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SYMMONDS: BARBADOS WILL COME BACK BIGGER AND BETTER

On National Heroes' Day, Minister of Tourism and International Transport, the Hon. Kerrie Symmonds, saluted the valiant efforts of Barbados' frontline workers as he spoke to global trade and consumer media on how the country is navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over 80 media representatives from Barbados' top regional and international source markets including the United Kingdom, Europe, USA, Canada and Caribbean and Latin America, tuned in to the Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc.'s (BTMI) webinar to hear first-hand about Barbados' next steps in tourism.

COVID-19 impact on Barbados

Describing the impact of the global pandemic on Barbados and its critical tourism sector, Symmonds noted that prior to COVID-19, Barbados was trending in the right direction with record levels of arrivals from both the U.K. and the U.S.A last year. That growth trajectory however, was derailed as the pandemic took hold.

“At this time of the year, we would be doing on average 55 movements of aircraft every single day; that has all dried up... In the long stay tourism sector, the hotels are largely all closed, ground transportation has come to a halt... companies related to the tourism sector have all been brought

to a standstill... Within the last three weeks, Barbados unemployment has risen by 25 percent,” Symmonds said.

He went on to identify ways in which the Government of Barbados is working to combat the effects of COVID-19. “We are spending money now on areas which help to drive employment so as to help us offset the fall-out in the tourism sector. We have had to shift funding into the healthcare sector; for example, we have dedicated BDS \$20 million to an isolation and quarantine facility, and BDS \$10 million has been dedicated to essential medical supplies and equipment.”

Support for tourism

But tourism has not been left out. The Government has put BDS \$20 million towards a Small Hotel Investment Fund, which is blended with the private financial sector, to ensure the smaller hotels especially have the opportunity to perform infrastructural refurbishments during this down time to improve on their competitive appeal.

In addition, a Tourism Task Force comprising government and private sector members, has been established to examine all elements of the industry, including marketing, product, health and safety, cruise, and aviation. Its mandate is to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on Barbados tourism and provide recommendations for the recovery, restoration and revitalization of this critical sector. The Tourism Task Force will also be working to re-train and re-tool tourism workers as part of the island’s recovery plan, commencing May 1.

Strong partnerships in cruise

Switching to the high seas, Symmonds outlined the importance of cruise tourism and home porting business to the Barbados economy. He referenced the cruise ships that were facilitated in Barbados and offered safe harbour since the temporary suspension of operations announced by Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) last month.

“For us the home porting business is very critical – we are the only eastern Caribbean country that does that. When other countries were in some instances refusing access, by the cruise ships, to

their shores, Barbados took a conscious and deliberate decision that we would not do that and that we would treat the cruise sector as partners should treat each other.”

Since then, Barbados has worked to assist those cruise ships with repatriating both passengers and crew. Most recently, the Aida Perla departed the island with ‘Thank You BB’ spelt out in lights on the ship to show their appreciation for the island’s hospitality. A thank you video was also released by the company after departure, which has since gone viral.

Currently, they remain approximately 16 cruise ships docked off the coasts of Barbados.

Preparing for re-emergence

Speaking on plans for re-emergence, Symmonds said that he expects subdued tourism business to return within the next three to six months as the international markets reopen. He identified the long stay luxury villa market, which is not reliant on commercial airlines for access, as an opportunity for reactivating the industry. These visitors typically stay longer and are less likely to be deterred by the mandatory quarantine period for arriving passengers.

“Beyond summer I think is the reality of a more robust recovery. Obviously, a lot of this is subject to what happens in some of our major source markets. We are very optimistic, but we prepare for the worst. It may be more of a reality to think in terms of winter as opposed to summer,” he said.

Barbados’ travel partners have advised that there is still a desire and hope for future travel among consumers and current bookings have moved to slightly later in the year, and into 2021.

In closing, Symmonds stressed that this is a golden opportunity to improve infrastructure within the sector, focus on training and tooling staff, and build out standards and operating procedures within the industry.

“We want to come back bigger and better than we were before and it means using the down time very productively. In Barbados, we have done this business well, but we can do it better, and we will.”

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About Barbados

The island of Barbados offers the most authentic Caribbean experience with its exceptionally rich culture and history rooted in remarkable landscapes. Rated as one of the world's sexiest beaches in 2008 by Concierge.com; Barbados' Crane Beach in St. Philip stands as a premier destination for travellers. Barbados is also the first Zagat-rated Caribbean island and is known as the culinary capital of the Caribbean. Barbados has hosted several world class events including: The annual Barbados Food & Rum Festival; the 2006 PGA World Golf Championships-Barbados World Cup, the ICC Cricket World Cup Finals in 2007, the Sentebale Charity Polo match with Prince Harry of Wales in 2010, and the ICC Twenty20 Cricket Finals for 2010, and the Rihanna LOUD concert in 2012. Accommodations range from picturesque plantation houses and villas, to quaint bed and breakfasts and award-winning, five-star resorts. Grantley Adams International Airport offers even more non-stop and direct service from a growing number of U.S. cities, making Barbados the true gateway to the Eastern Caribbean. Barbados was voted eighth in the World by Trip Advisor's "2008 Travelers' Choice Destination Awards" in its Top 100 Destinations category. For more information on travel to Barbados, visit www.visitbarbados.org, follow on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/VisitBarbados>, via Twitter @Barbados.