

# Viewpoint

## Towards an alternative tourism for Jamaica

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### Keywords

Jamaica, Tourism development, Tourism management

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### Abstract

This paper examines some of the trends, issues and challenges associated with tourism development in Jamaica. It argues that for the tourism product to be more competitive, there is a need to rethink the kind of tourism product currently on offer to the world. It is being suggested that Jamaican tourism planners, drawing on the experiences of a number of countries, should concentrate more on the culture and history of Jamaica, making sure they involve different segments of civil society in the development process. Only then will tourism reach its full potential and become a sustainable industry in the country.

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### Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and the Caribbean is by far the most tourism dependent region in the world. However, approximately 95 percent of the world's tourism activities take place outside of the Caribbean; the region constitutes only about 5 percent of global tourism. In recent times, the Caribbean's main growth market has been Europe, even though Canada and the USA still remain the most important markets for the product. In terms of the distribution of these markets, Europe constitutes 25 percent, Canada about 5 percent, while the USA makes up 46 percent of all tourists coming into this region[1].

While Jamaica receives 9 percent of the tourists coming to the region, it is the Hispanic Caribbean that welcomes the bulk of the visitors within this region. Jamaica gets about 4 percent of all European tourists coming into the region. In addition, a significant proportion of Canadian tourists also go to the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Even though there is not a great emphasis on intra-Caribbean tourism in Jamaica, there are some destinations which depend on Caribbean tourists. Trinidad, St Lucia, Barbados and Guyana have a highly developed intra-regional tourism market.

Over the years, the length of stay of the average tourist has been increasing, and the data for tourists originating in the USA, Canada and Europe reveal that the Europeans are the ones who tend to stay longest in these destinations. However, the Jamaican tourism sector is largely dependent on the American market. About 70 percent of all visitors to the country come from the USA. The Canadian market makes up only 8 percent of total arrivals, and the UK and the other European markets constitute about 17 percent. So Jamaica is really a destination for the Americans. Jamaica contrasts with the rest of the Caribbean, where the US market makes up less than 50 percent of total arrivals – making them a more diversified destination.

While the Jamaica tourism sector has grown over the years, there are some very important issues which have to be addressed if the product is to improve and become more competitive. According to some stakeholders in the tourism sector, crime is the cause of many of the problems faced by the industry in Jamaica. Many persons in the private sector agree with this and have argued for quite some time that the anemic growth rates in the industry are primarily due to high levels of crime in the country. But is this true?



## It is more than crime

Recently, in a paper which I co-authored with Dillon Alleyne we looked at the relationship between crime and tourism development in Jamaica (Alleyne and Boxill 2003). What we found was that while one can argue that crime does have an impact on the ability of the industry to expand, this is merely a part of the story.

In this paper we argue that, on the one hand, while the development of the all-inclusive concept has been good for Jamaican tourism, it has also prevented the growth of the non-all-inclusive sector. On the other hand, and consistent with the views of Issa and Jayawardena (2003), if there were no significant all-inclusive sector, then the visibility which Jamaica has received, internationally, as a result of the crime factor might have had a more detrimental impact on the tourism sector. So in one sense the all-inclusive sector has been able to bring in tourists, to shield and to protect them from the perceived crime or security problems which exist in the wider society. However, while the number of all-inclusive rooms has grown tremendously, the other sector has been stagnating. That is to say, the rapid growth of the all-inclusive, which constitutes a significant proportion of the rooms, is probably preventing other aspects of the tourism industry from growing.

It is noteworthy that the all-inclusive hotels have catered primarily to American visitors and they have not been able to capture the attention of the European visitors as much. The reason for this is simply because the European visitor is essentially different from the American visitor. Mexico has developed an even more interesting model which demonstrates this point. The Mexicans developed Cancun, giving the Americans, an "America" away from America. But, they also created a destination to attract the Europeans. This other destination, called Playa del Carmen, is one of the fastest growing destinations in Mexico. The experiment was successful and Playa del Carmen primarily attracts European visitors. How did the Mexicans do it? They simply created the destination with the preferences of the Europeans in mind. They built small hotels, they made the settings more intimate, they concentrated on developing a wide range of restaurants and they offer a wide range of activities which cater to the needs of these visitors. The Mexicans figured out quite early that the average American visitor has a different set of needs from the average European visitor. In addition, after having flown all the way from Europe, the European visitors tend to spend much more time in Mexico and are therefore able to take advantage of Mexico's numerous sites and destinations,

which the average American is highly unlikely to have the opportunity to visit.

In terms of culture, there is an essential difference between the Americans and the Europeans and Jamaican tourism policy makers and investors have not taken advantage of the European market. This market is important because this is the market that is most likely to make the linkages between the hotels and the small operators in the society. In other words, the dissatisfied vendors in the craft markets in Negril or in Ocho Rios are more likely to benefit from European tourists than from the visitors from the USA. This is so simply because the psyche of the American tourist and the European tourist tend to be different. Of course I am speaking here in absolute terms, because there are American tourists who are similar in their tastes and preferences to European tourists, and many European tourists also opt for "American" type tourism destinations. However, in general, Europe and the USA are different tourism markets.

Therefore, our study argues that the rapid development of the all-inclusive sector, while good for the short-run, has had significant long-run negative effects on the expansion of the industry. The failure to deal with the causes of crime, and more importantly, the inability to tap into the non-American markets, encouraged a lopsided growth pattern in the accommodation sector.

The second issue arising from our study is that another problem affecting the tourism industry has to do with the tourism resorts themselves – namely, Ocho Rios, Montego Bay and Negril. Although these areas have experienced rapid population growth there has been a very little concomitant infrastructure to serve the growing communities. The annual population growth in Montego Bay, for example, has been 3.1 percent. The rate of growth in the tourism resort areas increases at a much faster pace than in the rest of Jamaica, and consequently, the average growth rates for the tourism towns are higher. What is responsible for this? People are migrating into the tourism areas in search of employment. In Negril between 20 and 30 percent of the population are squatters, because they have no land. In Ocho Rios, Negril and Montego Bay have reached their carrying capacity in the social services. This situation does not augur well for the sustainability of these resorts.

According to the research on tourism, tourism destinations tend to prosper when the citizens enjoy the amenities to which the tourists are also entitled. In this respect New Zealand has provided us with an excellent model (Pearce, 1995). The New Zealand governments developed the South

Island as an important tourism destination, but their strategy in this process was to develop the island first and foremost for the New Zealanders. The tourism research regarding destination development points to this key factor: the development of any destination has to be centered on the development of the people and the development of the infrastructure in that area. Whenever the amenities for the tourists are much more advanced than those of the local residents, this can lead to resentment toward tourists (Pearce, 1995).

### An alternative model

For there to be a more sustainable tourism product a different approach to product development must be adopted. The global trend in tourism is not in the direction of sea and sand tourism, but more attraction, cultural, heritage and green tourism. In this regard, there is much to be learnt from tourism development in Mexico, Guatemala and the large cities, such as London and Paris. In Mexico, for instance, there is sea and sand tourism, however, like Europe, there is also an impressive heritage and cultural tourism industry.

Jamaica has the potential to develop an alternative tourism, which can deliver more than what is offered by the current product, which is largely sea and sand based. One example of this potential alternative is Port Royal, a unique historical site in the Western hemisphere, which can be transformed into an important attraction for both locals and visitors alike. There are, of course, many other examples, such as Spanish Town, the first city in the country, built by the Spanish settlers hundreds of years back. Yet another example of a heritage site, which could be exploited, is the world famous Trench Town, the home of reggae and the place most associated with Bob Marley.

It must be pointed out that the above examples of potential heritage tourism sites have been discussed ad nauseum by commentators and developers in Jamaica. However, I raise them here because, in my view, tourism development should be about developing a product which is attractive to the visitor, but which is also culturally uplifting and economically beneficial. In the past, tourism development has been conceived as simply a product to make money for investors by luring visitors to our shores to have a good time. This view of tourism needs to change, if the industry is to be sustainable in Jamaica.

Clearly then, there is a need to make connections with products which can enhance the

education, the identity, the self-confidence, the self-esteem of the people, while at the same time earning income for the population. When one visits a mansion in France or a castle in England, this is what is being done. You go there to experience a part of the history of a country which is proud of its history and which asks its own people to learn more about their history. This is no longer an industry with sea and sand as the focal point, where somebody comes and takes something and leaves a few dollars behind. What should be done is that you provide something for yourself and then you let other people experience that product. In Jamaica, such attractions would be good for school trips or groups, which wish to experience the cultural heritage and the history of the country. The more locals experience these historical links, the more they are likely to encourage people to experience them; the more locals come to appreciate and protect these attractions, the more they are likely to welcome tourists to these attractions with pride.

In Mexico, the government spends a lot of money on museums, archeological sites, and focusses on teaching locals about their history. In Jamaica there is a need to understand the centrality of history to tourism development. Historical sites earn a significant proportion of the tourist dollar globally. There is a great deal of the Jamaican culture that can be used to attract visitors.

For this type of tourism to develop *en masse*, a different mindset is required from the policy makers and the society. Research and training has to be taken more seriously, as training at all levels of the industry is important for this type of tourism to prosper. Training for the tourism sector has to be in all areas, not just in hospitality. Tourism training must embrace the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences. These studies will facilitate the promotion of both heritage and educational tourism.

### Conclusion

Tourism is an extremely important industry, one far too important for the Jamaican society to allow decisions affecting its development to be left to a few private sector people and policy makers. Tourism is the only economic sector in the Caribbean region which Caribbean academics have not engaged with in a very serious way as yet. Ironically, it is the region's most important source of revenue. The discourse on tourism development needs to be widened, to incorporate more serious, rigorous research, as is the practice in other sectors such as bauxite and agriculture. Tourism's

potential can be fully realized only if policy makers and the people of the society reorient and revitalize the approach to strategic development that has for too long been associated with this industry.

### Note

- 1 Data for the paper are taken from the *Caribbean Tourism Statistical Report 1999-2000* (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2000).

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