

Caribbean tourism on the upswing in 2019



Caribbean Tourism Organization's Acting Director of Research Ryan Skeete

The Caribbean tourism sector is projected to record strong growth in 2019 following a stronger-than-expected performance last year.

The Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) is forecasting 6-7% growth this year, continuing an upward trend that began last September.

"We are projecting that tourist arrivals will increase by between 6% and 7% in 2019, as the damaged infrastructure in the hurricane-impacted destinations returns to capacity. Similarly, cruise arrivals should expand by a further 4% to 5%," said Ryan Skeete, the CTO's Acting Director of Research.

Skeete warned of possible "significant headwinds to navigate", including the outcome of the Brexit negotiations in the UK, the ongoing trade war between the US and China, and potential extreme weather events in the destinations and marketplaces.

Still, he said, with global demand for international travel expected to remain strong, underpinned by healthy economic activity, and with improved air connectivity helping to boost arrivals, the outlook for Caribbean tourism in 2019 was cautiously optimistic.

The CTO research director revealed that a robust 9.8% growth during the September to December period last year led to a stronger-than-projected performance. It was a significant turnaround from the previous eight months of decline.

"Even the destinations that were severely impacted by the 2017 hurricanes, despite registering overall double-digit declines last year, experienced a significant turnaround during the last four months, registering triple-digit increases during this period," said Skeete.

The 29.9 million tourist visits in 2018 represented the second highest number of visitors to the Caribbean on record, surpassed only by the 30.6 million who visited in 2017. And while this represented a 2.3% decline overall, it was better than the anticipated 3% to 4% fall.

"With a strong performance during the last four months of 2018, including a robust showing by countries impacted by the 2017 hurricanes, the evidence suggests that Caribbean tourism is on the

upswing," Skeete said.

According to information compiled from CTO member countries, Canada was the strongest-performing market - its 3.9 million visits represented a 5.7% rise. The intra-Caribbean market had its best performance ever, reaching 2 million visitors, while South America produced 1.9 million tourist visits, representing a 3.6% increase. Arrivals from Europe grew by a modest 1.3%, with UK arrivals remaining flat at an estimated 1.3 million.

However, the US, which remains the region's leading market, was down, with the 13.9 million American tourist visits, representing a 6.3% fall. This was due mainly to steep declines in arrivals to popular destinations impacted by the hurricanes, such as Puerto Rico, which was down by 45.6%, and St. Maarten, which fell by 79%.

But there was a healthy 28% rise in arrivals from the US in the fourth quarter, reflecting the strong turnaround during this period.