

ADDRESS BY PRIME MINISTER
THE MOST HON. P.J. PATTERSON, ON, PC, QC, MP
AT THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER
COUPLES OCHO RIOS RESORT
MONDAY, JANUARY 20, 2003

Salutations.

It is a real pleasure to be part of Couples' 25th Anniversary Celebration.

At the time of its conception, I had the Ministerial responsibility.

I have celebrated a number of your previous birthdays and, especially after October 16th, I am particularly delighted in doing so once again.

In ~~such~~ a setting such as this, and on such an occasion, it is clear that the most valuable contribution I can make is to keep my remarks very brief.

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I believe it would be apt to share an incident involving the late Abe Issa, the patriarch of the Issa family, the founder of this outstanding property, and arguably the father of modern Jamaican tourism.

It is reported that, in 1959, Abe gave a speech at the World Travel Congress of the American Society of Travel Agents held in Havana. He delivered a masterly half hour address, as he believed the programme required. Thunderous applause followed his presentation. The President of ASTA then congratulated him on "the best three-minute speech he had ever heard."

As Abe told the story, he had mistakenly read thirty minutes for three minutes on the programme!

"I was the only one who outspoke Castro!" he said.

As we all know, that was quite a feat! As much as I admired Abe, I do not intend to emulate him this evening!

I simply want to add my voice to the warm welcome which all our visitors here this evening will have already received from the hotel staff, and I am confident, from all the Jamaicans with whom you have come in contact since your arrival.

It is also my pleasurable duty to join in heartily congratulating members of the Issa family; Mr. Paul Pennicooke, President and CEO of Couples Resorts; Mr. Norman Lord, the General Manager; the resort staff at all levels whose contribution to the success of this organization I cannot overemphasize. I also congratulate everyone else associated with this outstanding resort on this twenty-fifth anniversary and re-launch under the pioneering, couples-only, all-inclusive concept.

In 1978, when sporting what was then seen as a somewhat risqué logo with two loving lions, Couples was born, Jamaica welcomed just over half-a million visitors. Today, the number of annual visitors to our shores surpasses two million, including a very large number of repeat guests, although few can match Gene and Jane Saks who are here tonight, I am advised, on their fifty-seventh visit to the resort.

Indeed, forty percent of visitors to Jamaica are repeat guests. This speaks volumes not only of the legendary beauty of our island, with its sparkling waters, magnificent mountains and pristine white sand beaches, but also of the warmth of our people, who welcome guests in our special Jamaican way. Our people's natural sense of hospitality and easy self-assurance dictate that they never confuse service with servitude, that they go to extremes to ensure that visitors have a vacation experience that is enjoyable, relaxing and fulfilling – that they feel the Jamaican vibe that cannot be replicated anywhere in the world.

Throughout my political career, I have been fortunate to have been associated with the tourism industry. My Administration continues to be fully committed to development programmes that will bring those economic and social improvements necessary to not only safeguard and enhance Jamaica's position as a favoured destination, but to ensure that these advances improve the quality of life of all our people.

This is why we have recently signed an agreement for the privatization of the operations of the Sangster International Airport – the gateway through which an overwhelming percentage of our visitors arrive. Over the next several months, millions of dollars will be invested to bring the airport up to modern, world-class standards.

This is why my Administration is committed to a new network of highways and communication systems that will ensure easy access not just to properties like Couples Ocho Rios, but to numerous attractions and heritage sites across the island to expose our visitors to the diversity and rich cultural experience that only Jamaica can offer.

We are also ensuring that by law and practice, we protect our fragile environment, the beauty of our land, our rivers, our beaches, our flora and fauna, all so vitally important not only to the sector but to the well-being of our people.

Tonight, we celebrate the vision and pioneering spirit of the Issa family who early recognized the potential of the tourism sector, which has continued to grow over the years and continues to increase its contribution to our national economy.

Couples is a fine example of the excellence we find in the sector. Over these 25 years, the owners, the managers and the workers have grown in experience, have taken advantage of technological advances, have kept abreast of, and often ahead of marketing trends in this highly competitive business and perfected the mix that ensures that guests enjoy the ultimate vacation experience - their primary objective, and a win-win situation for all involved.

Globally, there are geo-political relationships and threats that can give us cause for concern and reduce us to the paralysis of pessimism and fear. This evening's celebration is ample evidence that this is one country that does not intend to go that route.

So this evening, we celebrate with one property and the family behind it, and a host of their associates and friends who have made overcoming challenges a way of life. Theirs is an example to be emulated.

I warmly congratulate Couples on becoming the standard by which the competition is judged, on winning several worldwide awards, year after year - in fact winning international awards seems to have become a way of life for this resort!

I acknowledge and congratulate all who have made a contribution to the great success of Couples. I include everyone gathered here this evening: private industry players; public sector officials; our visitors, who are central to this exciting industry; as well as the thousands of Jamaicans who work in the numerous sections of our society and contribute to creating and maintaining the unique tourism product which Jamaica offers.

To each and every one of you I say: You can be proud of your achievement.

Like the Energizer bunny, may you keep on going and going, and, to you the couples who come here on vacation, may you keep returning and returning!

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.