

BTIA Annual General Meeting – December 5th 2014

Looking back some Twenty five (25) years ago, if you had mentioned the word 'apple' at that time, we all thought of a nice healthy fruit. Today, when you say apple, we first think of electronic devices like smart phones. Similarly, some twenty five years ago, if you had mentioned the word 'tablet', our first thought was about some form of medication, but today, we think of a tablet as an electronic device. The list can go on and on, if you ponder on other words such as 'Blackberry', 'mouse' and others. These ladies and gentlemen, clearly signal that times have changed and continues to change; and products are evolving in such a way, to give new meaning to words, and hence, new focus, new direction and particularly, greater level of importance.

Tourism is no different! Some twenty five years ago, we were all ignorant to the idea of cruise tourism. In fact, in Belize cruise was in its true infancy stage, with only a couple hundred visitors to Belize at that time. Today, we are expecting over 1m cruise passengers by the end of the year. Overnight arrivals on the other hand, was at approximately 150,000 visitors. Showing that we have grown in overnight arrivals by approximately 200% within 25 years.

With just those brief statistics, you may already recognize that 25 years ago, the growth and development of our economy had very little dependency on tourism revenues. Today, the tourism industry is the second largest in Belize, following only the agriculture industry. Tourism also employs one in every seven persons while 25 years ago, less than 2,000 Belizeans worked in the overnight sector at hotels across the Country.

With these thought provoking statistics, it is clear that the level of importance on the tourism sector is at an all-time high, and therefore, all tourism related initiatives must be treated with the significance and prominence with which it impacts our daily lives. The reality then, is that for this to happen, we must all be in this business together. The public private sector partnership is inevitable, if we are to be able to support this industry's role and its level of importance to both economic development and the livelihood of so many Belizeans.

In looking closely at Countries like USA, Spain, France and Germany which ranks highest in the world in the Tourism business, they have adopted what is referred to as the strongest possible tourism strategy. Collectively, there are four parts that makes this strategy successful. First - what government does nationally, Second - the role and support of local

government. Third - how we make policies in other areas that will impact the tourism industry. And fourth - how we stimulate the private sector in tourism. As a country, we should have the strongest possible engagement with the tourism industry in each of these areas, and as Tourism Ambassadors, we should encourage each other to be on board.

Tourism plays a very vital role in the entire global economy. Generating roughly 9% of the global GDP, international tourism ranked as the fourth-largest industry in the world, coming immediately after fuels, chemicals, and automotive products. In Belize, the tourism Industry accounts for approximately 25% of GDP, and as I mentioned before, ranks second, coming very close behind agriculture.

The economic might of the tourism industry has helped transform societies, often for the better. In Belize itself, we have seen how tourism has changed lives and has several advantages over other industries. For example,

- It is consumed at the point of production so that it directly benefits the communities that provide the goods.
- It enables communities that are poor in material wealth but rich in culture and history, to use their unique characteristics as an income-generating source.

- It creates networks of different opportunities with a variety of jobs for tour guides, translators, cooks, cleaners, drivers, hotel managers, and other service sector workers. Many tourism jobs are flexible or seasonal and can even be taken on in parallel with existing occupations, such as farming.

In the BTB's quest to execute its tourism strategy for continued growth and development within our tourism sector, we have delivered well on many initiatives within this year. To highlight a few, I will focus on areas that I have been asked to mention, including Marketing & product development, quality of service and our stakeholder engagement.

Promoting Belize as a unique, authentic and attractive destination is our marketing trust and main focus. Most of our efforts are concentrated on ensuring that we target the right people, using the right medium, based on very meticulous analysis of market data and metrics. The results have shown that the market is responding, as the growing trend in tourist arrivals continues to slope upwards.

As you are aware, for the first time within ten months, Belize has achieved its one million visitor milestone – a target that was set to be accomplished at the end of the year. While this is historic and sets a new target for

us, we are already seeing that the potential for us to sustain this growth is quite promising. In a nut shell, our marketing efforts are yielding very encouraging results; and while the BTB utilizes this success as a measurement of its performance, we are also cognizant of the fact that the marketing efforts of our partners at the BTIA, BHA, along with other individual hoteliers and stakeholders, have all been responsible for the success in marketing our destination. I can therefore assure you that the aggressive marketing of the Belize brand will continue well beyond 2015 but more so, we will build on what we have done so far by creating more synergies among stakeholders, and promote Belize, more in unison with each other.

This therefore obviously signifies that strengthening and enhancing our stakeholder engagement has to remain high on our list of priorities. The BTB's 2014/2015 strategic plan outlines stakeholder engagement as one of its main objectives. With that in mind, we have been meeting with the BTIA, BHA, the ACSP, tour operators, port agents, and other individual partners and stakeholders in the Industry. These meetings have so far yielded successful results and specific actions for improvements where necessary.

- The BTB now plans to renew the MOU with the BTIA and BHA, to re-engage as true partners, having the same mission of promoting Belize as

the destination of choice. The BTB has further agreed to consistently promote both the Hotel guide and the Destination Belize, official collaterals of the both BHA and BTIA.

- On an individual level, I continue to personally take the time to visit and meet with stakeholders, to engage with them and hear their personal views on the industry and ways to foster the growth we all want to sustain. These discussions are meaningful and have so far given me great insight into prioritizing these ongoing initiatives of the BTB.
- Our staff as well, also continues to visit with stakeholders countrywide, on a day to day basis.

While Marketing Belize is critical for our success, delivering on our brand promise is equally important. Another of our objectives is therefore aimed to continue in improving the quality of our service delivery within the industry, to give our visitors the "Experience" that would have them coming back.

This is of great importance to us, as in any business sector, we try to retain what we have, because as we all know, if we lose our visitors (customers), it takes twice the effort to get them back. Giving the best quality service in this industry is therefore of significant importance to sustain the growth we are seeing today and to further increase that growth.

The BTB initiatives in improving service quality over the past few months have been for example, extensive Tour guide training across the country. We are now going even further, as we are finalizing a project to revamp the tour guide program and implement tour guide specialization. This means that very soon, our tour guides can chose to specialize only in areas where they will provide tours. Knowing all areas of the entire country, or all aspects of guiding will no longer be required if a guide intends to conduct only Belize City tours for instance. This is all in our efforts to have tour guides concentrate and specialize in what they do best, to improve on service delivery and provide the best experience to our visitors.

To enhance our training efforts, just last month the BTB concluded its 'Train the trainer' session where representatives of our related agencies such as Immigration, Customs, Border Management and others, were all involved in a customer service and PR training conducted by the National Initiative of Service Excellence out of Barbados. Again, this is to ensure that those persons with whom the visitors first interact at the point of entry, are given the necessary skills to give a very good first impression to visitors.

Another major initiative to improve on quality of service in the industry, is our drive to implement

Minimum standard for Hotels and properties in 2015. Hoteliers have been introduced to specific requirements, which at a minimum, must be maintained to be able to provide good quality service to guests. The BTB have already conducted two sets of Audits and I am pleased to say that property owners have shown a drastic upswing towards meeting these requirements. This initiative is therefore considered to be well received as property owners recognize the need to maintain a standard that will guarantee the guest at least, a minimum level of experience.

In our focus to Build and develop our destinations across the Country, and create that unique and authentic experience, quite a few initiatives are ongoing and will continue into 2015.

- Next week, the BTB and the BTIA PG will be launching its Heart of Toledo trail, giving visitors another destination for tour.
- In San Ignacio, we are working with the town Council on the upliftment of the Columbus Park and the Harksworth bridge, while also working with the Caye Caulker Village council on building a craft market to assist artisans in marketing and selling their products.
- We are in the planning phase to develop the PG water front and the Corozal waterfront, to create

other unique destinations in Southern and Northern Belize.

In building out these destinations, our efforts to work with the relevant agencies to expand the Philip Goldson International airport are ongoing. In fact, I am pleased to mention that an initial expansion of the arrival section at the airport is ongoing and is scheduled for completion later this month.

This will help to accommodate the additional flights we successfully gained for this high season, with United adding a direct flight from Chicago, Delta adding a direct flight from LA plus an additional flight from Atlanta and most notable is, Condor Airlines connecting with Tropic Air in Cancun to have for the first time, a same day connection from Europe to Belize.

These are great successes achieved recently, and on which we can build. But, despite these successes, let's not forget that in such delicate and vulnerable industry, we do have our share of challenges as well. The recent Ebola scare is a good example of how volatile we can be, but also how responsive and strong we can become, when we work together to resolve issues, and head in the same direction.

Definitely, there is more to be done in working with even more agencies, when we look at additional tourism impacting areas such as improvement of roads and infrastructure, increasing room stock, additional flights from Europe and South America, visa waivers, and the list goes on. These are all areas of priority as we formulate our three year strategic plan, which will also be aimed at implementing the long term strategies towards the National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the work continues. I feel confident that my feet are now wet, and that's being a bit modest. However, I am now in this business, enough to commit to you that BTB will work very closely with you, to drive this industry forward. Our commitment to you comes also from our Board of Directors, who have all unanimously committed to taking the necessary actions, so that we will strengthen our engagement with you.

Times are changing and we must do the same, if we are to progress. Remember that apple is no longer a fruit and tablet, is no longer medication. Let's wake up and move together with the time.