

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WICO Editorial: Once A Visitor, Always A Friend

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Sometimes we meet people and an instant connection is made. It just feels right. A lifelong friendship is born. That's how it is with so many of our cruise passengers, they visit the Virgin Islands once and they become friends for life. So, let's discover why Caribbean cruisers prefer the Virgin Islands and return again and again.

Choosing a vacation destination is a very personal choice which is influenced by many factors. Cruise passengers decide on a cruise vacation for several reasons. Some find it an economical vacation option, as a cruise allows travelers to experience multiple destinations in one trip. Others use it to experience the destination offerings in an effort to decide which destinations to return for a longer stay land-based vacation. Others, who prefer to cruise, return repeatedly to the destinations which attracted them, to continue to

explore their attractions, publicized and unpublicized. Cruises are also a popular choice for families, friends and other affinity groups.

We at WICO, recognize that vacationers can choose from a wide array of competing destinations. In response to this reality, we have honed our skills and abilities with the singular purpose of providing an impactful and unforgettable destination experience. We are the cruise gateway to the U.S. Virgin Islands, the first impression. Therefore, we feel compelled to ensure their arrival and positive port experiences; providing happy, friendly and knowledgeable employees to satisfy our guests' every need. The management and staff at our retail and food establishments offer great products and provide world class purchasing experiences. Additionally, we entrust our cruise visitors to well-trained tour operators who provide transportation as well as guided tours across the islands.

The beauty of the United States Virgin Islands - nestled between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, sells itself; enchanting hilltop vistas, flamboyant displays of color from an abundance of flora and fauna, the majestic rise of tree life providing shade and trapping the tropical breezes to cool our visitors and friends in making, and the beauty of our historic architecture. Yet with all this physical beauty, the standout quality which guarantees a meaningful and lasting connection with our cruise guests, is our welcoming Virgin Islands spirit of ready laughter and smiles, forever poised to extend ourselves to ensure that the needs of our guests are met, and their experience is a positive one - our Virgin Islands flavor.

According to the Florida Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) in its 2016 Cruise Industry Overview, 2016 was forecasted to have 24 million cruising the oceans, a 4% increase over 2015. Though new markets have opened worldwide, the Caribbean has been consistently headlined as the industry's success story. In 2016, the Caribbean still ranked as the dominant cruise destination with 33.7% of the global deployment capacity market share.

Our cruisers are an important piece of the Virgin Islands economy. FCCA's 2015 Cruise Industry Overview, in its Economic Impact of Cruise Industry on Destinations, reported the US Virgin Islands as having the 4th highest volume of onshore passenger and crew visits in the Caribbean, totaling 2.19 million visits. Also as the 2nd highest in average total expenditure rate of \$157 per passenger and crew per visit, with a total expenditure of \$276 million dollars for the 2014/2015 cruise season alone.

Cruise Lines International Association's (CLIA) 2014 North American Cruise Market Profile (published every 3 years), reports that 42% of cruise vacationers return to a destination visited on a cruise, for a land-based vacation. Also, reported by CLIA, 89% of cruisers gave their cruise vacation experience strong satisfaction ratings, with 84% indicating that they would recommend it to friends. Additionally, 62% of cruisers have taken multiple cruise vacations, while 38% were new cruise travelers. Both categories of cruisers are expected to achieve unprecedented growth in numbers.

Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) report issued December 14, 2016, reports that the growth in the Virgin Islands economy was due primarily to increases in exports of services and consumer spending, which consisted primarily of spending by tourists, reflected in an increase in air arrivals and attendant hotel revenue. Reviewing the trend a little closer to home, specifically the St. Thomas/St. John District, The U.S. Virgin Islands

Exit Survey 2012/2013 produced by the VI Bureau of Economic Research, reported 25.6% of overnight vacationers had previously visited by cruise ship. This rate of return applied to the number of cruise visitors during the first 11 months of 2016, indicates that of 1.5 million cruise passengers, approximately 384,000 will return as air visitors for overnight stays.

Therefore, with the large number of cruisers coming to the Virgin Islands, we will continue to see a positive impact on increased overnight stays for years to come.

Many of us may not know or think about the experiences considered by our cruisers when determining whether or not to return on a cruise or for an overnight stay. In determining value rating, cruisers consider their port experience; attractions to include historical, recreational, educational; water based activities; local foods, arts and crafts; guided tours providing impactful information; quality of customer service; time spent stuck in traffic; product items and prices; cleanliness of destination; and level of customer service. Lastly, there is one area which I am sure never crosses our mind, but it is an important factor, and that is interaction with island residents. Think about your personal encounter with a Tourist.

As we begin a new year, the USVI ranks highly in most categories, but there is always room for improvement. Let us continue to improve and refresh our product, so that our cruise and overnight guests can have a fresh and invigorating experience, and become friends for life. Every new friendship earned leads to a more stable and prosperous future for all of us.

Submitted by:

Joseph B. Boschulte, president and CEO of WICO

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