



Enabling Economic Empowerment

An Interview with The Honorable Edmund Bartlett, Minister of Tourism, Jamaica

EDITORS' NOTE *The Honorable Edmund Bartlett has given over 35 years of service to Jamaica, working both in the Senate and in the House of Representatives. Bartlett was first appointed Minister of Tourism in 2007, serving until December 2011. Prior to this appointment, he already had a solid track record of service as an outstanding legislator in central government in both Chambers of Parliament. He served as Minister of State for Information, Broadcasting and Culture in the Office of the Prime Minister and Minister of Youth, Sports & Community Development from 1980 to 1989; later he served as Senator and Opposition Spokesman on various portfolios, including Tourism, from 1989 to 2007. While serving in the shadow Cabinet following his first stint as Tourism Minister, Bartlett traveled the world forging alliances with strategic partners for global initiatives. He returned to the helm of the Ministry of Tourism following the February 2016 victory at the polls by the Jamaica Labour Party. He currently chairs the Board of Affiliate Members of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). A graduate of the University of the West Indies, where he majored in accounting, he has worked at the senior management level in the areas of marketing and sales as well as accounting for major multinational companies operating in Jamaica, prior to entering elective politics.*



The Hon. Edmund Bartlett

How critical is tourism for Jamaica and what are you doing to continue to build an understanding of its role in driving growth for the country?

Tourism is the largest earner of foreign exchange. Last year, we earned \$2.56 billion, which is 53 percent of the foreign exchange generated in the country. It represents 8.3 percent of the GDP. There are more than 100,000 people directly and indirectly employed in the sector. This means that one in six or seven of the workers in the country are involved in tourism.

The number of rooms we have in the region is around 28,000, and we have a growth level now of about 4 percent. We also have a calculation of the impact of tourism, which makes its contribution to the GDP closer to 30 percent.

It is certain that tourism is the single largest economic activity in Jamaica today. However,

it has to be positioned and structured in a way to enable economic empowerment of the people of the country. It has a propensity to use foreign exchange and could become a net user of foreign exchange if the capacity of the economy is not built to respond to the demand of tourism.

Tourism has a series of moving parts that have to seamlessly work together to create an experience that people buy.

One tourist generates 75 jobs.

That makes a point about the value chain and how deep and wide it is, and how critical it is for job creation and poverty alleviation.

Historically, Jamaica has had an understanding of tourism as being a driver of leisure, excitement, and fun, but we have never structured the economy around tourism as a driver. The result is that the leakage of foreign exchange from tourism is high. In the Caribbean as a whole, it is 80 cents on the dollar. In Jamaica, it's 30 cents.

We now have to recalibrate and reconfigure the structural arrangements to enable tourism to contribute more and to further cauterize the leakage.

As tourism continues to grow at the pace it has, do you worry about meeting the demand?

We have made a conscious decision to look at how we can enhance the linkages of tourism with the various other economic sectors. To that extent, we have established five pillars of growth.

The first is the expansion of products, meaning new products; the second is the expansion of the markets, meaning the emerging markets, especially those in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America, as well as Africa and India.

The third pillar is new investments, which is central to capital development and the expansion of the product itself. Investment is also a marketing tool because people want to relate to familiar things, and investment that flows from a destination invites visitors from those destinations.

The fourth pillar is partnerships, which includes airlines but also multi-destination tourism activities and partnerships with countries. We have to redefine how in the new tourism landscape small countries, like ours in the

Caribbean, will be able to compete with the larger countries in the world. More countries are realizing that tourism is an easy way to transfer wealth from the rich to the poor more efficiently than most other economic activities.

The fifth pillar is human capital, which is about training and building people to make them more efficient and proficient and more responsive. However, we also want them to be more creative and innovative because that is what will enhance our competitive edge and distinction as a top destination.

People travel for experience, and the growth in demand for experiential journeys is outpacing that for destinations or even for brands. Because we have much to offer in the visitor interest and experiences area, we have to develop those experiences and the products around those experiences. We need to identify the passion points because people travel to fulfill their passions.

As a result, we have developed five networks: the first is food, because 88 percent of the world travels for food and food-related experiences. It's not just about providing delectable dishes, but identifying areas where food preparation happens. We can build products around that and all of these areas provide jobs.

The second network is shopping; 67 percent of the world travels for shopping and the Asian travelers are particularly interested in shopping, so we have to provide shopping experiences in our space.

The third network is perhaps unique to Jamaica – entertainment, music, and sports. Jamaica has Bob Marley, the millennial sound, and the fastest man and woman on earth. We have the oldest human being on earth as well. It's about exploring the depth of our culture and heritage, and putting attention on ethnic groups who have come together over the years to form our country.

The fourth network is health and wellness. The richness of the diversity of Jamaica's environment offers opportunities to flow from its plants and herbs. We have two of the finest spas in the world. We offer alternative medicine and applications based on a number of pharmaceuticals that flow from our plants. Cannabis offers a range of medical applications, and that has its own value as a traffic builder.

Our last network is knowledge. People travel to discover new places, to learn languages, and to do things such as geological and

archaeological exploration. This is an entire area that offers many opportunities to develop experiences around.

In the context of those pillars and networks, we weave the capacity of our economy to respond to the demand of tourism. The farmers will be empowered to produce more fresh fruits and vegetables to deal with gastronomy. The manufacturers will have to provide more furnishings. The agro-processor will also be empowered to deal with the canning of juices and sauces. The bakers will be empowered to bake more bread.

This is the answer to empowering our economy and to building wealth for our people.

What role will partnerships play in the growth of the tourism industry?

Partnerships are an essential element of tourism and enhance sustainability in the industry. We feel that, particularly for small economies like ours, partnerships are a means to growth.

We look at partnerships not just in terms of the distribution network or suppliers' network; we see it in a broader sense because there is a need for neighboring countries that might not have the critical mass alone to forge larger partnerships with airlines and cruise lines to come together and develop joint marketing and air-lift arrangements.

We have been meeting with our partners in Cuba, Mexico, and Dominican Republic, because the four of us represent close to 70 percent of the tourism in the Caribbean. This provides an opportunity for serious discussions with airlines, particularly those from the emerging travel markets, like China.

The Caribbean is in the mood for more collaboration. Just recently, the Caribbean Tourism Organization in New York passed a resolution concerning joint marketing arrangements that will treat the Caribbean countries as one unit. It's

about harmonizing certain policies to enable visitor facilitation within the Caribbean region as a whole.

Is collaboration difficult when there is so much competition in the market?

We have a growing understanding, but it has taken a while for countries to reach this point.

There is still concern that the larger countries may subsume the smaller ones in the process, so we have to continue to show how the marketing of the region can be positive for everyone.

People buy multiple experiences within the Caribbean space and, because they island hop, they can take a multi-week vacation and spend those weeks in a number of different destinations with a variety of experiences.

We're providing a better customer value proposition for Caribbean tourism and that is being increasingly appreciated.

Necessity has driven many of the islands to begin to look seriously at this collaborative approach because airlift for them is either non-existent or minimal.

It's easier if they can develop hubs and relationships so one bigger country can receive the mega lines and small aircraft can distribute to the smaller islands.

We are also recognizing that a rising tide lifts all ships.

What is the focus of the conference that Jamaica will host in November and what do you hope comes out of it?

The global conference we are hosting will be significant. Not only is it the first time we're bringing together the key stakeholders of tourism – financial, intellectual, the hotel/hospitality groups, the cruise lines, multilateral agencies, lending agencies, and donor countries – but it's also the first time we're going to be focusing on empowering the small- and medium-sized tourism entities. They drive 80 percent of tourism globally, but their rewards often seem to be invisible.



Frenchman's Cove in Port Antonio, Jamaica

We will be discussing how to make destinations more profitable and how we stem this leakage that has impoverished several tourism-driven destinations.

We will also be addressing the asymmetries that exist in terms of the flow of resources to support development activities in tourism as opposed to other industries, bearing in mind that tourism represents 10 percent of global GDP. Last year it employed 293 million people directly and pretty close to one billion indirectly. The fact is that 40 percent of trade and services is tourism related.

These are huge economic indicators that should be reflected in the way that countries embrace tourism as the central focus of their economic activity, but we're not seeing that.

The conference will look at how we can make tourism a generator of more jobs and inclusive growth.

In the context of sustainability, we are looking at three key areas: first is the management of climate change; second, we're looking at the economic impact; and third, we're looking at how to bring communities together socially to expand and benefit from the impact of tourism.

We want to make sure that the infrastructure in the communities is as good as that which is in the hotels, attractions, and tourism centers. It is the people who must continue to be at the center of the tourism experience because it is the people who craft it.

If we train and develop the people, and build their human capacity, then we will empower them to create innovative experiences, and then the people will embrace tourism and they will protect it.

The issues of safety and security, which have dogged us over the years and continue to be the largest problem tourism has globally, will be dealt with because those issues are driven by people.

That is the context in which this conference is being positioned. We're looking to welcome 157 ministers from around the world and approximately 500 companies that are involved in this.

We can discuss the experiences that technology can enhance, although even with AI or other technology advances, it's still about the people.

What efforts are being made to make Jamaica more secure?

We recently inaugurated a program called Destination Assurance, which was set up to pull together all the critical stakeholders and the agencies of government that are responsible for the integrity of communities in the police, water, health, fire, utilities, and environmental areas. The goal is to have them all under one counsel that can then advise a destination manager, and we have developed six resort

areas that will be resort destinations. We'll have six managers, and that office will become a one-stop shop for all the key deliverables that enable us to secure the integrity of the area.

We are working with homeland security, and created a special tourism security core that is under the direction of homeland security. They are trained in hospitality, but they also carry a strong hand because they are trained in the execution and preservation of the law.

We use technology, and we support homeland security in getting CCTV and other equipment that enhances intelligence, like mobile units with cameras. We work with them and the communities to enable better access for our people and tourists. The program for security and safety is not only about the visitor; it's about making Jamaica safe, secure, and seamless for Jamaicans first so when the visitor comes, it's no problem. ●