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ADDRESS BY PRIME MINISTER, RT. HON. P.J. PATTERSON Q.C., M.P.  
FOR OFFICIAL OPENING OF AIR JAMAICA VACATIONS,  
MONTEGO BAY, JANUARY 31, 2002

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Salutations

Introductory remarks

Since entering public life, I have been accused of many things. So I won't be surprised if I am accused of showing favouritism to the Tourism Sector by participating in not one, but two important Tourism events in just one week.

Just last Thursday, I addressed a luncheon hosted by the JTB in New York for the movers and shakers in the travel industry in that region, as well as members of the Jamaican community. And here I am again today, happy to be part of yet another landmark tourism event.

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Frankly ladies and gentlemen, being accused of showing favouritism to tourism, as you know would be nothing compared to some of the things I am accused of on a daily basis ---- just listen to any of the talk shows! So I am willing to stand firm for this one!

Those of you who know of my history of involvement with, and commitment to, this sector will recall that tourism was one of the first sectors for which I had Portfolio responsibility as a rookie member of the Cabinet.

Many of the youngsters in this audience, who today hold management positions in the sector were at that time only gleams in the eyes of their parents! Chances are, that just a few years before I became Minister, your parents might not have been welcome as guests in any of our already world-famous resort hotels! How times have changed!

I hope that at least some of you know a little about the history of the sector and have some appreciation of the enormous strides we have made as a nation - socially and economically since then. Strides that have made events such as this one possible.

Looking back, I recall how happy I was as Minister, to mark the increase of stopover visitor arrivals from 532,863 in 1978 to 593,571 in 1979.

In 2000 that figure was 1.32 million and counting. Cruise shipping saw record arrivals of 907, 611. As they say: -- "We've come a long way, baby!"

And by all indications, we still have far to go and, better yet, we know how to get there!

As the tourism sector continues to grow and mature, I see a welcome development of genuine, measurable cooperation among all players in every segment of the sector. I sense a real appreciation of the fact that we are all in this together. We have far more to gain by working in tandem than by creating artificial divisions. We are definitely developing a seamless operation in order to deliver the best tourism product of which we are capable.

Today, Tourism earns more than half, 51 per cent to be precise, of our gross foreign exchange earnings, and accounts indirectly for one in every four jobs in this country.

We continue to enjoy a unique position in the global tourism market. We are truly blessed with one of the most beautiful countries in the world; a vibrant culture, and a name that carries international brand recognition.

We have the added value of a self-confident people who are more than capable of differentiating between service and servitude.

People who welcome visitors to the island with the warmth that we extend to guests in our own homes, and who know how to put our visitors at ease.

That makes a Jamaican vacation a positive human experience for locals and visitors alike. That is the special ingredient that makes the Jamaican vacation tempting to imitate, but impossible to duplicate.

With a clear vision of where we want this sector to go, we have developed Tourism in a cohesive and focused way. As the leading export earner for Jamaica during the last decade, Tourism has been identified as a priority area in our National Industrial Policy and has enjoyed the unwavering support of the Government as a major catalyst for national development.

This Administration has been mindful of the need for improvement in our infrastructure and facilities for ground and air transport to further facilitate tourism development.

A major advance in this regard has been made with the start of construction of our first toll highway- a section of which has already been completed on schedule. I invite anyone here who has not yet taken a spin on the Old Harbour Bypass to put it on your itinerary! Believe me, you won't regret it. Just be sure to observe the speed limit, please!

The 230 km Highway 2000 will connect Kingston to the tourism centres of Montego Bay and Ocho Rios in record time. When the North Coast Highway linking Negril to Port Antonio is completed, along with Highway 2000, the entire country will be transformed.

While we continue to make good progress in the sector, we still face serious challenges, not least of which is recurring negative publicity in the international media, with the less than desirable images of violence in our country.

No media house, no individual journalist, however friendly, is likely to sacrifice the truth— or the story that sells -- on the altar of attention to specific detail that would place their stories always in their proper context.

Like every star, - Jamaica, because of our high profile as a tourism destination, must learn to accept that Jamaica is news! Other countries with equally troubling problems never make the headlines - because they do not enjoy the name recognition that we do. So it's something we have to live with and learn to manage - the downside - the bad publicity) with the upside - the name recognition that helps sell our tourism product.

Our job as leaders in the sector is to maintain vigilance in monitoring and seeking to counter these negative impressions. It's a task we must carry out tirelessly, for the stakes are high.

The events of September 11 created yet another potentially crippling challenge to the continued growth of the sector. This we met with both local and regional responses.

Prior to September 11, the second Caribbean Tourism Summit was planned for October 2001. Following September 11, a Special Emergency Meeting of CARICOM Heads of Government was held in Nassau, October 11 -12, followed by the Tourism Summit also in the Bahamas from December 8 - 9.

These meetings represented a prompt, comprehensive and cohesive response to a common threat and gave rise to the adoption of a number of significant measures.

These measures were aimed at not only facilitating short-term recovery. They were aimed also at reinventing and re-positioning Caribbean tourism in the context of slowed global economies and the stepping up of efforts by many destinations in support of their businesses in a softened marketplace.

Heading our concerns were issues of safety and security at all airports; strengthening the systems, including posting of armed personnel, reduction of access to secure areas and increase in screening of passengers and baggage.

A Regional Safety Oversight Mechanism was also established with Jamaica providing temporary office accommodation and an Interim Director for the Safety Mechanism.

The regional tourism Summit emphasised

- product quality
- human resource development
- research and use of information technology
- transport and communication
- cost effectiveness, *and*
- promotion and marketing

We expect to see the benefits of a stronger collaborative effort involving representatives of CARICOM, the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO), and the Caribbean Hotel Association as the main entities driving the regional initiative.

We fashioned a response which resulted, as I am sure you are well aware, in a special marketing strategy - one crafted with particular sensitivity and creativity.

These efforts have elicited an outpouring of goodwill and commendations among the people of the US. These efforts will undoubtedly go a long way in deepening the relationship with consumers and ensuring that Jamaica is well positioned as the travel industry slowly recovers.

So today, with all these initiatives in train, we are confident we are doing the right things to keep the sector going and growing.

Set in this context, we certainly welcome the addition of this new Air Jamaica Vacations state-of-the-art facility, with its menu of user-friendly amenities and comforts. It is just the kind of creative, avant-garde facility that provides vacationers with more than they expect!

This Terminal will certainly help place the Jamaican vacation experience a cut above the rest!

At a time when necessary security measures are threatening to make the travel experience somewhat tedious, this will surely help to put some fun back into travel.

I warmly congratulate Butch. He continues to exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit; the fertile imagination that not only conceptualises, but that succeeds in translating ideas into reality.

I congratulate his team of artists, decorators, designers, artisans, craftsmen and women, his business partners (including of course, the Government of Jamaica!), all the members of his team whom he continues to inspire to perform at peak level -- (I don't think I want to know whether it's by persuasion or by coercion!)

Seriously, Butch. Congratulations on a job well done as we work together to build tourism and to build our beautiful and blessed island of Jamaica.