

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Department Of Tourism Begins 2017 With Sales And Marketing Push

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The Department of Tourism said on Monday that it was building on the increase in stay-over arrivals last year by entering the winter season with a strong sales, marketing, advertising and public relations charge.

According to the release, D.O.T, Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty reported that besides paid advertising - which is currently airing on national television - D.O.T. earned close to 170 media placements since its Centennial promotion (which offers visitors \$300 in Spending Credits) took flight during the Christmas season.

To date, the department has recorded 167 earned media placements in print, online and broadcast media, registered 5.3 billion impressions and a public relations value of approximately \$3.4 million, according to the release.

The promotion was covered by journalists on outlets such as Thrillist.com, Huffington Post, CNBC.com and CNTraveler.com, and aired in news reports around the country, including CNN Headline News and WNBC-TV (NBC) New York, according to D.O.T. Mrs. Nicholson-Doty reported that the promotion was so successful that the Department had to increase its server capacity on VisitUSVI.com. To date, the Department has recorded more than 470 package sales, totaling 2,076 room nights with a total economic impact of more than \$1 million.

According to D.O.T., in recent weeks, the tourism team has been active in Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York and the San Francisco Bay Area, elevating the profile of the Territory among consumers and members of the travel trade. These efforts complement outreach by the sales team to the travel agent community through the popular 12@12 travel agent educational seminars.

The department began the year targeting members of the media, meeting planners, travel agents, industry influencers and consumers through initiatives to promote the Territory and its offerings. These included hosting meeting planners and journalists in January, having a strong presence at the annual Caribbean Travel Marketplace in the Bahamas, and participating in The New York Times Travel Show, New York Boat Show, The Boston Globe Travel Show and New England Boat Show, reaching consumers across the northeastern seaboard who are interested in Caribbean travel.

In Atlanta and then later in San Francisco, the D.O.T. team met with media, influencers and meeting planners as well as executives at Delta Air Lines where initiatives to increase travel to the Territory this summer were discussed. In Texas which, along with California, is a Top 10 market for travel to the USVI, the Department of Tourism's Director of Communications Alani Henneman-Todman discussed Centennial events and activities with influencers and members of the Dallas-based media, the release further states.

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty [also met with officials at Airbnb while in San Francisco](#) and then attended the important Routes Americas airline route development forum in Las Vegas. She capped off the week appearing on the KTLA Morning Show (a CW-affiliate in Los Angeles) to support the destination's participation in the Los Angeles Travel and Adventure Show. "In a short, but sweet segment, we were able to promote our Centennial commemoration and also feature the talents of Virgin Islanders Stan Brown and Alison Moolenaar Foy on steelpan and stilts, respectively," she commented. The public relations value for the segment was more than \$314,000.

According to the release, D.O.T.'s media hospitality program attracted close to a dozen journalists to the Territory to date (January and February), representing meetings/groups travel, culinary, travel and lifestyle publications. The trips gave members of the media an opportunity to experience and cover various facets of the destination, including the recent Agriculture and Food Fair on St. Croix. Plans are in the works to host writers for the St. Thomas International Regatta, Centennial/Transfer Day, 'A Taste of St. Croix' and the St. Croix Food & Wine Experience.

The film department has reported a number of productions were recently shot in St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas, including Vacation Creation travel series on The CW; a Travel Channel promotional video; House Hunters International; and a Danish Interactive Documentary. Filmed in the latter part of 2016, the following productions aired in January and February: ABC's The Bachelor; Beachfront Bargain on HGTV; and a National Geographic special on oceans.

More overnight visitors came to stay in the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2016 than in the previous year, even with challenges facing the sector, including concerns about the Zika virus in the region. The Commissioner attributes this growth to "an aggressive, strategic and targeted approach to marketing our Territory in our primary market - the United States", which continues in 2017.

According to the U.S. Virgin Islands Bureau of Economic Research (B.E.R.), stay-over visitor arrivals to the Territory were up 4.3 percent compared with 2015. St. Croix registered a 6.5 percent increase and St. Thomas/St. John was up by 3.8 percent. Based on available data (January to December) from the Caribbean Tourism Organization, the rate of growth experienced by the USVI has so far outpaced regional neighbors, including Aruba, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Curaçao, Grenada, Jamaica and St. Lucia.

"The U.S. market is responsible for more than 90 percent of our arrivals in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and we are encouraged to see how our sector is growing in spite of the challenging and competitive environment," said the commissioner.

She also noted that tourism spending in the destination is up and hotel room revenues, Revenue per Available Room (RevPAR) and Average Daily Rate (ADR) increased over 2015.

According to the statistical analysis presented by STR (formerly Smith Travel Research), which tracks supply and demand data for multiple market sectors, including the global hotel industry, average annual hotel daily room rates in the U.S. Virgin Islands increased from \$321.57 per night in 2015 to \$335.66 per night in 2016, an increase of 4.38 percent.

The corresponding rates for the Caribbean reveal that average annual daily hotel room rates decreased by 0.32 percent from \$202.14 per night in 2015 to \$201.50 per night in 2016. The average Caribbean occupancy rate dropped by 2.34 percent whereas the USVI registered a one percent increase in occupancy over the period 2015 to 2016.

The increase in the hotel room tax from 10 percent to 12.5 percent, notwithstanding hotel resort fees that range from \$20 to \$78 per night, has not appeared to impact demand.

Cruise arrivals to the USVI dropped by 5.4 percent over the past year, but tourism officials expect this to improve over the next 12 to 18 months now that the Territory has re-engaged its cruise partners to develop a solid strategy for addressing concerns - and return market share to the destination. Discussions have centered around improving the port and passenger experience at Crown Bay and introducing water transportation between the ports and downtown Charlotte Amalie.

According to B.E.R., visitor activity supports about 8,000 direct jobs in the Territory or approximately 20 percent of total wage and salary employment in four core tourism areas: accommodations, transportation, food and beverage, and other tourism industries.

According to D.O.T., tourism has a \$1 billion direct impact on the USVI economy, contributing an estimated 30 percent to the territory's gross domestic product. Not only is it a significant contributor to the economy, but because of its expansive influence on related sectors and industries (e.g., retail, dining, arts and entertainment, and other services), its impact is substantially greater than the direct value. Indirect economic impact is estimated at \$1.2 billion, for a total economic impact of \$2.2 billion.

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