

Travel Facilitation key to Tourism Development



Industry experts acknowledge that travel facilitation is closely linked with the development of Tourism and is a key contributor to the overall appeal of a destination, which can lead to increased demand and sustained tourism performance. Travel facilitation is a broad term that defines all the services and facilities related to getting the potential visitor from their point of origin to the destination. For purposes of this article however, the focus will be on aspects that can be managed and/or controlled by respective destinations. This includes inter-alia, visa policies and fees, travel regulations and taxes, and the relevant immigration processes and services.

Regional organizations like the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) are increasingly placing emphasis on the need for countries to address antiquated visa, travel and taxation policies which can be impediments to travel and tourism industry growth. More particularly for the countries of the Greater Caribbean, efforts of the ACS aim to provide information on current best practices, systems and processes and also promote cooperation and knowledge exchanges between countries towards the standardization and harmonization of immigration and visa policies and processes, at the regional level.

On the broader international scale, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), two of the world's leading Tourism Organisations in seeking to raise awareness of this topic as a priority of global significance, have published several studies and reports to evaluate the current situation of visa regimes and procedures and the possibility to build solutions to advance travel facilitation.

According to these reports the countries of the Latin America and Caribbean Region are among the most open in the hemisphere and have made significant progress, either by implementing 'visa

exemptions' and/or 'visa-on-arrival' measures, which have contributed to the remarkable growth of the tourism sector. Especially noteworthy are the multilateral agreements that mutually exempt all or certain categories of travellers from the visa requirement. However, there are still important areas of opportunity that remain under-utilised, such as the possibility to maximize the use of information and communication technologies in improving visa and immigration procedures.

It is also worth noting that while many countries have instituted visitor-friendly systems to facilitate cruise travel, similar measures for commercial air-travel seem to be lagging. Many travellers will no doubt recount the challenges associated with air-travel in general to include travelling within the region. Much of this can be attributed to regulations imposed by Airlines and International Civil Aviation Authorities, such as new luggage restrictions, intrusive and lengthy security checks, as well as long lines and travel delays. However, there are certain factors within the ambit of countries control that can be made more efficient and 'traveller-friendly'.

The current reality is that travelling within the region is encumbered by stringent travel policies that make travel less desirable and more costly. Travellers, whether local residents or visiting tourists have to contend in most cases with Value Added Tax (VAT) added to the cost of airfare, as well as taxes for entry and/or departure, and other ambiguous levies and fees associated with travel to the destination. These measures are used by many countries in the region and elsewhere around the world as a means to generate revenue. Several industry experts argue however, that by making travel more affordable there is potential to increase volume in terms of the number of visitors travelling to the destination and consequently in the revenue generated from in-country spending. There is added value in that the revenue generated could be up to double the amount of what would have been collected in entry taxes and fees.

Air-travel remains the most convenient and fastest way to travel, particularly for international visitors, and costly taxes and fees act as a deterrent particularly to leisure travellers and in some cases may contribute to making travel unaffordable. A primary challenge for every tourist destination is to make their product attractive and affordable. For the tourism dependent countries of the Greater Caribbean seeking to remain competitive and increase their share of tourism arrivals and earnings, a review of fiscal policies as well as taxes and fees associated with air travel is highly recommended.

There are also regulatory systems, such as immigration and customs procedures, which are worth considering. Noticeably, in many countries throughout the region, these entry procedures remain a tedious and archaic process. In this area, upgrading airport facilities as well as introducing computerised entry-systems and mechanised scanners, although costly would be worthwhile investments. The human factor is also a key ingredient that should not be overlooked. The 'Airport experience' is often the first impression that tourists gain of a country, and their subsequent perceptions can be adversely affected if they encounter difficulties, delays, high costs or unfriendliness when going through the immigration and customs process. The importance of training to instill the need for relevant airport personnel to deliver a friendly and courteous service, while also maintaining the highest levels of professionalism and efficiency is critical.

Travel policies, visa processes, entry procedures and other regulations are justifiably employed by Governments to ensure security; control immigration and limit the entry, duration of stay, or activities of travelers; and can be a means to control tourism and investment. Therefore it is not suggested that these be discarded altogether, but reviewed with the aim of updating to improve their functionality and effectiveness to Governments and visitors alike.

The UNWTO accurately asserts that, in order to reap the full socio-economic benefits international tourism can bring to a country, it is necessary to put in place conditions that make the country appealing and competitive, among which most importantly is to make the country easy to visit. In this regard, it is important to note that some countries (including many ACS Member States in the region) have introduced initiatives aimed at encouraging and facilitating visitor access. Examples include tourism investment incentives, increased marketing budgets and favorable visa policies, such as:

- Visa waiver and visa-free travel for citizens of certain countries;
- simplified visa application procedures such as visas on arrival; and
- reduced or zero visa charges.

However much more remains to be done and more importantly streamlined across all countries of the region. A recap of the UNWTO/WTTC studies on Travel facilitation offers important conclusions that merit review. Accordingly, in attempting to offer some suggestions to enhance the travel experience to and among the countries of the Greater Caribbean, the following can be considered:

- (i) There is need to improve the delivery of information on entry formalities, to include visa requirements and procedures. Information should be easily accessible on country information as well as Embassy/Consular sites, and be accurate and undated.
- (ii) Enhancing systems and processes to obtain visas should be prioritised. The application process, wait time, as well as the requirements linked to this process can be improved with the use of modern technology such as instituting eVisa programmes.
- (iii) The use of differentiated treatment measures can be explored. This can include having different policies and procedures based on duration of stay and purpose of visit, such as lessening restrictions for intransit or overnight visitors and establishing processes to support and encourage multi-destination tourism etc.
- (iv) Pursue visa facilitation Agreements. There are many Trade Agreements on the sub-regional level and among diverse groupings of countries within the Greater Caribbean Region that facilitate travel and therefore must be applauded. The strategy now should be to pursue multi-lateral arrangements with countries that have been identified as key source markets, particularly in the emerging markets from within Latin America as well as the growing economic powerhouses of the BRICS countries of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This can be pursued as an initiative with the framework of the ACS or by countries engaging in individual 'reciprocal arrangements'.

It is believed that implementing any or a combination of these can yield substantial returns in visits, tourism receipts and jobs for local economies, in short guarantee the future growth and development of the tourism industry.