

MULTI-DESTINATION TOURISM (MDT): AN OPPORTUNITY FOR DIVERSIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT



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The Tourism industry has long been regarded as one of the primary vehicles for social and economic development of the countries that comprise the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) in the Greater Caribbean. Aware that the Tourism industry is highly competitive and demands innovative marketing strategies to ensure long-term success, it has become increasingly necessary to strengthen co-operation networks between countries so as to increase and better share the revenues generated by tourism.

From a geo-political perspective, it is believed that the Region can gain a competitive advantage and thus enhance sustainability if it can package and market its varied attractions more cohesively to entice potential visitors. To address this issue, the ACS has been working to promote Multi-destination Tourism (MDT) and enhance cooperation and dialogue among the regional tourism stakeholders. The objective is to utilise MDT as a tool to preserve the Region's market share in extra-regional markets and increase intra-regional tourist flows.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MDT MODEL

Historically the approach to tourism development has been the single-destination model, where each country and/or destination competes for its market share, utilising various marketing and promotion strategies to attract visitors. This unilateral approach is still very prevalent among the countries of

the Greater Caribbean, in spite of efforts by various Regional Agencies to promote joint ventures.

Multi-destination however, goes beyond marketing and promotion and is an approach to tourism development that adds value to the tourism experience, while expanding the benefits of Tourism to more than one destination. In this regard, multi-destination tourism can be considered one of the complementary means to diversify the Regional Tourism Industry while capitalising on the Region's natural and cultural assets and contributing to social and economic growth.

From a visitor's perspective, a multi-destination tourism package will afford travellers the opportunity to experience different destinations/localities, with each experience fulfilling a different desire of the visitor. This will become even more important in seeking to add value for visitors to the region, given the impediments to travel that have been imposed by some countries, which make travel less pleasant and more costly. Such packaging will also contribute to enhancing the continued appeal of the region, and thus mitigate the increase in competition from other tourist regions.

From a destination perspective, there are several benefits, economically and otherwise to be derived from multi-destination tourism. It is well known that the old cliché of labelling the Caribbean as 'The Destination' for sun, sea and sand, while not being fully representative of the uniqueness and diversity of the region's destinations, is also no longer sufficient to attract the more experiential and socially-conscious modern consumer. With the increasing popularity of niche market tourism, there is an opportunity to position the region as a multi-destination travel option and attract new markets as the natural, historic and cultural attributes of each country is further developed and promoted. This requires willingness and commitment on the part of the countries to coordinate marketing, product development and investment strategies as 'ONE' Greater Caribbean Destination, even while continuing to develop their unique attractions.

From a regional perspective, multi-destination tourism offers the opportunity for each country to ensure maximum output from its tourism investments and related activities. This is important in view of the current threats and uncertainties facing the Tourism sector. These include the reduction in flights to and from the region's premier hubs, as well as new travel policies and levies being implemented in some of the main source markets, which have diminished travel to the Region.

Recognising that development and marketing of regional multi-destination packages can boost travel intra-regionally, and increase the region's market share from the existing North American and European markets as well as the emerging BRICS Countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and Latin America; the countries of the Greater Caribbean can exploit the potential for profitable diversification and re-branding of the Regional Tourism Industry in the international arena. The fact that multi-destination tourism is a novel and growing trend makes it ideal as a development strategy and therefore policy makers and stakeholders including airlines and other transport sectors servicing the Region, should be poised to benefit from its capacity.

TRAVEL FACILITATION KEY TO MDT

Currently, little multi-destination tourism activity exists in the region. There have been attempts by diverse sub-regional groupings particularly in relation to marketing, which have met with varying degrees of success. Notably, what is consistently lacking is the necessary packaging and establishment of support mechanisms to facilitate travel between countries.

In this regard, there is need for policy makers to aggressively review existing immigration and border control mechanisms. For the Greater Caribbean for example the possibility of adopting measures that would enable tourists to travel more conveniently to and among the countries of the Region, such as visa waivers for select countries or a multiple entry visa such as the one instated when the Caribbean hosted the Cricket World Cup Tournament in 2007, needs to be explored.

It is worth noting that there are some initiatives on the sub-regional level that seek to facilitate intra-regional travel and connectivity, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Single Market and Economy (CSME) and the Central American Integration System (SICA). The countries of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) have also signed an Economic Union Treaty, which allows for the free movement of persons. It should be noted however that these initiatives focus primarily on Trade issues and the movement of nationals between countries.

On the wider regional level very little progress has been made, and this is further compounded by the lack of efficient air and maritime connectivity within the Region. These factors as well as antiquated policies and procedures act as barriers to travel for business travellers and tourists alike.

For the ACS, the development of multi-destination tourism and the institutionalisation of support mechanisms to facilitate intra-regional travel are not incompatible with countries continuing to promote their destinations. It is also not intended to supersede a country's sovereign right to control immigration and limit the entry, duration of stay, or activities of travelers which it deems are in the best interest of ensuring the safety of its citizens and security of its borders. Alternately, multi-destination tourism has the potential to complement and enhance country's efforts both in terms of destination promotion and border control through standardising policies and procedures and the sharing of information and resources.

The ACS recognizes that most of the factors that will enhance multi-destination tourism will also positively impact on the overall tourism industry in the Region, thus facilitating its long-term profitability. The success of any multi-destination regional strategy in the Greater Caribbean however is directly related to the willingness and commitment to create an enabling environment for its development, from both a private and public sector perspective.

Figure 1. Comparative Analysis of the Characteristics and Benefits of
versus the Multi-Destination Tourism Model

Single Destination

SINGLE DESTINATION

MULTI DESTINATION

TOURIST/TRAVELLER

One Country visited

Two or more Countries visited

Specific destination or experience desired

Experience a varied and diverse itinerary by adding value to a single long-haul trip

Less time and resources needed

More time and resources needed

Target Market Demographics - Older pensioners, repeat visitors and Diaspora communities.

Target Market Demographics - Young, middle-aged, affluent, adventure-seeking and socially conscious.

COUNTRY/ DESTINATION

Country solely responsible for all marketing and promotion efforts

Cost sharing through joint marketing and promotion efforts

Promotes competition among countries and drives isolationism and protectionism

Fosters closer ties and enhances cooperation and collaboration among countries

Traditional mono-product is often the main appeal and sustained

Potential to develop new Tourism products and market niches

Traditional status quo is maintained of All-inclusive enclaves dominated by international tour operators and Global Distribution Networks

Opportunity to expand the benefits of Tourism to other regions, actors and communities locally

GREATER CARIBBEAN REGION

Single destination is the main attraction

Multi-destination packaging a key element

Traditional avenues of market access and promotion to potential visitors maintained

Provides access to a wider market and an opportunity to increase visitor numbers capitalising on a wide regional promotional effort

Country benefits solely and directly from its own efforts

Opportunity to expand participation in tourism and spread tourism's benefits regionally

Focus on promoting and developing Country/Destination image

Strengthens regional image and appeal by showcasing the diversity of the region

The Country or individual Destination is promoted

The Region promoted as the Destination

Julio Orozco, Director of Sustainable Tourism and Amanda Charles, Sustainable Tourism Adviser of the Association of Caribbean States. Any comments or feedback can be sent to feedback@acs-aec.org