

## Learning lessons for tourism from 2017

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No one involved in Caribbean tourism will easily forget 2017. It was the year in which Hurricanes Irma and Maria demonstrated not only climate change's ability to negatively affect much of the Caribbean economy, but also made clear that tourism and its sustainability have become central to the region's future.

Arriving in quick succession, the two, intense, category-five storms, devastated variously Anguilla, the BVI, Puerto Rico, the USVI, St Maarten and St Martin, Barbuda, Dominica, St Barths, and the north coast of Cuba and many of the country's central provinces. They also caused extensive damage to other nations from St Lucia to the Turks and Caicos, causing death and injury, displacing visitors, severely damaging tourism infrastructure, and raising doubts internationally as to whether the region was open for business.

In the short term, they made the point about the importance of immediate realistic messaging on social media, the importance of establishing information protocols with tour operators and governments in source markets, and the provision of regular online recovery updates in the months following hurricane damage.

They also demonstrated that not only is climate change real and likely to be lasting, but that the economic growth, employment and the taxes created by tourism, are particularly vulnerable.

The two hurricanes emphasised too, how dependent the industry is on both the built and natural environment, and that sustaining tourism's economic contribution requires governments to invest in and seek external support to build resilience.

More generally, the two weather events underlined the need for a joined-up public-private approach to making the case internationally for increased support for the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility. They also emphasised the need for region's vulnerability to be recognised by international financial institutions and for concessional funding for recovery and adaptation to continue to be made available.

It was also the year in which it became apparent that commercial insurance premiums for storm damage were set to rise dramatically to levels at which smaller players in the hospitality sector will likely require industry associations and governments to find new creative solutions if national product diversity is to be maintained.

Beyond this, 2017 was the year in which changing US policy had both a direct and indirect influence on Caribbean tourism.

In particular, the decision by President Trump to reverse his predecessor's policy on travel by US citizens to Cuba created some surprising winners and losers, creating new scenarios for regional tourism.

The new US regulations had the effect of ending individual travel to Cuba by US citizens, making visiting more complex, while creating uncertainty and risk for the average US traveller. The winners in this will undoubtedly be the US cruise and the specialised US tour operators able to offer such travellers regulatory certainty. The losers and those most likely to suffer in 2018-19 are cruise destinations distant from the US if as expected the cruise lines adapt their itineraries to spend longer sailing around Cuba.

2017 was the year in which Jamaica hosted a conference in Montego Bay that could have long term implications for the way in which the industry is regarded internationally. Together with the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the Jamaican government hosted an event that explored how the industry's growth might drive future economic development and social change and come to play a central role in delivering the UN sustainable development goals that aim to end poverty globally.

It was also the year in which it largely came to be recognised that visitor motivation was changing.

At numerous industry events in the region and internationally there was something close to a consensus that the growing international demand for the authentic and experiences, rather than a homogenised product, would necessitate reorienting tourism in ways that brings benefits to communities away from the beach.

The year marked the return to prominence of the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA), partly through its pro-active response to events such as the two hurricanes, but more importantly through its thoughtful and strong positions on public policy issues from climate change to taxation.

Space does not permit more, but let us hope that the lessons of 2017, are not just well learnt, but are acted on by governments and the industry.

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