

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

It's time to make regional travel easier

If you are over the age of forty it is probable that you will remember when intra-Caribbean air services were frequent, costs were low, and travel taxes and security were almost non-existent. So much so that intra-regional travel provided a sense of being embraced by the Caribbean, as workers, officials, students, sports stars, people going on vacation or visiting friends or family, and even higglers filled the Caribbean owned air services that daily flew routes across the Caribbean.

Then, on the whole, inter-island transport worked, movement was affordable and underwrote in an economic, practical and even cultural way, a sense of regional integration. It justified and confirmed that the Caribbean was a single entity.

Today, in comparison, the experience is quite shocking. Travel around the region has become disjointed, prohibitively expensive, subject to multiple layers of taxation and regulation, and while secure, is often at levels that are absurd. The consequence is that intra-Caribbean travel has largely become non-discretionary; intra-Caribbean tourism is falling; and the cohesion of the Caribbean as a region is being damaged.

In a region that is four times more dependent on tourism than any other; in which inter-regional tourism once accounted for between six and ten per cent of visitor arrivals; and where the ability to travel underwrites regional integration, this is far from acceptable.

Although the Caribbean Tourism Organization's Aviation Task Force recently recommended a number of measures aimed at making intra-regional travel easier, so that visitors clearing an initial port of entry can continue travelling throughout the region, achieving this across CARIFORUM may be challenging.

As matters stand, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, is to be used as a model for a single visa regime as it already has internal free movement. This is then intended to be reviewed for possible replication across the CARICOM region.

The task force also identified an urgent need to end secondary screening for intra-regional passengers in transit recognising that current practice diminishes the overall travellers' experience.

While welcome, like too many issues of importance this all seems to be too little too late. As a recent UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) report noted, there is a quiet revolution going on globally relating to removing impediments to travel and visas. Emerging economies, including China, India, Brazil and others that are actively trying to stimulate tourism and business travel, are changing their visa regimes, offering electronic visas, introducing visas on arrival or other mechanisms to make travel easier.

Trying to discover the actual effect of off-putting regulations on Caribbean economic growth, let alone the impact of the decrease in inter-regional airlift, and increasing travel costs and taxes, is far from easy.

Although reliable evidence is hard to come by as countries have not used consistent methods to count the number and origin of regional travellers, limited statistics, plus anecdotal evidence,

suggests a significant decline in intra-regional travel if the period up to the millennium is compared to today.

However, more recent figures available from the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) on intra-regional travel suggest that between 2006 and 2011 the numbers fell by six per cent, with 1.44m intra-Caribbean travellers being recorded in 2011.

What is surprising is that the impediments to making intra-regional travel easier have not, up to now, been addressed in a systemic way, despite clear evidence that such an approach has worked in other parts of the world.

In ASEAN, South East Asian nations realised after 9/11, when visitor numbers and inter-regional travel fell, that there was a need to stimulate and ease travel. Later, when it became apparent that such short term changes, had resulted in increases in travel, visitor numbers and income, and had improved travellers' experience, the countries concerned consolidated their decision, enabling their region to resist the worst effects of the post 2007 recession.

Delivering cost-effective answers in the Caribbean may be more difficult, but a good starting point, as CTO's task force now proposes, would be to try to make travel within the Caribbean seamless, so Cariforum citizens and visitors at least cease to experience difficulties at immigration and customs.

A second approach would be to significantly reduce or waive for intra-regional travel the various departure, arrival and other miscellaneous taxes that are levied, so that there might be, say, a US\$10 single travel tax for Cariforum citizens and another single tax for visitors.

A third would be to change the visa regime so that all Cariforum citizens and visitors with a US or European visa – the hardest to obtain – or a US visa waiver, could travel freely across the region.

A fourth would be to encourage greater inter-connectivity and where possible, changed security arrangements that make seamless travel of the kind one can experience in many Latin American airports now possible.

A fifth would be to establish a genuine regional hub in a location like Antigua that could operate easy transits in the manner of Panama's rapidly developing Tocumen airport.

A sixth would be to try to develop a Caribbean app that enables one to see connections to smaller destinations on carriers that are neither externally owned nor belong to one of the big airline alliances.

And finally, at its most obvious and difficult to resolve, improved and viable Caribbean-owned intra-regional services are essential if there is ever to be a sustainable sense of the ability to travel easily in a fragmented region.

As matters stand, the problem is understood, but there appears to be little willingness at a high policy level to address the issues or ensure their satisfactory and rapid resolution. Cash strapped governments are unwilling to resolve these issues in an holistic manner, and bureaucratic lethargy makes solutions 'too difficult' or ensures that the process of change is addressed over so many years that they run into the sand.

Unfortunately, this will have a consequence. If no one addresses and implements solutions soon, the region will gradually become less competitive, tourism based growth will be more difficult to

achieve, and the effect will be felt most keenly by smaller locally-owned hotels and guest houses and small businesses; which is to say nothing of the eventual impact on politicians.

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