Is multi-destination tourism about to become a reality?

Business of Tourism
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Traditionally, stay-over tourism has been based on a single-destination model. For most of the Caribbean this will likely remain the principal approach for the foreseeable future, albeit with a new emphasis on diversification away from the beach and improving the visitor experience.

There are, however, signs that a product which has been talked about for many years is at last emerging: the multi-destination Caribbean vacation.

The basic concept is straightforward. It revolves around the idea that the visitor who wants to see and understand more of the Caribbean can, if the right arrangements exist, visit seamlessly two, three or more geographically proximate nations.

Unlike cruise tourism, multi-destination travel involves stay-overs in each nation. It is potentially of great appeal to visitors coming from non-traditional distant source markets like China or Russia, who want to see and experience more and stay longer.

In the last few months, at the initiative of Jamaica's Tourism Minister, Edmund Bartlett, multi-destination agreements have been signed by Jamaica with Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, while Cayman has indicated that in the coming months it expects to do the same.

Importantly, multi-destination tourism goes beyond marketing and promotion. For it to happen it requires several factors to work together. A 2015 study by the UN World Tourism Organisation set these out as being ease of crossing borders; transport connectivity; branding in major tourist markets; the involvement of tour operators, hotel chains and travel suppliers in developing innovative products; and of course, regional cooperation.

Placed in a Caribbean context this means that for the initiatives agreed to work, there will have to be efficient air and maritime connectivity between participating countries; an aggressive review of existing immigration and border control mechanisms; additional incentives offered to tour operators, hoteliers and other service providers to develop

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multi destination marketing programmes; and fresh resources put into joint marketing campaigns.

More specifically, for multi-destination tourism to be seamless, a single travel document will be required allowing visitors entering one country to enter the others without a separate visa. Ideally there should also be agreement on mitigating into a single sum the wildly varying tourism taxes visitors pay in different countries; and an overall approach that captures for the visitor the cultural and other difference of each location.

It also requires an acceptance that certain regional hubs such as Havana, Mexico City, Punta Cana and in future Panama City, are likely to be the best facilitators for visitors by air from China, Russia and East Asia who are seeking a multi-destination experience. This is because they are easy-entry transit points for passengers on Air China, Aeroflot and other long-haul same-plane services not seen elsewhere in the region.

In this context, reports in the Cayman media suggest that the inter-regional connectivity option being explored is for Cayman Airways to operate a spoke and hub services carrying visitors between multi-destination partner countries.

While the detail is challenging, it is not insurmountable. Rather it will require the political will of those in the governments concerned to follow through to unlock the likely bureaucratic impediments that such a mould breaking initiative suggests.

To this end, a joint summit has been scheduled to take place by March involving high-level representatives from Jamaica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, who reportedly will also discuss the marketing arrangements in greater detail.

Multi-destination tourism has broader implications. It reflects a view held in the northern Caribbean that future growth may lie in economic convergence between the region’s generally larger economies. The suggestion is that with much improved transport infrastructure, tourism could become a significant driver in developing a new model of economic integration.

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