

HAITI: TOURISM IS THE GREATEST PRIORITY



The Haitian Government has set aside \$160 million to invest in the country's stagnant tourism. Today, tourists rarely visit the country considering the fact that Haitian high crime rate and catastrophes have negatively impacted what was once considered the back bone of the country's economy.

The Government has now opened doors to private investors who are interested in developing hotels and resorts. **It has already received \$13.2 million from the government of Venezuela to fund airport construction** and put in place a system of new infrastructure in Ile-a-Vache southern island, and \$8 million to be used in the development of the infamous historic town of Jackmel.

The budget for the tourism industry more than doubled since the time of the previous government which stood at \$2 million and an additional \$1 million was loaned by PetroCaribe oil fund from Venezuela.

The country's budget now stands at \$4.7 million. Moreover, PetroCaribe is pumping \$27 million to be channeled in the construction of Jackmel, Ile-a-Vache and other projects. The government has also waived a 15 year tax break on import duties totaling to \$160 million for 11 hotels and resorts and \$100 million for the completion of a pipeline.

Furthermore, the government has offered to teach 53 tourist police officers languages such as English and Spanish, and also life support skills such as first aid and good customer relation services.

Although any move that will lead to job creation is highly welcomed, the country still feels it is overwhelmed by very few facilities to fully support tourism, for example the ministry has only 3200 hotel rooms. In addition, poor medical services have negatively affected the number of visitors from the US and Canada. However, the government anticipates reversing the condition within a period of two years by doubling the number of hotel rooms, a move that has highly been criticized.

Senator Francois Joseph said that clean water, electricity and good roads should be given the first priority instead of tourism. However, tourism minister, Villedrouin Stepheine differs. She feels that Haiti needs to be independent and manage its internal affairs without external influence, and that tourism should be number one on the priority list.

Experts project that tourism will lead to creation of over 1600 jobs and 6500 others indirectly. Villedrouin also said that last year alone tourism sector gathered \$200 million. The country's budget stands at \$3 billion in total.

A brief history of Haiti reveals that the country was frequented by the rich for the Voodoo late night ceremonies and rum revelry. However, AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, political havoc, earthquake and cholera that claimed over 316000 and 7750 people respectively have shunned tourists.

According to Villedrouin, today about 600,000 tourists visit the county per year via cruise ship. The Canadian charter carrier, Air Transat, flies every week between Pourt-au-Prince and

Montreal, and claims to have flown over 120 tourists this year alone.

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