

DREAM

WORLD CRUISE DESTINATIONS

Autumn 2007



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Enticing one day visitors to

By Margaret Epps, Tropical Shipping

The Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) reports that well over 12 million cruise tourists were forecast to arrive in the Caribbean this year. Further, that the Caribbean is the most preferred destination overall. Encouraging but uncomfortable, however: developing travel and leisure alternatives coupled with competing destinations in the Mediterranean are giving sway to the point of view that the future of tourism is uncertain. The future of tourism in the Caribbean, it seems, will depend upon the delivery of an aggressive program that influences consumers to return to the region for a land based vacation. As recent as March of this year, Carnival Cruise Lines' recently retired president and CEO Bob Dickinson made observations about trends in cruise destinations, saying that the Mediterranean is the new Caribbean. Such a simple statement, yet it rubs most of us in the wrong direction because it is not in agreement with the legendary presumption that when it's time to talk cruises, it's time to talk about the Caribbean.

With Dickinson's wake up call, we return our attention to the question of influencing consumers to return to the region for a land based vacation. There is of course a myriad of marketing techniques used by destinations to bring that about. However the sheer number of visitors to the Caribbean via cruise ships does represent a golden opportunity for the region to convert

week vacationers of the future. The question has been how to achieve that goal. In support of delivering an aggressive program—specifically, a cruise conversion program—some have suggested that such a program should not just be adopted, but elevated to the status of a formal policy of island nations to ensure there is a plan to attract and secure a future for tourism revenue. To this point it is worth taking note of a study commissioned by the FCCA last year with Business Research and Economic Advisors (BREA). The focus of the study was to analyze “cruise-related spending and its impact on the economies of the (nineteen) participating destinations.” BREA reports that cruise-related spending and tourism collectively generated just under \$2 billion in direct expenditures, funded 41,500 jobs and \$600 million in wages. Five of those destinations, led by the US Virgin Islands at \$362 million, had direct cruise tourism expenditures in excess of \$150 million. If land-based tourism operators can capture a portion of the cruise-related expenditures locally, they are sure to find that renewable source of tourism revenue that they are seeking for long term growth.

Weighing program against policy and calculating the numbers will continue, but in the meantime help is on the way.

Economists largely agree that tourism is the goose that lays the golden egg when we talk about boosting a country's economy, and this

With over 50 recognized types of tourism, a few of its more recognizable varieties in the Caribbean region include cultural and heritage tourism, sports, day-trippers, and, perhaps the most brilliant of them all, ecotourism. Interestingly, ecotourism has proven to be such a winner that the European Union funded a project in Dominica that identified 20 ecotourism sites and developed a plan for their maintenance and development. A portion of the EU plan details cruise ship tourists as a targeted group, specifically as a source of revenue. This is only one example and, as this discussion continues, we will focus on the cruise conversion program pioneered by a corporate citizen that has been in the region for over 40 years.

The Tropical Shipping sponsored cruise conversion initiative called “Freestay Caribbean” was started out of the company's commitment to the Caribbean region's economic growth via the Tourism sector. The initiative was developed to help support their hotel and tour operator partners in their efforts in getting cruise passengers to return to the Caribbean...one coin at a time. This cruise conversion program was created by Tropical Shipping, in cooperation with the FCCA, Hotel and Tourism Associations and the Ministries of Tourism for the participating islands in the Caribbean, to reinvest in the Caribbean. To its credit, the program is one of only a handful of cruise conversion programs

Return to the Caribbean

13 participating members in the Caribbean and South America. A full directory can be found online at www.FreestayCaribbean.com where tourists peruse special offers for the staples of tourism: accommodation packages, unusual and interesting tours, exciting attractions and delectable cuisine. The most recent member countries to join Freestay are Barbados, Cartagena and Cozumel.

On the business side of the program member countries have Freestay

Caribbean as a ready and waiting vehicle to promote their destinations to cruise passengers: Participating businesses, whether a micro enterprise or a major player, benefit from the wealth of strategic alliances and opportunities that Freestay Caribbean offers its members. All businesses participating in Freestay Caribbean are members of their national board of tourism, hotel and tourism association or have been otherwise approved.

The introductory collateral is a sign

in the cruise terminal and a minted coin that is distributed through operators and ministries of tourism. The coins are used to 'purchase' a free land-based promotion by responding to offers found on the Freestay Caribbean website (www.FreestayCaribbean.com) where member countries update their destinations, and businesses are constantly updating their offers, but a coin is not required to take advantage of the Freestay Caribbean offers.

Members who are participants in the Freestay Caribbean initiative have been asked to report any conversion and to continue to drive home to their local tourism partners the fact that giving the "WOW" experience to all visitors, whether they arrive by ship or plane, when they are on the islands, will ensure a stronger and more viable tourism sector, and in turn help the local economy.

The FCCA data which states that on average no more than 40% of cruisers will take a cruise vacation the following year represents a real opportunity for the Caribbean. With the right combination of endorsement, commitment and tourism development policy behind this Freestay Caribbean program, which remains a promotional tool that is free to use to any nation in the region, it will continue to form a part of the wider branding efforts of the region, which can only be enhanced by raising the quality and service levels at attractions and delivering enjoyable experiences for the visitor on land. ☺

FREESTAY CARIBBEAN - AREAS OF PARTICIPATION

Island Member Countries	Hotels	Tours	Activities	Sites or Attractions	Car Rentals	Shopping	Restaurants	Country Clubs/ Beach Clubs	Night Clubs	Spas	Parks & Museums
Antigua	•				•	•	•				
Barbados*											
Belize	•	•	•	•	•						
Cozumel	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•
Dominica	•						•				
Grenada	•	•					•				
Jamaica	•	•		•			•				
St. Croix	•										
St. Kitts	•	•			•		•				
St. Lucia	•	•			•		•				
St. Maarten	•				•	•	•				
St. Thomas	•				•		•				

*program has not yet launched although Barbados has officially joined