

RADIO BROADCAST BY
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My fellow Jamaicans,

At this time of year, the large number of Jamaicans who are involved in our very important tourism sector, begin to make final preparations for the winter season which commences on December 15 each year. This year is no different except that we see the possibility of the next winter season as being one of our most successful.

You will remember the difficulties we faced, along with all countries around the world which depend on the travel trade, after the horrible attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. The entire world was affected by these acts of terrorism.

It has been a long road back. We have had to call on all our resilience and determination. All of us in the public and private sector struggled hard to get our tourism sector back on its feet again. So far this year, the signs have been very encouraging.

By the end of last month, stop-over visitor arrivals increased by over 7 percent. Cruise passenger arrivals were up by almost one third. We expect to welcome our one millionth cruise ship arrival for this year at the end of this month. An amazing achievement and the first time in our history. Congratulations are surely in order for all those whose hard work made this possible.

This means that we have recovered the ground we lost after September 11 and are now ahead of the 2000 level, which was our best year until then. We expect 2004 to be even better, especially if the US economy continues to improve.

I want to use this opportunity to tell every Jamaican what he or she can do to contribute to the continuing success of our tourism industry. I am sure you all realise how important the industry is to our entire economy and to the lives of every Jamaican.

Tourism is our country's largest source of foreign exchange earnings. To meet our country's expenses, we need foreign exchange and the revenues we collect help us meet our national expenses. Without sufficient foreign exchange, we cannot buy raw materials, equipment, fuel, food and all the consumer goods we do not produce locally. That is why we refer to foreign exchange as the life blood of our economy.

Knowing how important it is for us to increase our foreign exchange earnings, and realizing that tourism offers the best avenue for providing jobs as the industry expands, we have developed what we call the Tourism Master Plan. The Plan was finalised after consultations with all the groups involved in tourism, and together we have come up with a programme which we will implement over the next ten years.

The Plan calls for an increase in the number of hotel rooms and other types of accommodation. We have made a fine start with this.

Right now, a 360-room hotel is under construction at Whitehouse in Westmoreland which will open next year.

In Negril, a 450- room resort is also under construction and this too will open next year.

Other hotels in our major resort areas are being extensively refurbished.

In St. Ann, at Pear Tree Bottom, (between Discovery Bay & Runaway Bay) an 1800-room hotel complex will begin construction in the New Year. So the outlook is positive when it comes to increasing the accommodation side of the industry.

Another important component of the Plan is ensuring we have enough airlines flying here to bring the visitors. We have had great success with that as well. We have also enjoyed success in attracting more cruise passenger arrivals.

The Sangster International Airport, now under new management, is being modernised. Sangster will soon be up to world class standards and well able to comfortably accommodate increased numbers of visitors. The Norman Manley Airport will be undergoing extensive upgrading soon. There have been major improvements at our cruise ship ports as well, and our cruise passengers now enjoy a more pleasant experience on arrival on our shores.

Most of us will agree that the eastern end of our island is one of the most beautiful places not just in Jamaica but anywhere in the world. We have been working to restore Port Antonio and its environment to its rightful place as one of our most attractive and popular resort areas. The prospects for a great season are wonderful!

As of last Tuesday, November 11, we began a new period in the history of Port Antonio with the arrival of the first of a series of scheduled cruise ship arrivals. Some of the world's top level cruise lines will be bringing passengers to Port Antonio throughout the entire winter season. These cruise lines cater to the highest end of the cruise market. They will continue to come to Port Antonio as long as we ensure that they enjoy a quality vacation experience. I am appealing to everyone in the area to make sure that this happens.

The Port Antonio Marina is also going to be the centre of new and exciting activity with the arrival of some 58 mega yachts starting this month.

Jamaicans and visitors alike will be pleased to hear that we will soon be able to enjoy the pleasure of rafting on the Rio Grande once again. A new agreement has been reached between the rafters and the management and the Tourism Product Development Company, (TPDCo), is carrying out extensive refurbishing to be completed in time for the start up of rafting in time for this winter season.

The construction of the Ocho Rios to Fair Prospect segment of the North Coast Highway will commence in the next budget year as we continue the modernisation of our island's road network.

The Tourism Master Plan provides for the development of **new** attractions for our visitors.

As you know from your personal experience, when you are on holiday, you want to try new things, to have new experiences. Right now, there are a number of attractions for our visitors.

Our world famous Dunns River Falls sees thousands of visitors every year. There are others attractions such as the Green Grotto Caves, Dolphin Cove, Devon House in Kingston and Rose Hall in Montego Bay, to name just a few.

But as we work to increase the number of visitors, there is a need for more.

One of the main responsibilities of the TPDCo is to work with any individual or group with ideas for developing visitor attractions by providing technical assistance. In addition, the Jamaica Business Development Company will provide business counselling.

Recently the Development Bank of Jamaica has made some J\$10 million available for financing such enterprises. Remember too, that new regulations have just been passed which mean that tax incentives are now in place to encourage the development of new attractions. Here is a real opportunity for enterprising persons. I encourage anyone with ideas or interests in such a project to contact TPDCo to discuss your proposal. They are there to help.

This is one of the very good things about tourism. It not only provides job opportunities for those who work in hotels. The benefits spread to people involved in other activities related to the industry - to agriculture, transportation, manufacturing, entertainment, sports and construction. Crafts people, tour operators, taxi drivers, barbers and hairdressers, florists, restaurant operators, anyone who provides goods and services to visitors can benefit and, as the number of visitors grows, so do the opportunities for enterprising Jamaicans.

I also want to remind those of you who are already employed in the tourism sector about the special training opportunities available to you through TEAM Jamaica, a certification programme for all levels of the tourism workforce.

I said earlier that I want to use this opportunity to tell every Jamaican how to help make this season our most successful ever. It is really not very difficult.

Firstly, I am asking your help in keeping our public areas clean. We will be beginning a general beautification programme shortly for the benefit of Jamaicans and visitors alike, as we all deserve to live in a clean, healthy environment. I am asking for your cooperation in maintaining these areas once the improvements have been made. Next, for your own safety and that of our visitors, please assist the police as they try to keep order and control criminal activity. I don't have to tell you how critical that is for all of us.

Finally, let me say this. Our tourism industry is successful for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Lord has blessed us abundantly with a country of special beauty.

Because we have been in the business for so long, we have developed a cadre of persons at all levels of the sector who operate at the highest standards of professionalism equal to any destination in the world. Our immigration officers, our customs officers our airport and cruise port staff at all levels, our taxi and bus drivers, our hotel workers and a host of other front line tourism workers have undergone training so that we treat the public -Jamaican and visitor alike - efficiently and politely. The level of harassment at our air and sea ports, which at one time threatened to destroy our industry, has been significantly reduced although we still have some way to go.

It may surprise many of you that when all the marketing surveys are done, all the questions asked as to why so many people continue to come to Jamaica, the answer is unanimous. Yes, they love our music, they love our beaches, our mountains, our clear blue water, our jerk pork and jerk chicken, the patties, rice and peas, curry goat, the rum punch and all that. But above all, they agree it is the people of Jamaica, with our self confidence, our special vibe, our friendliness, the warmth of our hospitality that keeps them coming back and sending their friends.

This explains why for this winter season we have developed an overseas advertising programme that pays tribute to the Jamaican people, a programme that stresses all the positive things about us, the qualities and attributes that make us special people and make Jamaica a unique tourist destination. The campaign's theme is the 'Genius of Jamaica'. I am sure you will see the ads as you watch the cable channels on TV when the programme kicks off.

So this year, let us welcome our visitors, and let us continue to do what we do best - be ourselves, and we will enjoy all the considerable economic benefits that tourism has to offer this beautiful land we love.