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Re-Imagining Belizean Tourism

Presented by: Mrs. Linette Canto, Executive Director, BTIA
Mr. Kevin Geban, University of Belize

Outline

This presentation covers:

- An overview of the tourism summit
- Main Objectives
- Highlights
- Lessons learned
- The Way Forward



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Overview



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- The summit was held on May 26, 2022 at the Best Western Plus Belize Biltmore Plaza
- Partnership with UB. Main Sponsor: MAR Fund
- Attendees – In Person: 127, Zoom: 15, Via FB: 231
- The main speakers for the opening ceremony were BTIA's President, Mr. Stewart Krohn, UB's President, Dr. Vincent Palacio, and the Keynote Speaker, Former Minister of Tourism of the Bahamas, Mr. Vincent Vanderpool Wallace.
- There were 5 Panels focusing on Climate Change, Belize City Cruise Ports, Branding, Airports and Land Borders & Looking Ahead: what is the goal and how do we get there?

Objectives



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The main objectives of the summit were:

1. To examine Belize's position as a tourism destination in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. To gather data and industry positions to contribute to the revision of the National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan;
3. To formulate recommendations for Belize Tourism's Strategic Direction in a Post-Covid 19 Era; and,
4. To discuss destination best practices relating to the main facets of Belize's Tourism.

Keynote Address



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The keynote address was delivered by Mr. Vincent Vanderpool Wallace,
Former Minister of Tourism of the Bahamas.



Highlights from Mr. Vanderpool Wallace's Presentation



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- Belize has good models in place like the domestic airline situation and the formalization of Airbnb.
- Belize can learn from the Bahamas, an example being the public buses that are operated by the Bahamas Government.
- Only Belize and Belizeans can shape our "brand" of tourism. The key is to make personal service more personal. Quoting Maya Angelou, "People will always remember how you make them feel."
- All citizens must be involved and there must be wide distribution of income from tourism. In the Bahamas, they created a mission statement specifically for tourism and sensitized all citizens about it.
- Mr. Vanderpool reminded the audience that competitors couldn't copy the "Belize" experience and that personality is a key skill in tourism

Panel I: Preparing for Climate Change: Is Beach Tourism an Endangered Species?

- The panel comprised of :
 - Dr. Colin Young, the Executive Director of the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre
 - Mr. Valdemar Andrade, the Executive Director of the Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association
 - Dr. Leandra Ricketts Cho, the Director of UB Environmental Research Institute
- The panel was moderated by Senator Janelle Chanona, Vice President of Oceana Belize



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Key Points from Panel 1



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Global warming is likely to reach 1.5 degree C between 2030 and 2052 and sea-level rise will increase by .26 to .77m by 2100

The impact on tourism include the loss of beaches, infrastructure damage, and the loss of livelihoods. To mitigate these threats, some recommendations are:

1. We need to change perspectives on the value of coastal ecosystems
2. Practice adaptive coastal planning
3. Restore coastal ecosystems: mangroves, coral reefs
4. Use natural protective buffers
5. Stop damaging practices on land, such as river mining
6. Diversify tourism activities

Key Points from Panel 1



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There is a lack of SLR gauges in Belize.

There has been significant beach erosion at South Water Caye over a 10-year period as well as coastal erosion in Monkey River - factors such as watersheds, hurricanes, and earthquakes have contributed to this.

It was suggested that 95% of tourism resorts would be at risk with a 50m erosion scenario, and the tourism cost will be US \$518m.

Beach tourism is an endangered species and climate change is now considered an existential threat. It is a certainty that it is happening now; we just don't know the extent as yet.

What is required in the short term is innovative approaches and the finances to adapt.

Panel II: Belize City Cruise Ports: How Many is too Many?



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The panel comprised of:

- Dr. Dionne Chamberlain representing Port Loyola Cruise and Cargo
- Mr. David Gegg, CEO of Portico Enterprises.
- There were no representatives present from Port Coral (they were invited to participate).
- The Moderator was Mrs. Amanda Acosta, Executive Director of the Belize Audubon Society.



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Key Points from Panel 11

Mr. David Gegg (Magical Belize):

Mr. Gegg stated that Belize is at a point where tourism must be "cut, shaped, and polished,"

He said that the Supreme Court in October 2015 made a ruling that eliminated the exclusivity of cruise ports in the Belize District which set the stage for investment, including his Port of Magical Belize.

Mr. Gegg said that there are issues with cruise ships navigating through Belizean waters and modern ships like the Oasis of the Seas will continue to need docking facilities. It would be much easier for ships to navigate to Magical Belize than to Port of Belize.

Mr Gegg stated that Magical Belize had an MOU with GOB in 2017 and presented a letter showing that Portico was given environmental clearance in April of 2021.

He then presented the features and main attractions of Magical Belize to highlight access to the highway grid and Belize's attractions.

Mr. Gegg proposed a Northern Lagoon Aquatic Playground and said that they plan to work with the Gracie Rock community and the Gales Point Manatee community and will explore the possibility of building a resort hotel.



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Key Points from Panel 11

Dr. Dionne Miranda Chamberlain (Port Loyola Cruise and Cargo)

Dr. Chamberlain said that the investor has a vested interest in Belize's development and is environmentally conscious

She said that in 2016 the GOB asked WIHL to research the viability of a cruise facility at Port Loyola, and the project is guided by: creating economic value, capturing cruise potential, and respecting the environment.

She highlighted that the value of the project is that it blends both a cargo port and a cruise port, that it has cruise operator buy-in and is backed by a billionaire who is not relying on local banking. She pointed out that the Port of Belize has a commitment from the cruise lines.

She also pointed out that it's a US\$200 million investment and that the bulk cargo facilities are very much needed for the Belizean economy.

She concluded by requesting that decision-makers make an informed decision by asking for cruise line commitments and financial investment commitments, among other things.



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Key Points from Panel 11

Moderator/Audience Feedback

The Moderator asked how many cruise ports were too many? Given the possibility that there may be 12 ships in port on a given day within a 25-mile radius, can Belize's infrastructure support that many cruise visitors?

Dr. Chamberlain responded that berthing facilities will become a must-have, so Belize must adapt or have no cruise at all. She pointed out that the country should explore how it can grow and that the tourism plan needs to answer the questions of how many is too many. She posited that investors are there to invest in growth.

An audience member pointed to a report that summarized that cruise continues to cause health and environmental problems and asked how Belize can rationalize such growth in cruise.

The panellists said they disagreed with the report and that it was skewed.

Another participant suggested that the point of the debate should not be about which is better and that he is okay with no cruise at all. He stated that cruise supporters like to point to economic benefit, but he hasn't seen any evidence of that. He points to Belize's policy of not receiving all cruise taxes, and if the country is not getting the real benefit, then it's not a great deal.

The panellists pointed out all the players in cruise that benefit and stated that quite a few folks do quite well from tips from cruise passengers.

A participant from the Ministry of Tourism then read from a report that concluded that there are arguments for and against cruise tourism, and it should be looked at further.

Panel III: Branding Belizean Tourism for Resilience



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The panel comprised of:

- Mr. Cole Zimmerman, Senior Vice President, Zimmerman Agency
- Ms. Liz Paradise, Chief Creative Officer, Zimmerman Agency
- Mr. Maynor Larrieu, Marketing Manager, Expedia Belize
- The moderator was Mr. Ian Lizarraga, Managing Partner, The Belize Collection

Key Points from Panel 111



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- There's been a fundamental change in how consumers connect with brands. The touchpoints have shifted and the “old way of doing business” is no longer sustainable.
- Brands need to craft their vision and their voice...communication and customer service is important.
- Friends and family are the #1 focus of brands right now.
- Resilience is about maintaining and growing the brand. A resilient brand is comprised of belief, experience, and strategy.
- Visitors want the assurance that Belize is a safe and comfortable place to adventure.
- 58% of consumers will choose to spend with companies that align with their values, 53% are likely to spend if they trust they'll get what they were promised, and that 44% have stopped buying from a company due to lack of trust.
- A good brand promise should be transparent, traveller-focused, supported by committed, high-quality partners, and rich with tools that help you succeed

Panel IV: Airport and Land Borders - Short Term and Long-Term Solutions

The panel comprised of:

- Mr. Yashin Dujon, General Manager of the Belize Border Management Agency
- Mr. Enrique Hoare, Operations Manager of the Philip Goldson International Airport
- Mr. Anthony Hunt, Airlift Committee.
- The panel was moderated by Mr. Ishmael Quiroz, Director of Private-Public Sector Partnership.



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Key Points from Panel IV



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- Border Management Agency (BMA) is responsible for both land and sea entry points. The border experience should be the same experience that one has at the airports.
- BMA is investing in technology and will be installing self-check kiosks and cashless systems to pay taxes and fees.
- The BMA will be investing in improved infrastructure, landscaping, and technology. The key is that border entry and exit must be a good experience.
- Quality control is important for the visitor experience; with one bad experience visitors may not come back.
- There are several challenges that the PGIA faces, which include:
 1. The decertification of the Boeing 737 Max and the loss of Aeromexico as a result;
 2. Covid and the ever-changing restrictions;
 3. Rising fuel costs;
 4. Training new staff and the certification and recertification process for them: and,
 5. Congestion peaks on Saturdays at 11 am.
- There must be incentives for airlines to change their schedule, more immigration and customs officers need to be assigned, more hiring of air traffic controllers and access to more land for expansion.



Airlifts:

- International Airlift in Belize has grown over the years.
- In 2001 only 7 cities and 3 countries were being served by 6 airlines.
- In 2022, there will be 20 cities and 7 countries being served by 11 airlines.

Myths about airline travel to Belize:

1. **Airfares to Belize are so expensive.** Of the top leisure destinations in our region there are 11 destinations that have higher average airfares.
2. **Air Service to Belize is missing from the biggest cities in the USA to Belize.** There are air services to some of the biggest cities in the USA, including Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and South Florida, among others.
3. **All the other countries were getting back service before Belize.** It was highlighted that Belize is in line with other markets in the region.

Key Points from Panel IV



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Major concerns from airlines about Belize include:

- Not enough core tourism product rooms..
- Small hotel size/lack of room consistency makes it hard for vacation divisions to sell
- We are closed two months of the year. What about the empty planes?
- Hotel rates are high. Hotels want airlines to lower their rates when they don't lower theirs.
- Belize needs to start to think of its product creatively, especially for repeat visitors.
- We must have data. Not having it is a huge negative.

Panel V: Looking Ahead: What is the Goal and How do We Get There?

The panel comprised of:

- Hon. Anthony Mahler, Minister of Tourism and Diaspora Relations, Belize
- Vincent Vanderpool Wallace, Former Minister of Tourism, Bahamas
- Stewart Krohn, President, BTIA



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Key Points from Panel V



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- Ensure that there is not a disconnect between what we are marketing overseas and what is being delivered.
- Ensure that all our citizens are seeing what we are doing. Example: There was a very successful campaign in the Bahamas called "Tourism Today" that informed the population of what was happening in tourism, thereby creating buy in and support.
- The Public-Private partnership is critically important, and we must remember that PPP does not mean 50/50 in terms of financing.
- Value for Money is important.. Expensive is a relative term, and what one should worry about is giving value for money and not so much the price.
- Service down the line is very important. In today's industry, the power has shifted to the consumer. Things like harsh cancellation policies would cause negative repercussions and we are re-learning that the customer is always right.

Key Points from Panel V (Hon. Anthony Mahler)



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- The Minister reiterated that his vision is that he wants us to all use tourism as a vehicle to bring down poverty levels in Belize.
- There are lots of investment happening in quality hotels, restaurants and in other tourism areas.
- Minister Mahler said his focus has been bringing airlifts back to the country, and they are focusing on Europe. He said it's one thing to get a route; it's another to sustain it because there are lots of issues like pilot shortage at play.
- Government's role is to create an enabling environment for investment.
- Human capital is important, and the way to get there is through continuous training.
- There are plans to work with the private sector and UB to launch a Tourism Training Institute and to update the Tourism Master Plan.
- Belize has a lot to offer and how we package it is important because we must use our resources in a sustainable manner.

Recommendations

After the presentations of the five panels, several recommendations can be extracted:

1. Given that climate change is occurring, when developing tourism plans and activities Belize must now focus on how adaptability to climate change can be included in such plans.
2. Given that Belize has no sea level rise monitors, the country should invest in such monitors.
3. The advantages and disadvantages of cruise tourism will have to be studied further. There should be wider consultations when deciding how many cruise ports Belize City can sustain.
4. The PGIA needs expanding, and the congestion on Saturdays needs addressing.

Recommendations

5. Government should examine increasing the number of immigration and customs officer at the airport, especially at peak times.
6. There should be further investments in the airport and the installation of gangways should be explored.
7. Belize's borders should be updated to include improved infrastructure and the use of technology.
8. There seems to be a disconnect between those in the accommodations sector and those in airlift. There should be increased dialogue between both parties when addressing Belize's airlift issues.
9. Belize should do a wider Public Relations campaign to show the importance of tourism, like the 'Tourism Today' programme in the Bahamas.

Recommendations

10. Belize should research public perception of tourism and gauge how its citizenry perceives careers in tourism.
11. There should be a continuous tourism training program that includes the private and public sectors.
12. The BTB should engage further with its industry partners, encouraging them to utilize BTB's media stock of photos/videos to expand destination marketing.
13. Tourism practitioners should build their brands by engaging in campaigns and not sporadic advertising.
14. The updating of the Master Plan should entail a detailed consultation process, and the sustainability of Belize's resources must be paramount in the plan.



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THANK YOU