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USVI Embraces Innovation as Tourism Engine Restarts

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Suitcase, passport and medical mask By. iStock/Getty Images/ VI CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Department of Tourism said Thursday it is confident that its latest strategic partnerships with national media and travel sellers as well as communications to welcome travelers back to the U.S. Virgin Islands are already yielding encouraging returns for the territory.

Since the reopening of its doors to leisure visitors one month ago, several thousand guests have arrived in the territory, eager to explore and experience all that the territory has to offer, and to stimulate much-needed economic activity through their spending at hotels, activities and attractions, restaurants, retail stores and with tour operators and transportation providers.

D.O.T. Commissioner Joseph Boschulte attributes much of the success in attracting visitors to the existence of the Travel Screening Portal, a prescreening tool now required to be used by travelers to the USVI (aged 5 and older), regardless of the Covid-19 positivity rate in the traveler's state or

country of residence, as well as the protocols and guidance established by the Office of the Governor, the Department of Health and other local agencies.

“The Travel Screening Portal has been a game-changer for us as it has given us the technological capability to prescreen and certify travelers before they arrive in the Territory, enhancing our ability to ensure that visitors and residents are as protected as possible from COVID-19 infection,” stated Commissioner Boschulte, adding that the Department of Tourism is actively preparing for the launch of an updated, upgraded Travel Screening Portal (version 2.0), an extension of its crisis communications plan to safeguard the public health reputation of the destination.

The current version of the Travel Screening Portal, which since its late July launch has processed close to 25,000 travelers, offers a user-friendly front-end system to walk travelers through the submission process, and a secure, state-of-the-art back-end system that allows administrators to seamlessly process submissions, and airport and seaport personnel to efficiently process travelers upon arrival. It also features mobile-optimized functionality.

The technology undergirding the Travel Screening Portal has been designed to be not only innovative, but also responsive to changing travel protocols and the Territory’s health and safety guidelines. As part of this evolutionary process, version 2.0 of the portal will include significant upgrades such as a hybrid mobile application that supports Android and iOS platforms for a faster mobile experience and QR code generation functionality that allows the system to generate automated emails to travelers. With its built-in airport screening functionality that allows for scanning on the ground, the QR code functionality facilitates a seamless experience for travelers once they reach the destination.

The portal email generation system will also provide vital information to the passenger before traveling. The portal will eventually integrate an Artificial Intelligence (AI) engine that will automate and increase the efficiency of the entire back-end process.

“The Department of Tourism is continuously balancing the need to promote safe and healthy travel to the U.S. Virgin Islands, while employing and deploying new and innovative technologies to carry out essential prescreening of all travelers. The health of everyone in the Territory remains our highest priority,” noted the commissioner, who lauded the strong communications, marketing and public relations efforts that are continuing to keep the U.S. Virgin Islands “top of mind” with travelers not only from the mainland United States, but around the world.

Citing recent flight capacity reports, occupancy figures, and demand indicators for both traditional and sharing economy properties, Mr. Boschulte said, “Demand for travel to our islands continues on an upward trend, with inquiries and conversions to bookings encouraging, especially during this typically slow period of travel to the Caribbean. We are also pleased with the increased airlift scheduled for the coming months. We believe we have something very special to offer visitors, especially those who are seeking an escape from the pandemic lockdown that has all but crippled travel to many other destinations.”

In addition to the Department of Tourism’s COVID-19 Communication Center, Call Center and website (www.usviupdate.com), the Travel Screening Portal is just one of the tools the department has leveraged to provide the best information available to travelers as well as residents, and to support and complement the territory’s efforts in response to the global public health crisis.

The USVI Travel Screening Portal 2.0 is expected to launch in November, making it even easier for travelers to go through the necessary steps prior to traveling to the territory, according to D.O.T.

