

Tobago looks to bring Canadians 'Beyond Ordinary'

Tourism Board © 05-06-2019 1:46 pm Blake Wolfe



(From left) Jessie Peters, representative - Canada, Tobago Tourism Agency; Ann Layton, founder & CEO, Siren Communications; Sheena Des Vignes, marketing coordinator, Tobago Tourism Agency; Louis Lewis, CEO, Tobago Tourism Agency.



Blake Wolfe

Blake Wolfe is an award-winning journalist and editor, who joined PAX after nearly 10 years in Canada's newspaper industry. In addition to PAX, his work has been featured in publications such as the Metroland Media group of newspapers and the Toronto Sun.

Tobago's natural environment and authentic travel experiences are front and centre in an ambitious three-year growth plan, in which the destination seeks to increase tourism by 90 per cent.

And while Sandals may have cancelled its much-anticipated Tobago resort project, there's still plenty of interest in the destination from other resort companies, Tobago Tourism Agency CEO Louis Lewis revealed to PAX.

The CEO was joined by fellow representatives of the tourism organization during an exclusive chat with PAX last week, for an update on Tobago's return to promotion within the Canadian market and what the island holds in store for travellers in the coming years. While 'Beyond Ordinary' has replaced 'Clean, Green, Safe and Serene' as the destination's tagline in its recent rebranding, the tenets of the former slogan remain a part of Tobago's identity, Lewis explained.

"We're back in the Canadian marketplace and have signalled our re-entry with our new campaign," he said. "It's no longer 'Clean, Green, Safe and Serene' - although we are still all of those things!"

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Tobago's rainforest

With Canada as Tobago's fourth-largest inbound market, Lewis explained that Canadians are a key part of realizing a goal of growing tourism to the island by a further 90 per cent over the next three years, with a first-year goal of 25 per cent. The approach is clearly working, as already this year Lewis explained that visitation to Tobago had increased 27 per cent for February-March and 29 per cent for April.

He added that with Canadians' travel styles aligning with Tobago's "core pillars" of tourism - namely the natural environment; sun and sand; rich heritage and culture; honeymoons and destination weddings - the market is a natural fit for the island.

"The Canadian market is of a lot of interest to us," Lewis said. "What we've discovered is that a lot of the attractions and reasons to visit Tobago, things like birding or diving, the Canadian market really feeds into that."

"The broad strategy is that Tobago is blessed with many tourism assets; anything you perceive to be a key component of a Caribbean destination, we have it."

The destination also received an airlift boost from Canada in the form of Sunwing's new Toronto-Tobago service, which launched last December with the first direct flight to Tobago from Canada, offering packages to resorts such as Starfish Tobago. With a 79 per cent load factor in its first year of operation, Sunwing has confirmed that the flight will return for the 2019-20 sun season, Lewis said.

In addition to Sunwing, Canadians can also travel with Air Canada, WestJet and Caribbean Airlines to Trinidad and make the short 20-minute air connection to Tobago.

More resorts coming soon?

The preservation of Tobago's natural landscape is also front and centre when it comes to the development of new resort properties in the destination, Lewis told PAX.

While "pockets of resistance" may have ultimately thwarted the development of a new Sandals and Beaches resort complex on the island (the brand pulled out of the development in January citing "negative publicity" around the development, including criticism about the potential impact on the local environment), Lewis said that interest in resort development by other investors remains high. Sandals itself has previously stated that it would again consider the establishment of a Tobago property in the future.

"The demand is still strong," Lewis told PAX. "I think that the outcome was ultimately positive, because investors and brands are now looking at Tobago. I can't mention any names but I'm confident that soon you will hear announcements about property developments. They're recognizable names for sure."

destination is also actively seeking to become "the greenest destination," Lewis said, by qualifying as many resorts and restaurants as possible with eco-friendly certifications.

"The last thing you want to do is wreck the natural environment and in 2019, you can build without disturbing the ecosystem. We don't want to overrun the country with large resorts; we know that our market is people with niche interests."



Starfish Tobago resort

"Low-impact, high-yield"

With a unique tourism offering, Lewis said that Tobago has fine-tuned its marketing approach for the destination, focusing on what he described as "low-impact, high-yield" tourism such as luxury outdoor experiences.

To that end, the travel agent community is a key asset in connecting Tobago (through its Canadian representation in Siren) with those discerning clients looking for the next big travel destination.

"The DR takes a million Canadians every year - they're established and know who their clients are - but Tobago is going to be a little bit different," said Siren CEO Ann Layton, adding that the destination will likely see more FIT than group travel. "It's a different approach and the agents need to be a little more educated as to what the product is. We're looking for a more discerning consumer who wants something a little different. Maybe they've done the sun-and-bake thing already and they're looking for something a bit more unique, educational and authentic."

"That's the consumer that we want to talk to. For those agents with clients who are a little more demanding, those are the agents we want to work with."