

Tobago Capital of paradise

The Caribbean island that is competing with its big brother for a bigger share of foreign investment.

Tobago, part of the politically-stable Caribbean republic of Trinidad and Tobago, is one of the most tourism-intensive economies in the world with its stunning scenery, rich cultural heritage, and warm tropical climate. The island's attractions will once again become a focus of intense scrutiny for visitors to the 2005 World Travel Market at Excel in London's Docklands 14-17 November.

Often called 'the Capital of Paradise,' Tobago, with a population of 60,000, is slower, quieter, and relatively crime free compared to Trinidad, 21 miles away, and is covered in rain forest and mountains with a rich variety of beaches close to Venezuela on the South American mainland.

Tobago is far more Afro-centric with calypso and its own native soca music than its larger



Orville London Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly

neighbor with which it enjoys excellent and inexpensive travel links by sea and air. Its ethnic mix and diversity owes a great deal to successive waves of Indian, black, and mixed race Arab and Portuguese immigrants. There are no real towns only villages still wedded to a rural way of life.

The Tobago House of Assembly is the principal democratically-elected decision-making body for the island and enjoys a high degree of autonomy from Trinidad. Its Chief Secretary the Hon Orville London is committed to maintaining Tobago's 'clean, green and serene' image but is impatient to diversify the economy to include conference and convention business as well as energy exploration. Tobago has the oldest protected rain forest in the western hemisphere. "Tobago represents nature at its most pristine," he says. "There is also a high standard of living and we are developing our economy in line with sustainable development."

The forward agenda includes developing the north-east of Tobago with more investors welcome and renewed efforts to encourage

smaller hotels to offer high standards of service. Tobago's visitors are still 80% from the U.K. but London is keen to see more of them coming from central Europe – only 5% are from the U.S. which is as yet an untapped market. "Our people will be participants not spectators in their island's development," he adds, "and as for tourist numbers we focus more on quality than quantity."

In the pipeline already is a 2,000-5,000 person capacity convention center and a soon-to-be completed shopping mall. Sports tourism is another niche that London is keen to exploit, especially for cricket and other games where the naturally athletic Tobagans excel, such as swimming and field hockey. In support of these ambitious plans Tobago must, of necessity, increase its energy supplies – a natural gas pipe comes on stream from Trinidad in 2006. The government is also examining the prospects for exploration of four or five offshore exploration blocks for new sources of natural gas.

Since 2001, the direct responsibility for tourism development has rested with the Hon Neil Wilson, Secretary of Tourism Division at the Tobago House of Assembly. In that time tourism arrivals have rocketed from 49,000 to a forecast 120,000 this year, with 85,000 confirmed in 2004. Eleven airlines now fly regularly to Tobago with Laudair of Austria the newest debutant. More visitors are now arriving from the Netherlands and Scandinavia as well as

Neil Wilson Secretary of Tourism Division, THA



Germany and the U.K. Tourism employs 15,000 people or 57% of the working population while the industry now contributes 47% of gross domestic product (GDP). When Wilson took over hotel occupancy was averaging 15-17%: last year that figure touched 75-80%.

"We are studying how much more development can take place on the island without lessening the appeal of Tobago to tourists," says Wilson. With 4,600 hotel rooms, there is a need for more local entrepreneurs to get involved, especially with standards rising. The

Cruise into new investment opportunities in Tobago

Exciting things are happening in Tobago, Trinidad's "clean, green, safe and serene" neighbor. A new pipeline bringing gas to the island will help the economy grow, offering pristine opportunities in ecotourism, adventure sports, light manufacturing and agro-processing.



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incentives for investors include 10-year tax-free holidays, interest-free soft loans, and duty-free concessions for importing supplies and materials. The government is also planning an upgrade to Tobago's airport capacity to accommodate a 50% increase in aircraft movements, as there is a queue forming of interested airlines.

Tobago's success in winning the World Travel Awards for Best Eco-Tourism Destination in 2003 and again last year was certainly a big driver behind the increase in tourism arrivals, according to Rene Seepersadsingh, president of the Tobago Chapter of the Trinidad and Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association.

Seepersadsingh points out that Tobago is one of the world's top 10 dive destinations and among a handful in the Caribbean, which offer kite surfing. Like Wilson, he is also conservative in his outlook about the potential for more major hotel projects but a new development – the Angostura resort - is opening soon and all three new resorts are at the planning stage.

For Seepersadsingh, Tobago on its own, without Trinidad, represents natural beauty, culture and tranquility. The excellent transport links to Trinidad include a new fast ferry link, the Lynx, which business executives use as well and takes 2.5 hours as opposed to the U.S.\$35 one way short hop air shuttle.

"We have just completed only 10 years of involvement in the tourism industry," he says. "Our late start has enabled us to learn from the mistakes of others and to develop a low-impact sustainable tourism industry focusing on small hotels of around 120 rooms. Instead of majoring on nightlife, we specialize in soft adventure, such as kite surfing and bird watching with hundreds of species, many of which are easy to spot." Tobago has a strong and vocal environmental lobby, which is quick to whistle blow about any development that threatens flora or fauna. "Further room for development exists in the



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villa sector," says Seepersadsingh.

Tobago is committed to approaching its future tourist development in a highly business like style with a new emphasis on training and customer service. Indeed Tobago is likely to become even better known since the cable television network MTV is using the island for its popular 'The Real World' series, which will give the island television coverage to an extent never seen before. "We also have prospects for growth in the scuba diving market, health, well-being, yachting and for promoting Tobago as a weddings and honeymoon destination," adds Seepersadsingh.

Business Focus

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Tobago, the luscious, green caribbean island awaits you. A tropical island with a relaxing ambience whether you're basking in the sun at one of our many white sandy beaches or exploring inland in our award-winning rainforest, abundant with magnificent flora and cascading waterfalls.

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