

COSTA RICA OPENS UP TO MEETINGS AND WELLNESS TOURISM



Costa Rica's tourism, one of the main engines of the economy, is opening its doors to innovation. Local tourism ministry plans to turn the country into a top destination for meetings and wellness tourism in the region. The focus on adventure activities and natural wealth is to continue throughout this year as well.

Tourism Minister, Mauricio Ventura, said that tourism sector is a "gem" which must continue to receive support, not only because of the foreign currency revenue but also because of the amount of employment it generates in different parts of the country.

Official figures indicate that tourism grew three times more than the national economy in 2015, with GDP increasing by 2.8% and tourism income by 9%.

Costa Rica enjoys a good position globally due to its attributes of sustainability, environmental protection and natural beauty, but, according to Ventura, the country must continue to grow, innovate and create new niche markets such as meetings and wellness tourism.

According to the official, meetings and conventions tourism is not just a niche but an industry which has proven to be extremely dynamic worldwide, and it is not subject to the seasonality affecting the sector during the low-season months of May, June, September and October.

One of the main features of the strategy for 2016 is the construction of the National Congress and Convention Centre (CNGC), which will require an investment of 35 million dollars by the state.

Similarly, wellness tourism in Costa Rica fits in perfectly in the country's model of development, but according to minister Ventura the country must establish its own style. In some countries wellness tourism includes massages, diets, and exercise, but is very expensive.

"I am thinking of nature being a source of healing and that wellness tourism in Costa Rica should include soft adventure, treatments, massages and healthy food because in this country connecting with nature is very easy; being on a river and in hot springs in our surroundings is relaxing for everyone. It is a "Pura vida" [Pure Life] wellness tourism," Ventura said.

For the minister, Costa Rica must maintain steady growth since tourism is one of the main drivers of the economy in this Central American country which is home to about 4.5% of the planet's biodiversity - one of its main attractions.

Tourism employs some 150,000 people directly and another 400,000 indirectly, and one of its advantages is that it provides jobs across the entire country.

In Costa Rica the average stay lasts 13.4 nights, with average spending for that period being approximately \$1,400.

According to the latest World Economic Forum Tourism Competitiveness Report, Costa Rica is number one in nature and number two in adventure, second only to New Zealand.

In 2015 Costa Rica received a total of 2,665,608 tourists from all transport modes, up 5.5% over

2014, according to figures from the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT).

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