

Host Destination Prepares for Caribbean Marketplace

St. Lucia - a small 238 square mile island in the Caribbean is about to make its mark as a premier host nation and destination...again.

The island is already famous as the gracious host of quite possibly the best jazz festival in the region; a colorful and heady carnival; a gastronome's food & rum festival; a sea farer's trans-Atlantic crossing and thousands of visitors who rush to its wave-lapping shores.

St. Lucia is now preparing to stage one of the Caribbean's biggest tourism networking forums – Caribbean Marketplace – scheduled for January 2009. It is organized by the Caribbean Hotel Association and endorsed by the Caribbean Tourism Organisation, CTO. As a backdrop to this event St. Lucia is an ideal location, location, location – cool, flora and fauna abundant rainforests coupled with standard island inventory: sun, sand and beautiful blue sea; duty-free shopping; up-to-date cruise facilities; superb choices across the accommodation spectrum; modern telecommunications platforms and a nation with a warm, friendly disposition.

Caribbean Marketplace 2009 hopes to gather 1500 hoteliers, airlines, car rental companies, tour operators, wholesalers and ground handlers in a single sales & marketing space for two days, under the theme “Business on the Beach”. The premise informs of a relaxed holiday destination with a serious edge for commerce. A local organizing committee already established, will oversee the project which will feature top of the line air-conditioned meeting facilities with WiFi availability on the selling floor; an exciting social program to include cultural aspects of island-life, dining and entertainment. The event will draw an international spotlight on St. Lucia at a time when several hotel properties currently in train will swing their doors open to welcome waiting clientele. Opportunity knocks here too for St. Lucia as local, regional and international journalists will be engaged in coverage of the 2009 event.

This is St. Lucia's first time hosting the event and the government and private sector have entered into a mutually committed partnership to ensure the delivery of a safe, successful and memorable Caribbean Marketplace 2009. The private sector is being primed to take full advantage of the networking prospects, where new business can be readily generated, or simply expand on existing opportunities.

The island is also fast becoming more than just a curious stop for well heeled and even better known investors – Ritz-Carlton, Raffles and Westin have all staked their claims in an accommodation gold rush that has resulted in a construction boom transforming the tourism landscape. Most of the upscale developments have attached private docking facilities where applicable, as well as celebrity golfer-designed...you guessed it...signature golf courses. Famous designers include Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Christy O'Connor.

And it is not just foreign investment pouring in – savvy locals have also seen the glint in the ever growing tourism industry – several have gone it alone or partnered with overseas interests in capitalizing on government sponsored incentives aimed at encouraging growth in that direction. The Landings, Cotton Bay, Almond Resorts, Bay Gardens, Jade Mountain and Coco Resorts are superior examples of that concerted effort. The island however, still offers alternatives for the budget sensitive end of the market – small, quality properties abound, alongside guesthouses, and bed & breakfast establishments.

St. Lucia's growing hospitality profile has been occasioned by the gradual erosion of preferential EU banana industry trade agreements which in the new order of world trade has been deemed obsolete and inequitable. The fresh attention given to the island's tourism development is partly in response to the new global business dispensation. Incentives include tax holidays and import duty waivers on construction material.

Delegates to next year's Caribbean Marketplace will see that even the island's cruise industry is being reset for a magical make-over. Island Global Yachting, IGY recently purchased Rodney Bay Marina, the island's largest yachting facility and is currently in the process of tearing down the old docks and raising a more accommodating structure that will lodge several mega yachts at a time. The upland portion of the development will feature upgraded provisioning and other yacht related services.

St. Lucia has been able to maintain and in some markets improve its tourist arrival numbers, even in the face of difficult times for the airline business worldwide with the burgeoning price of fuel. According to figures released by the island's Tourist Board, St. Lucia recorded double-digit increases for both January and February 2008, compared with the same periods last year. With daily direct flights from strategic U.S., Canadian and European gateways and on-going negotiations to increase air seat capacity, international visitors to the island have more inbound options. While the story is different when the tale of regional air travel is told, there is a continuous effort at dialogue aimed at improving soft regional air capacity.

St. Lucia is being positioned as a premium destination where high standards reside and are expected; a host nation capable and willing to execute events such as Caribbean Marketplace 2009; where accommodation runs the spectrum but has quality as its central theme; a destination where everything is not just simply beautiful, but simply...the best.