

# **Safety and Security in the Tourism Industry - A Regional Perspective on Tourism Security**

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## **Tourism in the Caribbean**

The Caribbean is the most tourism dependent region in the world. Tourist arrivals in the Caribbean have increased from 6.9 million in 1980 to 21.8 million in 2004, while cruise passenger arrivals in what is undoubtedly the world's busiest cruising area have risen from 3.6 million to 20 million during the same period. Gross visitor expenditure, which is vital for the region's balance of payments, reached an estimated US\$ 21 billion in 2004, as compared with US\$ 3.8 billion in 1980. The Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) estimates that tourism generates about 750,000 direct and indirect jobs in the region and that in some countries tourism's share of the GDP is as high as 70 per cent.

## **Nature of Tourism**

By its very nature, tourism is a global and intensely competitive industry. Although inherently vulnerable to economic crises, natural disasters and outbreaks of warfare and epidemics, international tourism has shown remarkable resilience in recovering from the adverse effects of such negative, but short-term, factors. However, not only does the consumer have to spend relatively large amount of his/her disposable income to buy the tourism product, he also perceives it in a subjective and experiential manner. As a result, tourism is highly sensitive to perceptions of danger and lack of safety and security. It is in this context that lack of safety and security and incidences of crime represent a more serious threat to travel and tourism than any other negative factor.

## **Safety and Security**

Safety and security are vital to providing quality in tourism. More than any other economic activity, the success or failure of a tourism destination depends on being able to provide a safe and secure environment for visitors. This was highly evident in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11th September 2001.

In the weeks following the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington, passengers abandoned airports in their numbers as the effects of these attacks extended beyond U.S. borders with grave ramifications for many airlines. Soon after September 11th, 2001 a number of airlines collapsed. Most shocking of all was the fact that a number of these airlines had been in existence for decades, and were not all American carriers. These attacks, along with the Gulf Wars, the war in Afghanistan and the terrorist attacks in Bali, have increasingly served to place tremendous and crucial importance on issues of traveller safety.

The inclination of tourists from various parts of the world to travel abroad also fell sharply in the post-9/11 period. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), international tourist arrivals slumped by 1.3 per cent in 2001 - the only significant decrease since World War II. In the Caribbean, CTO estimated that arrivals from the US fell an estimated 20 per cent between September and December 2001. Arrivals from Europe dropped by about 15 percent during the same period.

The changing attitudes of travellers in the wake of these attacks were reflected in the manner in which a number of independent travellers dealt with the fear of insecurity. Some of them even

got involved in "home swapping", using home exchange programmes which allowed them to "stay at home" - someone else's home - providing a sense of security because the vacation base is a non-tourist location. In March 2003, as the United States and its allies went to war in Iraq, the Business Travel Coalition (BTC), an advocacy organisation which represent the interests of corporate buyers of the business travel services, released an analysis of the impact of war on the U.S. commercial airline industry. The BTC said that 21 per cent of corporations had banned international travel for some period of time; 33 per cent said they would consider banning international travel under worsening circumstances; 54 per cent had tightened pre-approval processes for international travel and 48 per cent had adjusted domestic U.S. travel policy in anticipation of the war.

These numbers emphasised the major role that safety and security plays in making travel choices. They also demonstrate quite clearly that peace is the best friend of travel and tourism while war and insecurity are among its worst enemies.

### **Perceptions of Safety and Security in the Caribbean**

The Caribbean's enviable perception as being a relatively safe region is among its major assets as a tourist destination. It is a factor that has served the region well and is expected to remain with us in the future.

However, we cannot be complacent, since there is an emerging consensus that crime - which raises safety issues - is a growing concern among tourism stakeholders who fear the potential damage that it may inflict on the perception of safety and, by extension, the industry.

Of even greater concern than crime is the issue of visitor harassment, which also impacts on the tourist's sense of safety. It may be claimed that, although varying in severity, it is a widespread phenomenon. There is also a general agreement that urgent action is needed to contain it.

In considering visitor harassment it is important to avoid getting bogged down in the finer nuances of the debate on what constitutes harassment in the Caribbean socio-cultural context. Ultimately, what matters is the visitor's perception of it. Unfortunately, the findings of ongoing visitor surveys in certain key countries point to consistently high ratios of perceived harassment, with all the negative aspects that such unhappy experiences are normally associated with.

Fortunately, tourism officials understand that tourism is undergoing a major paradigm shift; that the old concept that tourism security is a necessary evil that does not add to the bottom line is passe and that a lack of proper safety and security will jeopardise tourism's future. Therefore, several countries in the region have taken measures to combat crime, particularly as it relates to the tourism sector.

For example, in recent weeks, St. Maarten announced plans to establish "Tourist Police" which the State Secretary Erno Labega was quoted as saying would likely become a reality within a few months. These officers will concentrate on providing security for visitors to the island and will be visible in areas which tourists frequent. Other countries, like Jamaica, have introduced similar programmes to deal with safety and security issues in tourist areas.

In the absence of an adequate provision of official state police protection, or as supplementary security measures, often encouraged and supported by police forces, the tourist industry has taken various private security initiatives. These include providing private security for resort compounds and extending to a collective and more systematic form of policing entire precincts,

such as neighborhood watches. It is now necessary and useful to evaluate the effectiveness of these private security arrangements and determine how existing systems can be enhanced, or whether new ones should be introduced. It is also necessary to define how best such private security initiatives should be combined with the activities of official law enforcement agencies within the framework of an integrated crime prevention strategy and visitor protection programme.

### **Regional co-ordination and co-operation**

In addition to co-ordination and co-operation at the national level, there is a need for extending and strengthening regional co-ordination and co-operation among all parties involved in ensuring tourism surety by combating crime and protecting both residents and visitors, as well as destination's reputation. In this regard the initiatives of the Association of Caribbean Commissioners of Police (ACCP) to focus discussion on the subject of safety and security in the tourism industry is a commendable step in the right direction. However, if the ACCP initiatives and actions are to have a positive and lasting impact, they must benefit from effective co-ordination and co-operation, including the sharing of information and harmonising of strategies. They must also be fully supported by other principal partners, including the governments, the tourism industry and the community at large.

### **Role of industry**

It is undeniable that the tourism industry has a right to defend itself as well as to have a legitimate expectation that the state will do all it can to ensure safety and security. It is, therefore, in the industry's own interest to co-ordinate its efforts and co-operate fully with the other main partners, i.e. the government, law enforcement agencies and the wider community. It must recognise that when the environment is safe, the visitor is also safe and that if the travel and tourism industry emphasises security it will have a good chance of surviving.