

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Needs To Find Its Tourism Identity, WICO CEO Says

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Part of the challenge right now is for St. Croix to define its identity. -- Joseph Boschulte, WICO CEO

St. Thomas, Virgin Islands -- On any given day, downtown Charlotte Amalie, the Havensight Mall and Crown Bay become epicenters of commerce. It's no longer impressive to have 9,000 visitors roaming the local shops in St. Thomas regularly, and when the island sees 20,000 tourists in one day, the occurrence no longer makes news.

When there is talk of tourism in the Virgin Islands, the conversations are mostly exclusive to "Rock City", the moniker given to St. Thomas because of its hilly terrain. And when

announcements are made that the Virgin Islands is the No. 1 tourism destination in the Eastern Caribbean, which it is, you'd be misguided to think St. Croix plays a significant role in attracting the more than 1.9 million tourists who visited the territory last year alone.

So why is St. Croix missing in action? What's the problem?

VI Consortium spoke with the West Indian Company's (WICO) CEO Joseph Boschulte last week at the company's headquarters in Havensight Mall. There he touched on a variety of topics, including the history of WICO itself and the Governor's Mansion's own history that is well-detailed [here on VI Consortium](#). He also spoke of how tourism works, and the current state of and solutions for attracting more tourism to St. Croix.

In the revealing interview, Boschulte explained that the cruise industry works somewhat differently than the airline industry, where flights to an island can be arranged rather quickly. In the cruise industry, however, he said call dates are booked years in advance.

"The ships you see here today were booked in 2013," Boschulte said, speaking of three Tuesday. Boschulte



Cruise ships in

Frederiksted, St. Croix

"For us in St. Thomas and St. Croix, cruise ships are not new," he said. "We see them come and go regularly, [and] one of thing we've been trying to do is get people to understand that there is a science behind the business, and that ships don't just come to a particular destination because you built a facility, or because you request for them to come, and if and when they do come, it's an 18-24 month period before they even book the ship."

"So, right now at WICO, we've finalized [the years] 2015, 2016, and heavy into 2016 and 2017, and booking ships for 2017 and 2018," Boschulte said. "So what we try to do is have people understand that [the cruise line industry] is slightly different from aviation, where there is a shorter lead window. For us, we know exactly what will be happening [years before]."

Boschulte then revealed that WICO had booked ships housing some 4,000 passengers for late 2017 into 2018, and said he intended to educate those willing to learn about the operations of the industry, "especially with the situation with HOVENSA," which has made tourism play "a larger role for the quality of life."

Boschulte made known that of the 1.9 million tourists who visited the Virgin Islands in 2014, 1.4 million of them came to WICO, a fact that gives the firm confidence when speaking about how the industry should move forward.

The direction forward "is one of the things that we as a territory have to decide, and that's one of the things that we are waiting for the signal from Governor Kenneth Mapp and his vision, for cruise ship tourism and tourism as a whole," Boschulte said.

The CEO then spoke about other markets that are quickly building new ports to better compete with the territory, including St. Maarten, Puerto Rico, St. Kitts and Barbados. Then, speaking about the territory broadening its efforts, Boschulte said St. Croix, in particular, needs to find its identity.



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West Indian Company Limited

CEO Joseph Boschulte

According to Boschulte, people who go on vacations want variety.

"When people go on vacation, they go to seek memories and part of seeking memories is to do things that are different," he explained. "So you don't want to go to three or five ports that offer the same thing. And one of the biggest differentiation for people, particularly cruises, whether it's big boats or smaller boats, is where you go, and one of the ways that you define where you go is which country's flag is over where the stop is."

"So that's why you don't see often on the same cruise itinerary the same stops," Boschulte continued. "[For example], you won't hit St. Croix and St. Thomas, you won't hit St. Kitts and Nevis, or Antigua and Barbuda, because you just want to hit one of them and you keep going. That's why you don't see any of the cruise hitting multiple stops in the Bahamas, unless it's a three or four-day cruise."

Boschulte said either St Croix's Christiansted or Frederiksted must be defined as the destination that people go to once they get off the cruise ships.

"I think from a St. Croix perspective, what has to happen, in my opinion, is one of the towns has to be developed as a point of where people go. When people come off the dock [in St. Thomas] they shop at Havensight or down at Crown Bay, but they drive downtown Charlotte Amalie. What we hear directly from the lines is that you have to have the product. So you have to have businesses, things for people to do. If the decision is to develop Christiansted and continue to build on the boardwalk and retail shops, and if the ships are coming into Frederiksted, then they need to have something to do on the drive up and drive back," the WICO CEO said.

Boschulte went on to say that he thinks "both towns have qualities of appeal, both towns have their own stories [and] I think part of what needs to happen is, I think there has to have that [involvement] from the public sector from an infrastructure standpoint, from the private sector from an entrepreneurship and investment standpoint, and the third piece, which I think a lot of people forget a lot of the times, is the community."

He continued: "We could do all we want to do, companies can invest, the government can build new roads and do all this, but if the people are not part of the equation, then you'll run into some situations where [tourists] come but the [locals] don't really want them. People come down, but you really don't know how to deal with them because you're not prepared for them to come."

And the more times you win that battle, the better off you are for the next series of ships. So they call and they book, and they book, and they book. And that's how it works.

In speaking of a solution, Boschulte offered that St. Croix should decide what size vessels it wants to attract.

"The first thing we have to do is decide whether we want the big boats or the smaller-size luxury vessels. Because one of the things that's very different is that the smaller, ultra luxury vessels -- Seabourns, Seven Seas, Regent Seven Seas -- those ships go to very different markets.

"So for example, whereas the Norwegian Getaway -- big ship with 4,000 plus comes out of Miami to St. Thomas and St. Maarten, Regent Seven Seas, which is also owned by Norwegian Cruise Lines, they would come into the region and they would hit St. Barts, Nevis, and some of the smaller, more intimate settings," he explained.



Downtown Christiansted, St.

Croix

Boschulte pointed out that some cruise passengers prefer smaller, cozier settings, where streets are not flooded with visitors where streets are not flooded with visitors.

"One of the reasons is their traveler doesn't want to be in a crowd of 12,000 -- 13,000 people, which we had today, they want to be in some place like St. John or Christiansted. There are talks about doing something in Gallows Bay because [the tourists] want to do things in a more intimate setting," Boschulte said.

"But that kind of field is different," Boschulte reminded, "so you have to say, 'Hey, I want to be in that realm' and that's part of creating identity. So where those ships go -- Anguilla, St. Barts, Barbuda -- those smaller islands made a choice, and these choices should be, in my opinion, in collaboration with the lines," he said.

"Because the lines will tell you, 'we go where the customers want to go,' and where the customers want to go, they send the ships. So it's better to work in collaboration with the lines as opposed to some destinations having the mentality of, 'Well, we want to do this and they're going to come,' and sometimes they come and sometimes they don't."

Yet, even if the St. Croix experience is enhanced to lure tourists from near and far, Boschulte said expectations must be managed because while momentum will come, it won't happen overnight.



Disney Fantasy docked at

Havensight in St. Thomas

"The other part that we've had discussions informally and formally with senators is managing expectations. It's not like if you build it tomorrow then they're going to be there, because it's 18 to 24 months out," he said. "So before you get to 18 to 24 months they call us and say, 'WICO, here is the fleet of ships we have coming in this season, and you have to check the box: do you have enough taxis to hold people, do you have enough things for people to do, is safety a priority, and when you're through selling your destination, Christiansted or Frederiksted, and all in-between and around the two towns as a place that people want to come, what they define is the identity.'"

"Seven Flags, eco-tourism, another shopping mecca -- whatever that ultimate decision is, before you get the ships to come regularly and in great numbers, you've got to show them. Because what they judge is [the experience]," Boschulte said.

Even so, Boschulte said it's a cycle that must be repeated over and over, and nothing should be taken for granted in the extremely competitive cruise line business.

"And the more times you win that battle, the better off you are for the next series of ships. So they call and they book, and they book and they book. And that's how it works," he concluded.

Cynthia Graham assisted with reporting for this story.

Feature Image: L to R: Cruise ship in Frederiksted pier, sky view of Christiansted town (top), and waterfront area in downtown Frederiksted (bottom).