

First and last impressions matter

The first and last impression a visitor has of a country is from the airport or port at which they arrive and depart. For this reason, the way they are treated and the efficiency and manner in which they are dealt with by immigration officers, customs and security, as well as their experience of the built environment, the facilities the airport offers, and the taxi or ground transfer services they use, have a disproportionate importance to the feel good factor any country can create. Along with the tourism product it contributes to a nation's ability to compete.

For this reason I am constantly observing as I travel around the region and internationally how good an airport and the arrival and departure experience is, and whether it is changing for better or worse.

Although this is far from being a science, regular travel provides a good basis for comparison. Recent commitments have for instance required me to use the airports at Kingston, Montego Bay, Grand Cayman, Miami, Washington and London.

As far as Jamaica is concerned there seemed to be a marked improvement in arriving in both Kingston and Montego Bay: in both airports the immigration officers were efficient, polite, and given the numbers they must see each day, surprisingly welcoming. Customs too, while largely silent, were efficient, enabling me to speed my way through both airports, arriving and departing, thinking that Jamaica had at last got its airport act together.

However, unlike a tourist and not having a pre-arranged ground transfer, in both cases I took taxis to and from my hotel.

Although the aging, rusting mini buses with their feeble air conditioning were official JUTA taxis and might be said to reflect something of Kingston or down town Montego Bay's grittiness, they seemed in Montego Bay in particular, at the prices charged, to demand a leap of faith by any tourist that might use them. While the drivers were invariably friendly – the driving skills of one seemed to suggest he was practising to become a formula one racing driver – there seemed to be a strong case for, as has happened in some other Caribbean nations, a deal to be struck to help drivers purchase more modern vehicles.

As for the airports, both worked well, security was efficient and polite, and in both cases had enough in the way of facilities to overcome a number of unwelcome delays.

To my surprise the experience in Cayman, a country which if the UK has its way and insists on changes to its financial services offering, will come to rely much more on tourism, the experience was very different.

Although the immigration officers were amongst the most friendly and helpful I have come across anywhere in the world, the system did not work well. Whether it was the IT system in immigration on departure which constantly needed rebooting; a security line which opened thirty minutes or more after airlines had begun check-in, causing unnecessary queues; a tiny sign that announced there were no working restrooms in the departure lounge; a labour intensive and lengthy process on arrival in relation to a new visitor work visa regime; and a cramped and small airport in relation to

the number of visitors; one felt that here was a location where those in authority ought to regularly be made to use the system in the same way that their visitors have to.

None of which is to suggest that London with its sullen immigration officers or US ports with their long queues for security and immigration represent some sort of gold standard. Rather it is to observe that airports and ports are important factors in the way a country is perceived.

Since 9/11 trying to improve the flow of passengers and the visitor experience, while meeting security and other requirements, has given rise to a whole new industry of travel and security facilitation.

This involves trying to find practical and often high-tech answers as to how best to efficiently and securely process travellers from the moment of their arrival through to their departure.

Travel facilitation is anything that smoothes a visitor's passage, from expedited security screening facilities for trusted travellers; to visa on arrival arrangements of the type being used in some Caribbean nations for visitors from nations such as Russia or China, if they hold a US, UK or Schengen visa; pre-clearance of US customs and immigration on departure; queue management systems that use facial recognition technology to track a passenger from check in to boarding; self boarding gates; and new airport designs that enable baggage check and screening procedures to be integrated.

The issue has become important as it is about more than the frustration or annoyance felt at the end or start of a journey.

It is fast becoming one of the key areas that the industry and Governments in the Caribbean will have to address if the region's product is to remain competitive and at best involves bringing together a country's security needs with an approach that is welcoming and efficient.

After much public criticism last year relating to visitor arrivals, my recent experience suggests that Jamaica is now doing much better. However, as my Cayman and other recent experiences indicate, other Caribbean destinations need to do much more if travel to and around the region is to ever become a pleasure and the region as a whole is to be able improve its competitive position.