The Professionalisation of Tour Guide Services in the Greater Caribbean

For many first-time tourists venturing into one or more countries of the Greater Caribbean, a guide may be quite necessary to assist in the navigation of the region's numerous attractions, or the country in general. Thus, it is safe to say that a number of tourists have either the privilege or the misfortune of experiencing a country and its touristic offerings through the lens of a tour guide, who, based on the quality of the service provided, can actually influence the quality and quantity of the overall stay for the tourist. One may even dare to suggest that the tourist guide is the face of the country for the tourists in his/her charge, albeit for a brief period. With this in mind, the maintenance of a high level of service offered by tourist guides in the region, as well as constant improvement of said services is crucial to the growth and enhancement of tourism in the Greater Caribbean. Very often, in the region, tour guiding is based on largely informal factors, such as familiarity with the area, with very little training or formal qualifications or skills required. This method, while it may prove simple and even effective with regard to the fulfilment of employment requirements and the provision of a necessary service, has contributed to a lack of standardisation and consistency of the service offered. While the employment of nationals in a local tourist industry is crucial, one must not fail to recognise the importance of necessary training and the acquisition of qualifications towards the holistic improvement of the sector's services. A number of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) Member States are yet to embrace the idea of adequate training for its tour guides and fails to acknowledge the importance of the standardisation of its tourist guide services.

The Directorate of Sustainable Tourism of the ACS recognises the importance of the tour guide sector to the tourism industry and seeks to harness the model applied in the recent establishment of the Regional Network of Artisans to form a regional alliance of Tour Guides with the aim of standardising the tour guide service offered, as well as elevating its general quality. The alliance would work along with national associations dedicated to training and certification of tour guide services in order to enhance existing tour guide services within the region as well to develop services where there are gaps yet to be filled in this regard.

Among the examples of existing efforts made in the way of adequate tour guide training in the region is the Trinidad and Tobago Tourism Industry Certification (TTTIC), which, under the Tourism

Development Company (TDC) holds instructional sessions for tour guides as well as tour operators. Yet another is the group Cuban Adventures, dedicated to the training and qualification of Cuban tourist guides, with an emphasis on the education and training of Cuban nationals and ensuring that the guides are not privately –and, as a result, unfairly– commissioned, as they are remunerated by the government.

It is crucial that the necessary improvements made to the tour guide services in the region adhere to the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism outlined by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). The aforementioned code, comprising ten (10) principles that speak to environmental, social, cultural and economic areas within the context of a responsible and sustainable execution of tourism activities. Additionally, in light of a number of instances of misconduct on the part of guides, a code of conduct should be drafted and enforced for the purpose of monitoring and regulating the behaviour of tourist guides. In keeping with the idea of professionalism and the elevation of the overall service, the guides should be held to upholding an aesthetic standard, which should constitute, at the very least, a tidy and well-groomed appearance.

It is this high level of professionalism of tour guide services that the Directorate of Sustainable Tourism of the ACS aims to implement throughout the Greater Caribbean, with the aim of a more functional operation of the service within the sector.

Furthermore, the alliance would be used as a platform for the sharing of best practices within the domain of tour guide training, standardisation and certification, for the purpose of constant improvement of mechanisms and the enhancement of techniques and initiatives. According to the Caribbean Environmental Network Project report, Improving Training and Public Awareness on Caribbean Coastal Tourism, the growing trend of providing tour guide training may serve as a disadvantage to a number of unskilled workers for whom jobs within the tourism sector require minimal qualifications; “[in order to] address these potential detrimental impacts, training provided by public [as well as] private organisms (including tourist operators) for potential workers as well as permanent training for staff appears necessary.” In this regard, if training is provided throughout, then the issue of unqualified workers within the tourism sector will no longer be an obstacle to regional tourism development.

Keeping in mind the formation of the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean (STZC) –yet another ACS initiative implemented in the spirit of regional standardisation and harmonisation – the Directorate’s aim is to ensure that the region gives adequate attention and the necessary support to contribute to the productivity, professionalisation and growth of the tour-guiding sector. This will ensure that within the context of the Sustainable Tourism Zone, the region’s destinations are adopting and implementing industry best practises and meeting international standards of excellence in service delivery, which are linked to destination competitiveness and thus sustainability.