable. Tourism has become the single most important contributor to national and regional economic development, providing through visitor taxes and spending a significant part of the revenue needed for education, health care and other forms of social provision.

However, what high levels of visitor dependence does do, is place host nations at economic and reputational risk when incidents happen, whether caused by natural disasters, health concerns, crime and violence, or terrorism.

The issue and who is responsible for ensuring visitor safety and security has therefore become of increasing importance.

This topic was addressed by a panel earlier this month at World Travel Market in London. There, Jamaica's Tourism Minister, Edmund Bartlett, said that to help address the matter, Jamaica had developed a 'manual of tourism ethics'.

Scheduled to be released a little later this year and the first to be produced in the Caribbean, this handbook would he said propose a new security architecture for tourism. Based on the outcome of an island-wide security audit of hotels and attractions the document will be used to ensure that Jamaica remains a secure destination for visitors and those who work in and around the industry.

In the same session Minister Bartlett expressed concern about what he described as the economically damaging effects of travel advisories issued by governments in source markets.

He called for “global oversight” arguing that such notices have a potentially negative effect on the economic viability and stability of nations that are tourism dependent.

How this might work was not made clear as the US, Canada, the countries of Europe, and others like Australia and Japan, regularly issue such advice independently and as a part of their legal duty of care to their citizens.

Such notices inform about the risks a visitor might face when traveling to a particular country, usually in relation to crime, terrorism or public health.

The objective of such advice according to diplomats, is to meet citizens’ expectations that their government will warn them of risk and have in place the appropriate consular services to protect them if required.

For the most part, officials recognise that too strident or disproportionate a warning could result in economic damage to the country concerned and its tourism industry. However, the same diplomats also observe that the published advice must respond to events and media coverage, and in some countries reflect host nations inability to tackle or solve visitor related crime, or to address crime more generally. They also indicate that in the case of some smaller nations in the Caribbean the notices published may reflect an unwillingness of the local authorities to admit the serious nature of the crimes involved or their frequency.

To confuse matters, different governments in the region’s key visitor source markets adopt different approaches. It is therefore quite possible at any one time to find the US, British or Canadian governments issuing advisories that vary in tone or even content.

So contentious have some country’s travel advisories become that behind the scenes they are the subject of difficult high level political or diplomatic exchanges about both the detail and the robustness of the language used.

What this serves to illustrate is the tension between governments and tourist boards in regions like the Caribbean that want visitors to believe that all is well and that nothing will trouble a vacation, and the legal and moral responsibility that governments in source markets say they have to inform their citizens and the travel trade about issues in certain destinations.

While there can never be any guarantees or certainty anywhere in relation to risk, one obvious way forward is for governments in both receiving and sending nations is to be pro active, speak more, and be prepared to respond honestly and accurately when challenges occur. It also means reacting rapidly and responsibly when any threat to visitor safety occurs.

The problem, if that is the right word, is that vacations exist to encourage visitors to relax and increasingly to seek out experience and the authentic. The paradox is that if in the process of a relaxing Caribbean vacation they become too trusting and less aware, they may be more likely to be caught up in the unexpected or in dangerously evolving situations, in ways that no travel advisory or security audit can ever address.

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