

MINISTRY OF TOURISM

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
TRINIDAD HOTELS, RESTAURANTS AND
TOURISM ASSOCIATION**

FEATURE ADDRESS

**DR. THE HONOURABLE RUPERT T. GRIFFITH
MINISTER OF TOURISM
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Date: Wednesday February 09, 2011

Venue: Calypso Lounge, Crowne Plaza Trinidad, Twelfth Floor, Port of Spain

Time: 10.00am

- Mrs. Melba Dedier, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism
 - Mr. Sayeed Emamali, Commissioner of the National Carnival Commission
 - Ms. Valerie Charles, Vice President Corporate Services, Tourism Development Company Limited (TDC)
 - Mrs. Michelle Palmer-Keizer, President of the Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association (THRTA)
 - Membership of the Association
 - Ladies and gentlemen
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Thank you very much for the opportunity this morning to outline to the members of the Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association the steps we are taking to prepare for recovery and to build a more competitive, more resilient, people-centered and more innovative tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago.

The economic importance of tourism in Trinidad and Tobago is far greater than many people think. Our local tourism industry is a powerful vehicle in government's economic diversification plans; considering its propensity to generate the jobs we so badly need at this point in time and the important role it plays in stimulating other sectors.

Tourism in Trinidad and Tobago today is a \$120million industry; generating an estimated 10.6% of the country Gross Domestic Product in 2009. Most importantly, tourism provides direct and indirect employment for around 88,000 persons (14.7% of total employment).

This Government's commitment to tourism is not in question.

Our aim is to help tourism make an even greater contribution to economic growth and employment. We understand that tourism is a valuable renewable resource and will give the industry the support it demands and needs.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is little doubt that the past three (3) years or so have been challenging for our local tourism industry.

The global economic and financial crisis, spiralling crime and the introduction of the Air Passenger Duty have all had a deleterious impact upon our visitor arrivals and hotel occupancy.

However tourism is a very resilient industry and has proven its ability in the past to bounce back faster than other sectors. The work ahead for recovery is not easy but, with concerted efforts by both the government and industry, the future of the industry is bright.

I have committed to doing everything possible to put the industry back on track so that everyone involved, directly or indirectly, can start benefiting again.

My first priority upon my return from the Tourism Promotion Mission to India a few weeks ago was to swiftly put plans in place for the organisational re-structuring of the Tourism Development Company (TDC) for greater operational efficiency and the building of a strong team.

There has been some criticism of the effectiveness of the TDC in the positioning of Trinidad and Tobago as a destination of choice. Some of the comments are justified ... some not.

It is my view that for too long our industry has been too focused on quick fixes - which invariably have taken the form of advertising campaigns. Marketing is extremely important but it offers only part of the way forward.

Not enough attention has been paid to the quality of the tourism product, identification of our unique indigenous experiences, the quality of tourism infrastructure, or the timeliness of statistical data for decision making.

It is for this very reason that the Ministry of Tourism has begun the preparation of a National Tourism Strategy, which we hope to bring forward for public consultations by the third quarter of 2011.

This will be an overarching plan for the entire tourism sector, and I am confident that the new strategy will be a comprehensive roadmap for the sustainable growth of our industry.

I have already moved to implement other important improvements.

I am looking more closely at our marketing and promotional programs to ensure that we provide the maximum amount of resources and obtain the maximum bang for our marketing dollars.

It is critical that our marketing efforts are focused on the right markets, and that we target the right audiences.

More attention has to be paid to viral marketing and e-marketing of a more social nature.

We intend to work much more closely with our international tour operators to get them to believe in our destination and bring that much-needed confidence back.

We have had some measure of success with the special joint marketing promotion for the UK/European market arrived at during the 2010 World Travel Market in order to protect existing airlift to Tobago. The cost of the packaged tour to Tobago is now reduced by £100 for stays of seven nights or more, if booked prior to the last week in January, for travel to be completed before mid-April. Blackouts are in effect during the Christmas holidays and Carnival periods.

I am also seeking to bring more local and international investment in tourism products, hotels and other infrastructure.

Our strategy is to give investors greater confidence in the local tourism industry's long-term potential for growth.

We are aiming to have more quality room stock, suitable for all budgets, both in Trinidad and in Tobago.

It is against this background that the Tourism Promotion Mission to India was undertaken in January this year. This particular mission has generated quite a healthy debate. But I wish to assure you that the Tourism Promotion Mission to India was indeed necessary and invaluable.

The objective of the Mission was to develop tourism and tourism investment in Trinidad and Tobago by creating awareness of the destination in India as well as to increase links with this Asian continent so as to grow outbound tourism to Trinidad and Tobago. The delegation met with travel agents, travel trade media, key tour operators and business associations to promote our unique tourism experiences and attractions.

Trinidad and Tobago needs to knock on the doors of its traditional markets ... ladies and gentlemen ... but we also need to explore new markets. We must diversify away from the advanced but troubled economies of USA, UK and Europe.

We are now witnessing the phenomenal rise of the Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) countries and to stay ahead of the game into the next decade, it is imperative that we assess the tourism opportunities in these markets.

According to international tourism experts, by 2050, China's economy will be some 70 percent larger than that of the USA, with India's economy being the third largest, followed by Brazil, Russia, and only then by the United Kingdom, Japan, France and Germany.

I must mention that Government is aggressively pursuing the sourcing of an investor and/or operator for the Vanguard Hotel in order to ensure the maintenance of airlift to Tobago especially out of the United Kingdom.

Concomitant with this activity, the Ministry of Trade and Industry has mandated E-TECK to undertake the necessary remedial infrastructural work on the facility to ensure the coming-on stream of an additional 200 first class rooms for the Winter 2012 Season.

Ladies and gentlemen, our tourism product needs to be constantly refreshed if it is to meet the changing demands of consumers. In this regard I have set up a team, comprising tourism executives, representatives from the regional corporations and community tourism action groups, to explore the feasibility of installing a range of visitor amenities at several new tourist attractions, such as Paramin Village and Blanchisseuse to name a few.

My intent is to ensure a synergistic relationship amongst all levels of government working in partnership with the private sector on a scale that is unprecedented. In this regard I have taken a number of initiatives to facilitate the “conversation”.

These initiatives include the establishment of a high level broad-based Trinidad Tourism Standing Committee to provide guidance on long-term tourism policy and strategy. This stronger participation from industry and state agencies represents, what I consider to be, unprecedented levels of co-operation.

A coordinated response between the public and private sector is imperative to the sustainable development of our local tourism industry. We must work together in partnership in order to build greater resilience against our many challenges, and explore new frontiers to grow and develop the sector.

Let us build bridges and not fences between ourselves.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association, and indeed to all our partners and stakeholders, in the tourism industry.

Thank you all for the hard work and dedication you have demonstrated in support of the tourism industry, and also for the ideas and advice you continue to provide us.

I invite all tourism stakeholders to join us in striving towards a new era of heightened tourism growth and opportunities.

The Government has great confidence we can get there, and by working together we will achieve our vision and a greater goal; namely growing tourism for the benefit of everyone in Trinidad and Tobago.

I thank you.

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