

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Seatrade, Dept. Of Tourism Received Encouraging Feedback, But Challenges Lie Ahead As Cruise Lines Shift Calls To Western Caribbean

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With innovative thinking, leadership and continued public-private sector collaboration, the U.S. Virgin Islands has a good opportunity to further develop its cruise tourism sector, Department of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty has said, according to a release D.O.T. recently issued.

However, the commissioner -- who held bilateral talks with a number of cruise line executives during the Seatrade Cruise Global cruise industry convention - warned that the landscape of the tourism industry continues to be challenging as lines reposition

itineraries to the Western Caribbean and passengers demand a greater diversity of experiences. The territory was already dealing with a year-on-year decline in cruise ship passengers of [20-30 percent](#).

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty noted that during a meeting with the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association's (FCCA) top brass, the Ports of the U.S. Virgin Islands was commended for the progress made to implement harbor transportation in the Charlotte Amalie Harbor, which they described as "the single most important thing we can do for cruise tourism on St. Thomas."

The commissioner reported that the U.S. Virgin Islands was preparing to respond to the trend of purpose-driven travel and voluntourism by rolling out a number of projects that will be available for both cruise ship passengers and stay-over visitors, according to the release.

The territory will also continue to prioritize providing authentic Virgin Islands experiences for visitors, such as food tours, historical site visits, educational rum distillery tours and the ability to purchase locally made art and products, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said.

Governor Kenneth Mapp led the USVI delegation ahead of the official opening of Seatrade in Fort Lauderdale, where he met with the FCCA leadership and cruise ship executives. Also participating at Seatrade this year were representatives from the Department of Tourism, the Virgin Islands Port Authority and The West Indian Company Limited, and 11 senators of the 32nd Legislature.

During a USVI-branded event at The Boatyard restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, Mr. Mapp shared the Virgin Islands Government's commitment to the industry and emphasized the importance of working with neighboring islands to build a strong cruise itinerary, according to the release.

At Seatrade, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty joined cruise executives for a panel discussion entitled Regional Spotlight - The Future Outlook for Caribbean Cruising, during which she underscored the post-hurricane resilience of both the Caribbean and the cruise industry, and spoke of the strong partnership the region shares with the FCCA.

"If we thought the FCCA and its members were our travel partners before, we learned that you are really family ... when we were most in need, you came to our aid," the commissioner said, referring to the recovery support provided by the association and various cruise lines.

With some cruise lines reporting higher post-hurricane guest satisfaction scores compared with pre-storm scores, FCCA President and panel moderator Michele Paige said: "The Caribbean is delivering, and delivering better than ever before."

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty also spoke to the value of partnership in the region to ensure the Caribbean cruise industry's continued success. "No destination alone makes an itinerary. And so we are our brother's keeper and it's really important that we work together," she said, emphasizing the importance of destinations sharing best practices and prioritizing resilient planning for future weather events.

"Let's be honest, the truth is that we live in a geographical area that makes us vulnerable, so we have to think about those things that harden our infrastructure so that if and when this happens again, we are even more prepared," she said.

On the trade show floor, patrons learned more about the destination at the USVI booth, which featured colorful carnival dancers and a mocko jumbie, steel pan music and a sampling of Virgin Islands products.

"This year's convention was especially meaningful given the importance of cruise visits to bolstering our economy as we carry on with the varying stages of our recovery," Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said.

Before the official start of Seatrade, the D.O.T. engaged in networking opportunities with Virgin Islands tourism ambassadors and members of the media, meeting planners and travel agents, according to the release.

During the South Florida activation, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty met with several members of the media from outlets including The Miami Times, Cruise Critic, Travel + Leisure magazine, National Public Radio, Recommend, Insider Travel Report, Family Traveler, Cruise Addicts and Departures magazine. She also met with executives from Royal Caribbean International, Carnival Cruise Line, Fathom, Princess Cruises and Disney Cruise Line.