

Turning potential into bookings in the Caribbean



Travelers are looking for beautiful wide-open beaches, which are available throughout the Caribbean

As with all regions during this pandemic, it's not really possible to look at the Caribbean's current travel and tourism situation as a whole, because countries within the region have taken vastly different approaches to Covid-19 border restrictions.

Not surprisingly, countries that have remained open to tourists during this time have done quite well at acquiring a greater share of those willing and able to travel, especially individuals from the region's largest market, the US. But the term open borders has its own variations, from requiring a negative PCR test to various lengths of quarantine to simply making tourists remain within a resort, and these different choices have had consequences for the islands and their own populations' health.

Tourist panel webinar

During a recent conference with the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO), members of the tourism industry discussed what has been happening in the region and most importantly, how the region can now recover.

Present at the conference, which was available to listen to and comment on during a zoom webinar,

were Johnson Johnrose, Communications Specialist for the CTO; Vivian Mur, Director of Sales at Adara Travel Data Consortium; Carol Johnson, Senior Principal Client Partner at Tripadvisor; Colin Pegler, Managing Director of Resort Marketing International; and Eric Bowman, Executive Editor of TravelPulse.

Johnson Johnrose began by stating what we all intrinsically know: Everything those in travel and tourism used to take for granted is now gone. He stated that, while those in Caribbean tourism used to know “when to start preparing for the high season and plan for refurbishment during the low season, planning for tourism during this age of Covid-19 is a complicated affair.” He wondered aloud whether there will be such a thing as a high season anymore, as expected openings continue to turn into closings and season after season is dismal.

This is in no small part due to ever-changing governmental decisions on who can travel, when and under which circumstances. Even those who are willing and able to travel are currently being haunted and held back by the spectre of canceled flights and new regulations.

Travel trends and retail

Current trends are very clear, according to those involved in this webinar. Luxury is leading the recovery, which might be very good news for travel retailers. Those willing and able to travel right now are people with money to spend.

More potential boons for travel retail, those who do have money to spend on travel have not been spending it, so their travel money is burning a virtual hole in their pockets, and also up to 80 percent of this travel is being paid for with vouchers, which means the travelers have even more money to spend at the duty free store.

Millennials and Gen Z are also an important cohort, as they tend to be less concerned about contracting the virus and more concerned about the enjoyment of life.

What are travelers booking

Search trends are one thing, but actual booking is another. Current booking trends are going in two directions, toward last-minute travel and toward travel in the fourth quarter of 2021. This shows that travelers are feeling cautious but also optimistic.

Travel rules are constantly changing — as an example pointed out by Colin Pegler, within just a couple of days Boris Johnson went from saying there would be no hope of a vaccine passport to saying such a thing is likely, and then suddenly gave dates for the allowance of travel and the end of lockdown, which caused a flurry of travel bookings.

Last-minute bookings are considered safer because the rules are less likely to change, whereas travelers are expecting that by Q4 enough people will be vaccinated that the borders will have opened up again.

The pandemic has made people miss a number of things in life, but possibly no more than the inability to spend time with loved ones. For this reason it’s probably not surprising that multigenerational travel is a clear trend, with families booking villas and sailboats — places where they can be together without having excess exposure to others.

Why choose the Caribbean

The Caribbean is always an important travel region. According to Carol Johnson of Tripadvisor, 45

percent of all US searches involving international travel are for destinations in the Caribbean.

During the pandemic and post-pandemic period, the Caribbean has the opportunity to take full advantage of the ever-referenced pent-up desire to travel, as it has everything on offer that travelers are looking for: Beaches, a tropical atmosphere, all-inclusive options and the ability to unwind and relax with no pressures. Already the region is especially popular not only with the US and Canada, which is to be expected given the proximity, but also Europeans and those from the UK, who have historical ties to the region. Even in the post-pandemic period, travelers are expected to seek travel with the option for social distancing; they want beaches, but not crowded beaches.

While in the near future European and UK bookings suggest short trips to the Mediterranean, the Caribbean is likely to become more and more popular, especially as the countries within become more welcoming. But the panel on this webinar suggest the region needs to focus very strongly on making itself the most attractive option. As Colin Pegler suggested, the region as a whole needs to “be proactive, be visible and be open.”

If travelers don't feel safe to go — and that means not only the risk of catching the virus but also at risk of being trapped at the border, having rules change, needing to quarantine for too long to make the trip worth it — then they have other options such as Mexico, which offer much of what the Caribbean offers.

Creating visibility and openness

In all, the participants of the CTO webinar are very optimistic and hopeful. The data is showing that people are looking for travel and as soon as rules and regulations change in their favor, they are booking it.

While Tripadvisor's Carol Johnson and TravelPulse's Eric Bowman both see the interest in the Caribbean to be high, Vivian Mur, the participant with the most actual travel data, says as of April this year bookings for the Caribbean are a bit sluggish. It will be up to the CTO and its country partners to create the visibility, the options and the feelings of safety necessary to turn searches into bookings.