

ZIKA SPREAD IN THE CARIBBEAN FUELS FEARS OF TOURISM DECLINE



The Zika virus is spreading rapidly throughout the Caribbean where local authorities fear that its link with birth defects in the children of infected pregnant women and the recent death of one person in Puerto Rico might trigger a contraction of the region's inbound tourism.

"I was planning to travel to Puerto Rico in May, but I must confess that I am scared by everything I am hearing about Zika. I'm trying to get pregnant and I am terrified to imagine that because of a simple getaway my future child could have microcephaly," said New York resident Carla Latorre. She finally decided to visit New Orleans.

However, Hugh Riley, Secretary General of the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO), said that **at this time the big tourism business operators have reported no significant changes in the demand for their products in the region because of Zika.**

"The industry usually observes carefully what is happening and organizes promotions to stimulate sales when necessary," Riley said, in response to the observation that in recent months there has been a reduction in the price of airline tickets to the region.

He added, however, that "right now we have no information to suggest that there is an issue (such as Zika) that is prompting the launch of any particular promotion," and he maintained that the fall in prices is a response to increased supply in a region that "is seeing interest growing among international tourists."

In late January, when the news of the first cases of the virus in islands like Puerto Rico, Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago was released, several airlines and hotel chains offered changes in airfares and in some cases even refunds to pregnant women who had plans to travel to these countries.

Spokespersons for the CTO and the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association explained that the niche market that could be most hurt is the so-called "babymoos" (honeymoons for pregnant women).

To date, the CTO does not have available information on how the Zika virus in the region, which is transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito which also transmits dengue and chikungunya, has affected the industry, and he says it is too early to draw conclusions.

However, concern is palpable in the islands most affected, such as Puerto Rico, with confirmation coming recently of the death of a 70-year old man who had gone to the hospital with a fever in February and had died within 24 hours from a drastic reduction in blood platelets caused by the virus.

The Government of Puerto Rico is conducting a media campaign to try to convey to the outside world that it is safe to travel to the island.

Even before that first death directly linked to Zika came to light, the director of the Puerto Rico

Tourism Company, Ingrid Rivera Rocafort, issued a statement explaining that "to date, less than half of 1% of our population has been affected by the virus."

"We are doing everything possible to protect visitors to our island and to ensure that they can enjoy a holiday free from fear," she said, pointing out that "as a tropical island in the Caribbean," Puerto Rico has extensive experience dealing with mosquitoes and the diseases they transmit.

"Therefore, visitors can rest assured that we are using that experience in our efforts to protect the welfare of everyone who visits us," she said.

To explain the low prices being offered for travel to the Caribbean, organizations and companies point to other factors, such as lower oil prices, the main component of airfares.

For example, recently LIAT airlines, which flies every day to more than twenty Caribbean destinations, announced the elimination of fuel charges in their ticket prices.

The Caribbean Public Health Agency, which does diagnostic testing for Zika for its member states, has so far confirmed cases of the virus in some fifteen countries in the region.

There is still no vaccine to prevent the transmission of Zika, or specific medicines to treat the disease, which in four out of every five cases presents no symptoms and, in general, has no significant effect on infected persons.

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