

MINISTRY OF TOURISM

TRINIDAD HOTELS, RESTAURANTS & TOURISM ASSOCIATION

**TOURISM AWARDS GALA
DINNER AND DANCE**

FEATURE ADDRESS

**MINISTER OF TOURISM
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Date: Saturday September 26, 2015
Venue: Hilton Trinidad and Conference Centre, Port of Spain
Time: 6.00pm

- The Honourable Darryl Smith, Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs
- Dr. The Honourable Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts
- Senator the Honourable Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry
- The Honourable Stuart Young, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs
- Assemblyman Mrs. Tracey Ann Davidson Celestine, Deputy Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly and Secretary for Tourism and Transportation in Tobago
- Mr. Allen Chastanet, our esteemed Guest of Honour, a former St. Lucia Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation and renowned hotel entrepreneur
- Mr. Guy Joseph, Member of Parliament for Castries South East in St. Lucia
- Mrs. Cecilia Greaves-Smith, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and other Permanent Secretaries present
- Mr. Umesh Rampersad, Board Chairman Tourism Development Company
- Mrs. Samdai Rampersad, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism
- Mr. Andrew Welch, President of the Trinidad Hotels Restaurants and Tourism Association (THRTA) and other Board Members
- Mr. Christopher James, President of the Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association

- Mr. William Aguiton, Chairman Board of Governors Trinidad and Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute (TTHTI) and other TTHTI Board Members
 - Mr. Shaun Mc Grath, newly elected President of the Tourism Association of the Guyana Hotel and Tourism Association. Coincidentally Mr. Mc Grath is the Chief Executive Officer of Cara Hotels (Guyana and Trinidad)
 - Event Sponsors
 - Presidents and other Representatives of the various Tourism Associations
 - Distinguished Awardees for Tourism Excellence, our very special guests this evening
 - Members of the Media,
 - Ladies and Gentlemen
-

Good evening and thank you for your kind words of introduction, Mr. Paul Keens Douglas. Your reputation as a Caribbean storyteller par excellence is certainly well-deserved.

I am really honoured to have been invited to attend the second annual Tourism Awards Ceremony hosted by the Trinidad Hotels Restaurants and Tourism Association (THRTA). This Awards Ceremony celebrates our commitment to excellence and recognises the shining stars of hospitality and tourism businesses that are raising the bar in terms of enhancing visitor experiences in Trinidad and Tobago.

It is a signal event in many ways. This is my maiden entry as the Minister of Tourism addressing the broad representational interests within the industry since I took up my new appointment earlier on this month. It is also the first time that these awards have been opened to all registered tourism stakeholders' organisations in Trinidad and in Tobago.

This evening, we are privileged to be able to applaud this outstanding group of professionals who have selflessly given of their time and their intellectual and professional efforts to the important mission of building our tourism sector. All of you have etched your names in the annals of tourism history.

The Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association has had a long and distinguished history as an industry grouping which champions the cause of its members. But it is much more than a lobby group as it genuinely seeks to improve the standards within the industry. I must applaud the Association for initiating this most worthwhile industry awards scheme which exemplifies the growing maturity of the tourism and hospitality sector in Trinidad and Tobago to increasingly take control of its own destiny in the dynamic economy in which we now live.

I am especially heartened to hear of the moves currently being made to bring the Tobago Hotel Association and the THRTA closer together so as to coordinate programs to the benefit of the nation as a whole. I make the commitment that this sort of symbiotic collaborative relationship must also happen at the national level.

I recognise that the relationships between the Ministry of Tourism, the Tourism Development Company and the Tobago House of Assembly have had its challenges. I am prepared to work with all parties concerned to iron out these differences and formulate a partnership that will place Trinidad and also Tobago in an enviable strong tourism position.

The Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association also has my assurance that the Ministry of Tourism will continue to support ventures such as this awards ceremony and any project that will redound positively to the benefit of the local tourism industry.

The Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association must also be commended for inviting the former St. Lucia's Minister of Tourism and a "giant" in Caribbean tourism, Allan Chastanet, to share his enviable wealth of experience. We gained so much from his presentation that clearly shows his powerful passion and commitment to the building of a truly authentic and engaging Caribbean tourism industry.

Let us please give Mr. Chastanet another hearty round of applause.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am from the culturally rich village of Mason Hall, Tobago. I have though spent most of my life in Bethel, a community known for its strong independent people.

Growing up in Tobago, I had many dreams but my paramount desire has always been to serve the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and, through the grace of Almighty God and the Honourable Prime Minister, this dream came another step closer to reality with my appointment as Minister of Tourism on September 11.

I am fiercely passionate about the development of this beautiful country of ours. I really care about people and their well-being. I place tremendous value on community participation, especially of our young people, in national development.

My interactions over the last two (2) weeks or so with the wide range of tourism stakeholders have revealed a wealth of expertise, commitment and dedication to the industry. I am also very keenly aware of the frustrations within the industry. Over the last five (5) years there were four (4) different Ministers with responsibility for Tourism, multiple changes of TDC Boards and Permanent Secretaries.

And quite frankly, that situation did not augur well for the industry.

This present Government is fully aware that tourism can unleash vast opportunities that can play a very important part in driving the economic diversification of Trinidad and Tobago. It is against this background that we have identified tourism as one of the lynchpins of this nation's economic diversification strategy; driven by a strong and effective public/private sector partnership.

It is an integral part of our economic strategy and is firmly placed as a cornerstone for economic growth and job creation. We intend to work hard to transform Trinidad and Tobago into an exciting location for tourism investment.

As we look around the world we see farsighted countries acknowledging that an economy based on natural resources must at some point use the revenue from those resources to build a broadly based sustainable economy based upon comparative advantage. One need only look at the major investments made by some countries such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar which are taking the resources derived from the sale of oil and reinvesting those resources into flourishing tourism based economies.

The impact of the fluctuating oil and energy prices, the finite nature of our energy resources, the rise of the US Dollar over the Euro and the rapidly changing international economic scenario have all ensured that diversification is a **MUST** for Trinidad and Tobago. Tourism must take its rightful place side by side with the energy sector so as to help to drive our nation's prosperity into the future.

We have no other alternative.

The time for talk and pontificating about the long acknowledged value and benefits about the tourism industry has long gone.

I am committed to ensuring that the Ministry of Tourism develop clear and concise tourism policy objectives in collaboration with all of our tourism partners and that **the tourism's voice is heard, clearly and strongly, in the Cabinet.**

I have mandated my Ministry to come up with a Tourism Growth Strategy in short measure; prioritising the major projects that will be undertaken on a yearly basis. This will be a comprehensive action plan that will focus on the incredible economic potential that exists outside of our rich oil and gas resource sector. All tourism stakeholders must play a key role in the design and development of this Strategy and contribute their views on what is required to ensure a viable cost competitive and sustainable tourism sector.

Moreover, I have reconvened the Trinidad Tourism Standing Committee comprising of senior representatives from various tourism stakeholder groups to inform on the strategic direction of the industry. This Committee will tackle major issues impacting upon tourism development such as airlift, marketing, product development, destination management and creating an enabling investment climate. Under my direct Chairmanship, the Tourism Standing Committee will meet on a monthly basis.

Our marketing campaigns now have to really hit the mark. It is a very competitive world out there when it comes to the tourism dollar. Our marketing has to be utterly and absolutely spot-on so as to increase visitor arrivals and tourists spend to transform our economy. We want to work with all of our stakeholders to ensure that we achieve just that.

Moreover, these marketing campaigns have to be based on empirical scientific research rather than trial and error.

In terms of our offerings, there is no doubt that if we are to increase our market competitiveness, we must develop our tourism product in such a manner that it stands out in a very crowded international marketplace. It is for this reason that the Ministry intends to guide the TDC towards developing “brand propositions” - iconic and signature programs that will stand out internationally and give Trinidad and Tobago a great **“WOW”** factor.

We must develop our tourism product by investing in better infrastructure, improved signage, cleaner streets, communities and beaches, safer neighbourhoods, service quality and more value for money. Tourism and transport are very closely interlinked. We must provide high quality consistent airlift into both Trinidad and Tobago as well as to drastically improve the inter island connectivity to make both of us more accessible.

I wholeheartedly support the view of the THRTA’s President, Andrew Welch that we must invest in training those who wish to join the hospitality sector so that we could have a workforce that is attuned to the expectations of visitors who will be coming to our shores. More importantly, though, we must embark upon a comprehensive nationwide awareness campaign to explain just how the visitor economy works and how we can all play an important role within it to ensure that together we succeed in expanding this industry.

It is vital that we increase the awareness of what Trinidad and Tobago has to offer. This is not only intended for the general John Public but also for all the government agencies. Tourism is an industry with tremendous linkages to other sectors within the economy. The clearest linkages are to agriculture and agri-business including food and beverage, construction, furniture and woodworking, garment manufacture for linens, uniforms, drapes and the like.

In this global competitive environment the importance of timely and accurate information becomes paramount. We need to know as much as possible about our existing customers and our potential customers and we need this information as rapidly as possible. The Ministry of Tourism is already working closely with our partners within both the public and private sectors to ensure that such information is available on a timely basis and is putting in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that such information is readily available.

We intend to get these things **right** so as to realise the full potential of the tourism sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

But tourism is about more than economics.

We should be proud of our potential because we are proud of our country and what it has to offer. As the Honourable Dr. Keith Rowley, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, indicated in his inaugural swearing-in speech the citizens of this country need to truly believe in the “red, white and black”.

I personally embrace the myriad diversity that is Trinidad and Tobago; from our colourful festivals, pristine beaches and our mouth watering cuisine to our rhythmic walk and ability to laugh at ourselves whatever the challenges. This is what makes the Trinidad and Tobago's tourism product different from the rest of the Caribbean.

We have so much to be proud of, so much to share with each other, and so much to show off to the rest of the world.

So, imagine you are a visitor arriving in this country for the first time or you are a third generation Caribbean Diaspora. You come in from the airport, you book into a hotel, the meals, the room that you have, the sites and attractions that you see, the experience that you have in the first 24 hours can leave a lasting impression. The Ministry of Tourism wants to work with the industry players to make sure that this visitor experience, in every sense, will drive people to return – to look at Trinidad and Tobago as a place to rejuvenate, to enjoy enthralling cultural experiences, to host business meetings, to invest, and to come back again for another holiday.

What I have just briefly outlined is just the framework of our tourism agenda. The role of the Government in the tourism sector is to support businesses to do what they do best by creating the right operating environment that drives strong and sustainable growth. **My mandate as Minister of Tourism is to ensure that tourism becomes an engine for boosting growth in the national economy.**

I am committed to making that happen.

I must also emphasise that government cannot do it all – the private sector must step up to the plate and bear its fair share of the responsibility of creating a vibrant and profitable tourism industry.

I am confident that together we can realise the tourism potential that is so clearly epitomised within this year's World Tourism Day's international theme of “**One Billion Tourists, One Billion Opportunities**”. The challenges are immense, but I know that we can obtain the winning edge; once the tourism stakeholders and government work closely together.

Now is the time, then, to stand together, be open to new ideas and new opportunities. Now is the time for all of us to renew partnerships and to forge new ones. Let us work for the good of this industry that we all love so much. Let's not be timid. Let's not be afraid to put everything on the table.

You all have invested time, effort, ideas and hard cash to ensure the sustainable growth of the industry.

In closing, permit me once again congratulate the Trinidad Hotels, Restaurants and Tourism Association on the exceptional work that it is doing. I also thank all awardees for their commitment to our sector and hope that you will continue to explore, dream and work to ensure that tourism retains its rightful place at the heart of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Let us all rise to that challenge.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to celebrate with you tonight.

Enjoy the rest of your evening. God Bless.

September 24, 2015