

Caribbean tourism rebounds in 2019 after hurricanes

Caribbean tourism posted record arrivals in both stayover and cruise in 2019, sparked by a robust recovery in the destinations affected by hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

Stayover arrivals grew by 4.4% to reach 31.5 million. This outpaced the international rate of growth of 3.8% reported by the World Tourism Organization.

Overall, the destinations most impacted by the hurricanes in 2017 saw some of the highest rates of growth, according to preliminary figures in the 2019 Caribbean Tourism Performance Report published by the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO).

Sint Maarten grew 80%, Anguilla 74.9%, the British Virgin Islands 57.3%, Dominica 51.7%, the US Virgin Islands 38.1%, and Puerto Rico 31.2%.

Meanwhile, cruise visits increased by 3.4% to 30.2 million, representing the seventh consecutive year of growth.

The US was the best performing among the major stayover markets, registering an increase of 10% to reach a record 15.5 million visitors.

But Canada, one of only two main markets to have sustained growth in each of the last three years, was sluggish in 2019 at 0.4% growth, equivalent to 3.4 million tourist visits. The South American market declined by 10.4% to 1.5 million.

The European market dipped by 1.4% from 5.9 million in 2018 to 5.8 million. The UK was down by 5.6% to approximately 1.3 million visitors.

Intra-Caribbean travel increased by 7.4 per cent to reach 2.0 million.

Table 2.3.1: Cruise Passenger Arrivals to the Caribbean ('000)

- ending December

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	%CH
Cruise Pax	25,877.3	26,405.8	27,158.1	29,254.7	30,258.0	3.4

Note: Imputed from data on Cruise Passenger travel to member countries

Source: CTO Member Countries and CTO estimates.

In a presentation of the report on February 26, Neil Walters, Secretary General (Ag) of the CTO, said: "In conclusion, 2019 was a great one overall for Caribbean tourism, based not only on the record performance by the region, but also for some individual destinations. These achievements were made despite several challenges such as global economic and political uncertainty and the impact of climate change leading to extreme weather events in some cases.

"As we navigate 2020, concerns remain over the global economic, environmental, political and social uncertainty, including the US presidential election, the impact of climate change and extreme weather events and health threats/issues, especially the coronavirus, and how these could influence our performance."

Walters added that other factors such as less-than-adequate intra-regional air access and high levels of taxation may hinder travel. However, he noted that destinations are making improvements to their infrastructure and there is renewed investment regionally in tourism facilities for both air and sea travelers.

For 2020, tourist arrivals to the 2017-hurricane impacted destinations should further normalize, Walters said, returning closer to the pre-hurricane levels. Other destinations are expected to show modest growth as the world's economy is expected to expand by 2.5%, according to the World Bank, while the US economy - the region's largest source market - is only expected to grow 1.8%.

Based on the CTO's preliminary estimates, tourist arrival levels to the Caribbean are projected to grow between 1% and 2% in 2020, with a similar rate of growth expected for the cruise sector.