

Creating a Competitive Advantage through Cultural Heritage - Tourism

The impending challenges of globalisation and trade liberalisation have forced Barbados and the other countries of the region to seek to re-position themselves by diversifying their traditional “sun, sea and sand” product offerings. Regional destinations are now making a concerted effort to differentiate their tourism products from that of other countries, by creating viable market niches that highlight their unique cultural, historical or ecological attributes.

The World Tourism Organisation has expressed a view that cultural tourism is one of the five key market segments of the future that will ensure the sustainability of the tourism industry. The Caribbean with its rich historical tapestry is well placed to capitalise on this current trend. The tourist industry in Europe and the Far East have benefited greatly from this aspect of tourism over the years.

Over the years, Barbados has developed a heritage product based primarily on British colonialism, African enslavement and sugar. This Eurocentric and Afrocentric heritage is evident in our architecture, the names of our streets, our buildings, our villages, our cuisine, our language, our music and various other art forms. However, there are still many features of Barbados, as yet untapped, that have a substantial potential for tourism development. For decades, our beautiful beaches, clear waters and warm climate have been our major drawing card. Indeed our beaches and climate are still the number one reason why tourists come to the island. However, despite this fact, it is estimated that the tourist market has changed more in the last three years than in the last three decades. Just like in the past when traditional trading encouraged exchanges between cultures, today, tourism is a powerful factor in the intermixing of peoples and of mutual understanding.

In the 1970’s and 1980’s the tourist’s main motivation was still the need to escape from the humdrum routine of industrial society. Today’s tourist is looking for a meaning, an alternative way of life, a new experience. These new-age tourists want to have fun, see different things, take in the arts, visit architectural and historic sites, try new cuisine, meet new people and experience a new culture. In this respect the role of culture is invested with a new significance and cultural tourism promises to be one of the most booming sectors of the market. It is estimated that almost half of today’s tourists are interested in or likely to be interested in culture.

This revelation means that tourism has reached a new stage in its development, which presents very significant opportunities for both Barbados and the Caribbean region at large. This is particularly so due to the fact that the strong cultural identities of the islands have in many cases been better preserved than those in the industrialized countries. Cultural tourism is therefore an asset for the West Indian islands in an age of globalisation and trade liberalization, because it is based on resources, which cannot be relocated in tourist generating countries. What makes our culture so distinctive in this region is that it is an eclectic fusion of Amerindian, European, African and Asian elements, which makes it one of the most unique in the world.

Music, dance, festivals, art, craft, oral traditions, literature, cuisine, historic sites and monuments make up the most obvious aspects of our culture. These collectively create an identity that is unique to the Caribbean region and by extension, makes the development and promotion of this rich culture to visitors one of the most sustainable and competitive forms of tourism in existence.

Heritage tourism is also one of the more sustainable forms of tourism that is better suited for small, environmentally fragile islands like Barbados. Restoration and conservation of old buildings has additional benefits of major significance. This niche market would strengthen the tourism product for the island's economic survival, while preserving and enriching the national heritage for posterity.

Recently, both Prime Minister Owen Arthur and Minister of Tourism Noel Lynch have been in the press expressing their commitment to the development to making Heritage Tourism a viable niche market in Barbados. While lamenting the fact that a number of the island's assets have been under-exploited, the Prime Minister however stressed that these assets should be restored not only for economic purposes, but also for their virtues as indigenous historical icons.

This present Cultural Heritage tourism thrust, which Government fully supports, is timely as Barbados seeks to rejuvenate its tourism product and reposition itself to take advantage of those markets that seek authentic cultural heritage experiences. The private sector and other social partners must all play a part in making this a reality.