

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WICO Kicks Off Holiday Season With Annual Christmas Tree Lighting Event

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One of the most anticipated community events on St. Thomas is the annual West Indian Company, Ltd. Christmas Tree Lighting in conjunction with the Havensight Merchants Association. We look forward to hosting the guests and the community at large this year on Wednesday, December 9, from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

The Christmas Tree Lighting provides WICO with the opportunity to share the festive spirit of the holiday season with residents and guests of all ages who want to spend some time enjoying a culture-based celebration, mingling with family and friends and getting in some early Christmas shopping.

We usually begin fielding inquiries about the Christmas Tree Lighting during the late summer, usually from vendors. The answer is the same every year: Yes, WICO will be hosting its Christmas Tree Lighting. To us, the annual lighting of the tree is more than an event, it is a commitment to the community, especially to the children.

We are always fascinated by the innocence, awe and wonder of our youngest guests when the tree is first lit, and they – along with their parents – experience the full splendor of our decorated tree.

And it is always interesting to see visitors' reactions to our traditions, especially those that include our appealing version of fruit cake and familiar carols set to the rhythm of the islands.

We know several people who mark their calendars and plan their holiday festivities, making sure to include a visit to Havensight Mall on the appointed day.

We are also keenly aware of the economic benefit to the many food and craft vendors. Having successfully hosted entrepreneurial seminars on both island districts this year, we remain cognizant of the need to provide businesses with opportunities to succeed whenever possible, not only by accessing the cruise industry, but also the local market.

Many of the vendors who participate in the Christmas Tree Lighting have done so for years, and consider it one of their best opportunities to reach the local community to make them aware of their unique goods, products and services.

This year we are pleased to have three new food, beverage and entertainment venues - The Smoking Rooster, Virgin Haven and Tap and Still. These businesses will provide new food, drink and entertainment options for visitors and locals, as well increase nighttime activity to the property. This is an exciting development for the Havensight area and is a welcome addition for guests and residents alike.

Reflecting on the past few months in particular, we have many reasons to share our appreciation with the community. First, that the Caribbean, the world's number one cruise destination, is our home, and that we are America's Caribbean.

Strong duty-free shopping incentives, being an English-speaking port, flying the U.S. flag and the current strength of the U.S. dollar are only some of the reasons we remain an attractive port.

We recently learned that the U.S. Virgin Islands has retained our marquee position as the destination with the second highest average expenditure rate for passenger and crew visits. Since 2012, that figure has increased from \$147 to \$157.

While this figure is lower than our record high \$193 in 2009, we note that in this post-recession era our figures are higher than the Bahamas' \$95 and Cozumel's \$119, two stellar, competing destinations.

We are pleased that the U.S. Virgin Islands is in the top five cruise destinations, testament to the fact that we remain in high demand as a cruise destination. WICO and the Territory remain committed to meeting cruise industry and guest demands as soon as we can, as best we can. However, our fall to a disappointing fourth place when we

previously ranked second cannot be overlooked, and our competition should not be underestimated. We have work to do.

WICO expects to continue its trend of hosting more ships during the summer season. One-hundred-twelve ships will call during the Summer 2015/2016, an almost 6.7 percent increase over Summer 2014/15 numbers.

We are grateful for a community that demonstrates its support and generosity. We refer, particularly, to the community's response during the Labor Day Carnival Liberty emergency.

We were gratified to experience cooperation and unity in our community demonstrated many times over. We received stellar co-operation at a time we needed it most, and we remain appreciative of the efforts of everyone who lent a hand. The least we can do, is continue our tradition of sharing during the holiday season.

Coordinating a Christmas celebration for the public takes a considerable amount of time, planning, organization and man power. This year we are pleased to present *A Storybook Christmas* featuring the acclaimed compilation of stories by the students of the Addelita Cancryn Junior High School.

Traditional seasonal treats, entertainment by school groups and community bands, face painting, and all the usual feature attractions that appeal to the young and the young at heart will be featured.

We are especially pleased that the Superior Court's Rising Stars Youth Steel Orchestra, which usually has concert commitments and schedule conflicts during the holidays, will be able to perform on at our celebration this year. We are also pleased to be hosting the Outta Limitz Band and the ever-popular and perennial favorite - Cool Session Brass.

We look forward to welcoming each and every one of you to the Havensight Mall on Wednesday, December 9. On behalf of the board, management and staff of the West Indian Company, Ltd., best wishes to the entire Virgin Islands community for what we hope will be one of the best Holiday Seasons ever.

Submitted by:

Joseph Boschulte, President/CEO, WICO