



Feature Address

Dr. the Hon. Hubert A. Minnis

Prime Minister, Commonwealth of the Bahamas

Opening Ceremony State of the Tourism Industry Conference (SOTIC)

Grand Ballroom, Atlantis Paradise Island

Tuesday, October 2, 2018; 7:00pm

- Hon. D'ionisio D'Aguilar, Minister of Tourism
- Ms. Joy Jibrilu, Bahamas Director General of Tourism
- Senior Government Officials
- Mr. Hugh Riley, Secretary General & CEO, Caribbean Tourism Organization
- Other Regional and International Ministers and Commissioners of Tourism
- Distinguished ladies and gentlemen

It is a pleasure to welcome you to The Bahamas for the State of the Tourism Industry Conference, the premier tourism conference of our region.

I welcome you as both head of government of The Bahamas, and as a member of the Caricom Quasi-Cabinet with responsibility for tourism.

The Caribbean is an archipelago of discovery and wonder, bound together by geography, history and culture.

We are an archipelago of possibility.

We are an archipelago of opportunity.

We are an archipelago of resilience.

We resonate with the rhythms of calypso, reggae, soca, Junkanoo, punta rock, reggaeton and other genres, which are all part of the pulsating heartbeat of a Caribbean Civilization that is unique among the civilizations of the world.

It is this very Caribbean Civilization that we proudly offer to the world as we strive to become a global leader in tourism on multiple fronts.

We must broaden our Caribbean brand in tourism.

Our region must be known for extraordinary visitor experiences and services.

We must also be known as a global center of excellence for all aspects of tourism development.

In so many ways the potential of our region is untapped.

This week, we will explore the possibilities and opportunities to rejuvenate, recreate and reconnect for new directions in Caribbean tourism.

May I take a moment to thank Minister of Tourism Dionisio for his guidance of CTO matters over the past year and a half.

I also thank our Director General Joy Jibrilu, for her steady hand and guidance over the past several years.

We are proud of these Bahamians and others, who selflessly devote their time and energy to the growth and development of the tourism economy of our region.

Allow me also to offer my appreciation to the Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Association and its leadership for its collaboration with CTO in advancing the interests of Caribbean tourism.

We are delighted that these two most important tourism organizations in the region are working closely together.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are meeting here today in the name of one of the world's most powerful brands: the Caribbean, which some have called the "Paradise of the Atlantic".

No matter where you are in the world and no matter which language you speak and however you pronounce the word "Caribbean"; it conjures delight and awe.

Our brilliant constellation of people, food, drink, music, multiple international and indigenous languages, culture and natural delights in such a relatively small region is unmatched.

The world is increasingly recognizing the breadth of history and culture of what the late Caribbean Nobel Prize Laureate Derek Walcott described as "the fragments of epic memory", which constitute our Caribbean experience.

In this vein, I am especially pleased that a compelling feature of the visitor experience at Baha Mar and Atlantis is Bahamian culture, inclusive of the visual, musical and culinary arts of The Bahamas.

Indeed, Bah Mar has demonstrated a strong commitment to incorporating the arts throughout the visitor experience at the resort.

This includes a gallery space known as The Current, and Fairwind, an exhibit of Bahamian artistry that is being housed at the convention center at Baha Mar.

"The Fairwind exhibition encompasses a survey of 100-years of Bahamian art, beginning in the late 1800s up to the contemporary practices of today.

“The exhibition communicates both a visual and auditory narrative to viewers, exhibiting paintings, photography, sculpture, artifacts and multimedia.”

I believe that what Baha Mar is doing in terms of the incorporation of the heritage of The Bahamas has tremendous resonance for our region.

Here at Atlantis, the Marina Village incorporates many aspects of Bahamians arts and culture.

I invite you to visit both the Marina Village and creative arts spaces at Baha Mar, as well as the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas.

Both Sandals and Breezes also showcase a tapestry of Bahamian culture and arts.

I am delighted that the success of these two major properties in taking such an initiative is driving other smaller, boutique properties to do the same.

These partnerships between artisans and tourism investors, both domestic and international, must be replicated if we are to provide even greater returns to our citizenry from the tourism sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

One of our core objectives must be to help to create greater economic benefits from tourism for micro- small- and medium-sized businesses.

This means greater diversification across various tourism platforms as well as greater linkages with other economic sectors.

For example: When speaking of diversification within tourism, we are still developing much of the infrastructure and facilities which give rise to compelling visitor experiences, memories and storytelling.

As a region, we are still working to develop and upgrade the museums and heritage sites which depict the traditions and culture of our people, as well as

showcasing, in a sustainable manner, the wonders of marine life that highlight the earth's biodiversity.

Such experiences and facilities serve to educate visitors and the people of the Caribbean about the beauty and the value of the mangroves, creeks, wetlands and other natural wonders of our unique eco-systems.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The training and education of a new generation of entrepreneurs is vital in helping our citizens and economies to garner greater economic benefits from tourism.

Toward this end, my Government recently launched the Small Business Development Centre, in partnership with the University of The Bahamas and The Bahamas Chamber of Commerce and Employers Confederation.

Our guiding principle is that sustainable economic growth should be driven by Bahamian investment and creativity, in tandem with strategic foreign direct investment.

Entrepreneurs are the primary drivers of innovation and growth.

We set as goals for our Administration to: stimulate Bahamian ownership, to create jobs and to reduce poverty.

In order to achieve those goals, we realized that we had to address the blockages that prevent Bahamian ownership, that stifle job creation and that perpetuate poverty.

The key, we realized, is access and opportunity.

By this I mean access to the kinds of opportunities that those who have traditionally succeeded in our economy often take for granted, including: good advice, help with planning and execution, contacts and networking, and of course, critically, access to capital.

Access so often separates success from failure.

Governments play an essential role in helping entrepreneurs to gain access to the skills and resources needed for success.

If we can give birth to a generation of new entrepreneurs, we can move Caribbean tourism to greater heights and in many new directions.

One of these new directions is a greater global involvement in tourism by the people of the Caribbean.

How is it that the world's most tourism blessed region and the world's most tourism dependent region is not the world's tourism leading region by a greater array of measures?

In seeking answers to these questions, our theme for this conference is spot on.

This conference comes after World Tourism Day, with the global recognition of the contributions which this dynamic industry makes to the global commons and to the economies and peoples of our region.

When we look at tourism in its totality, there are more employment and engagement opportunities in tourism than in almost any other economic sector.

Travel and tourism is also one of the largest and fastest growing sectors of the global economy.

Why then has the Caribbean never really attracted many of the tourism-related businesses outside of our region which rely on our region for their profitability?

Why are we so narrowly focused on servicing our local visitors only instead of also focusing on providing tourism services to the wider world?

Moreover, in delivering domestic, regional and international services we must ensure greater ownership of our travel and tourism sector by Caribbean nationals.

For far too long, we have focused our attention in tourism development on local personal services which, though currently critically important, is not the totality of the

talent required for the development of this economic sector into an economic powerhouse.

When we look at the global travel companies involved in packaging and selling travel, they have hundreds of thousands of employees outside our region yet their annual returns depend quite heavily on their sales to our region.

Only a very tiny fraction of their hundreds of thousands of employees are involved in local service delivery.

Most of them are involved in other sophisticated aspects of tourism that could engage the minds and talents of many of our very bright and energetic young people, including in marketing, software development and other services.

How can we attract more of the development and management of global tourism to our region to accelerate and increase the range and variety of those sophisticated jobs available for our young people?

Why am I so focused on this matter?

We all know that we have a serious problem in our region with brain drain.

Would we not retain far more of our talent within our region if we engaged architects, engineers, accountants, artisans, attorneys, interior designers, energy specialists, new media communication specialists, software developers, and others in providing tourism services to countries and destinations across the wider world instead of focusing only on personal services in our own individual countries?

We can take the Caribbean spirit, ethos and imagination global.

The world needs the Caribbean not only as a place to visit.

The world should also relish and delight in what the Caribbean may bring to the global commons.

We have a two-fold mission:

We must ensure that we deliver the very best range of exceptional personal services to our own visitors.

We must also become far more focused on providing global tourism services.

In the short run, this might require our attracting to our region subsidiaries or units of some of the existing global travel companies. This is how many enterprises are jumpstarted.

The world is full of these economic clusters that have become enormous stimuli for the countries where they exist.

Let our region become global center where tourism talent will cluster to the benefit of the people of the Caribbean.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to briefly focus on the protection of the environment by citing a number of our initiatives here in The Bahamas.

Since 1992, we more than doubled the National Park System of The Bahamas, which is managed by The Bahamas National Trust.

We continue to add to our Marine Protected Areas. Indeed, approximately 10 percent of our marine environment has been declared as such.

We made a commitment some years ago to designate a further 10 percent as protected areas by the year 2020.

Due to our geographic location, The Bahamas archipelago is besieged by marine debris from the United States of America and from the high volume of international marine vessels which pass through our waters.

This pollution affects tourism, fisheries and the health of our population.

To reduce plastic waste, the Government of The Bahamas has made a commitment to banning single-use plastics and Styrofoam by 2020.

This ban will include: plastic bags, plastic straws and plastic food utensils.

I know that a number of other jurisdictions in the region are doing likewise.

Considering that we have already experienced some loss and damage to our natural resources, we are committed to the replacement of damaged and endangered coral reefs.

We will do so through the creation of coral nurseries, and the installation of artificial reefs, which will assist with coral propagation.

One such example is the country's first living underwater art gallery, home to the largest underwater sculpture in the world.

We continue to partner with various national and international NGOs and research facilities in order to ensure that our policies are grounded in proper research and science.

Such collaboration has been quite fruitful. We have established open and closed seasons for key ecosystem species, and those that hold commercial value.

We have designed park management frameworks and increased patrolling in sensitive areas to preserve these services and food sources for generations to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Tourism will continue to be a leading engine for development within our region.

As such, we must ensure the greater retention of more tourism earnings within our region, and the greater dispersion of wealth within our economies.

Travel and tourism continue to evolve at a pace that requires us to constantly innovate in order to maintain market share and to meet the expectations of our visitors.

We must keep pace with such innovation. But we must also be the drivers of global innovation.

The world must increasingly ask: "So, what are they doing in the Caribbean?"

There has been an upsurge in visitor arrivals for various destinations in our region. This is good and necessary.

Yet, in considering the state of tourism in the Caribbean our answer is clear: It is good, but it can be even better.

Even as we celebrate our accomplishments, I invite you this week to explore new and perhaps groundbreaking dimensions for our region.

Thank you and good evening.
