

Tourism branding in a sea of sameness

by Robert Ferguson

“Nothing will be the same again” has been a refrain for months: we’re quick to talk about how COVID is changing expectations about living and working, but what will this mean in practice? If you’re a Caribbean island country looking beyond COVID, what do you do? It might change how islanders brand themselves. Will we see a return to a more authentic Caribbean?



Nina Burleigh wondered about this in a compelling New York Times article, “The Caribbean Dilemma” (August 4, 2020). We know the region as a playground for winter-weary visitors. People are used to jumping on flights that quickly transport them to a blanket of tropical humidity; one of life’s singular pleasures. But has tourism been good for the islanders?

Superficially, yes: in 2019, more than 31 million people visited Caribbean islands, leaving behind

\$59 billion (50–90 percent of GDP for most Caribbean countries). Tourists mean money, but also problems: resort construction, road building, and cruise ships have damaged the natural beauty of the islands and created a huge disparity of wealth on the islands. Enormous ships disgorge thousands of passengers at a time but leave behind only the illusion of prosperity. In reality, local police, medical systems, and food supplies for locals have long been overwhelmed. And food prices have long been ridiculously high because hotels assume tourists will reject rather than enjoy locally-produced food.

Nothing will be the same again after COVID. It’s time for a new debate over place and tourism branding in the Caribbean.

Covid-19 has brought immense hardship: the lack of flights and ships in ports has meant no tourists, no income. Yet some residents are tired of their paradise being over-touristed and don’t want to go back to normal. As the islands slowly reopen, their voices debate whether the pandemic should be a moment in which destinations can seize control of the downside of over-tourism and demand changes. This is a time, Burleigh writes, when some islanders are arguing the need to broadly “rethink the relationship of tourism focused on value – and not just financial value.”

There is a creeping sense of sameness in our own mostly amorphous North American cities and towns. We’ve been unable, or unwilling, to resist the hallmarks of suburban sprawl: box stores and malls, with their cookie-cutter appearance and mass consumer goods, have homogenized cityscapes’ individual sense of style. Approach any given town by road – in virtually every small town, in every province and state in North America – and you are faced with the same franchises and big box retailers: the obligatory Tim Hortons (or Dunkin’ Donuts) precedes an A&W or McDonalds, followed by a Walmart, Esso/Exxon station; Subway and Starbucks. You’ve no choice but to pass through this gauntlet to find what’s left of the town-centre’s unique spirit.

Marketing as a block may have seemed advantageous to a number of Caribbean destinations, but it should not be done at the expense of highlighting one's unique character and experiences. The place – town, city, or (in this case) island state – that doesn't know and can't effectively promote its brand is destined for anonymity. We think of the Caribbean as an amorphous collection of island states. The Caribbean's tourist industry trained visitors to think of the diverse islands as interchangeable – sun, sand and sea – when each has, in fact, its own unique geological and human history. As Burleigh acknowledges, the citizens of these islands possess unique traditions, history, language and culture, which rewards those visitors who demonstrate a little curiosity.

How do “places” reveal and leverage their unique character and singular charm to people who are hungry for experiences that let them escape the sameness of their own lives? It requires each independent entity to engage in a process of rediscovery that goes deeper than Sun, Sea and Beaches. Each island should be eager to eschew the formula that has taken them from unique and exotic to predictable and humdrum. To draw-out its distinctiveness each needs storytelling that position its character, identity, and differentiation in people's minds. Authenticity is a prime measure of worth in any brand, so knowledge of local history should be the foundation of any well-differentiated identity. Retaining a community's local colour, conserving its treasures, and marketing its unique stories doesn't just keep blandness at bay, it is a very effective (although vastly underused) selling tool.

Brands thrive when they are highly focused; when they are selective about whom they associate with. Maybe Covid-19 should mark the end of the era of cheap tourism, mega cruises, and North American food. Travel, Burleigh rightly points out, can be more thoughtful and more socially responsible. St. Lucia has recently launched a program to seed money for resort workers and hotel chefs to open up their own small-scale, boutique operations pitched at the luxury market and appealing to smaller numbers of people. It's a good start: if the Caribbean tourism industry could take this opportunity to differentiate the islands and get travelers exploring local food and authentic culture, the pandemic might result in them attracting a different kind of visitor: well-off, perhaps, but much more conscious, and more conscientious. But to get this, the islands need to act deliberately, thoughtfully, and not leave change to happenstance.

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