

Niche Market Tourism in Dominica

Texas A&M Study Abroad in Dominica 2010

Submitted by
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Abstract

During a three week study in Dominica I interviewed a diverse group of individuals in order to gain a perspective into the tourism practices of Dominica. I also collaborated with a Ph.D. student from UC Davis, Iara Lacher. I wanted to gain an in-depth view of not only how tourists viewed the island, but also how Dominicans viewed the tourists, and how the government treats tourism. I took the route of viewing the actual tourist attractions on the island and how they were advertised. My goal was to determine what type of tourism Dominica uses, and whom does it attract. The sites visited in this paper will be described as they were described to me. In order for Dominica to be competitive in the tourism field they must use niche market tourism aimed at hikers, divers, and the ecologically minded. Dominica cannot compete with the rest of the Caribbean islands where the mass tourist market is “sun, sand, and surf.” It is necessary for Dominica to use its uniqueness and pull visitors based on its advertisement as the “Nature Island.”

Introduction

The island of Dominica is not a common household name for vacationing unless you live in the West Indies. Most people in fact believe you are talking of the Dominican Republic whenever you say Dominica. Dominica was “discovered” on Sunday 3 November 1493 by Christopher Columbus and named for the Latin translation of Sunday (Philpot, 1996). Many of the islanders take pride in saying, “If Christopher Columbus was to come back today this is the only place he would recognize.” Dominica is known as the nature island, and it is due to its past isolationism and the inability to pull mass hotels and corporations that it remains the vibrant island it is today. However, it is also due to Dominica’s isolated past that a different style of advertisement for the developing tourism market is used. The report describes the history of development on Dominica and addresses the type of advertisement used to attract tourists, the type of tourists that visit, and why.

Methods and Materials

A number of individuals were interviewed from different backgrounds in order to build a complete picture of the history, and how it has affected present day tourism on the island. Tour guides were interviewed to see what attractions were most popular with their clients, while hoteliers and their staff were interviewed to see what attractions they advertised to their guests

and how. There was a specific list of questions used in order to gain a complete list of answers and to determine whether there were ideals that are shared around the island. The names and affiliations of the individuals interviewed were:

Clem James

Tour Guide for Ken's Hinterland Adventure Tours and Taxi Service

Ken George-Dill

Owner and Operator of Ken's Hinterland Adventure Tours and Taxi Service

Dr. Lennox Honychurch

Staff Tutor, University of the West Indies, School of Continuing Studies.

Curator: The Dominica Museum, Bayfront, Roseau.

Member of the Dominica Public Service Commission.

Trustee of The Old Roseau Market Trust.

Member, Advisory Board of The Dominica University Centre, Extra Mural Department of the University of the West Indies.

Member of the Advisory Committee to the Carib Council, Carib Territory Dominica

David Williams

Director of Parks

Tia

Owner and Operator of Tia's Cottages

Screw and Staff

Owner and Operators of Screw's Sulphur Spa's

Ron Heffner

Temporary manager of Rainforest Shangri La

Staff

Experience Dominica

Lize Bardoille

Marketing Director of Roxy's Mountain Lodge

Evelyn Dennis

Manager of Papillote Wilderness Retreat

Jem Winston

Owner of Rosalie Forest/Three Rivers Eco-lodges

Helene Castran

Director of Operations of Jungle Bay Resort and Spa

Definitions:

According to onecaribbean.org

a niche tourism market is a specific market segment, usually with a well-defined product, that can be tailored to meet the interests of the customer. Examples for the Caribbean

include golf, bird watching and diving. Note that “niche” does not necessarily mean “small” – niche markets can generate large numbers of tourists.

Results

Background

Until the 1950's with the completion of the Imperial highway, Dominica was virtually split in fourths due to its rugged terrain and river systems (Philpot, 1996). Up to that point the people on the island had traveled by boat north to Guadalupe and south to Martinique for any goods they needed from a town. It was much easier for them to travel across the sea than to try and forage across the mountainous trails. Due to this the islanders developed different traditions in their culture, they speak a slightly different language in many of the villages, and it is said that a village elder used to tell what family and village you came from just from your physical features.

The rugged terrain had also dissuaded the British and French from colonizing the island for almost 200 years after Christopher Columbus had “discovered” it. This led the poorer, less financially successful French colonials from neighboring islands to move from their previous homes to Dominica in hopes of building their future here. Many businesses also came with the plans of using the wood from the rainforest; however they quickly found out that the lack of infrastructure hindered their ability to move their product. Ken George-Dill explained that from that point on it was assumed that Dominica was only good for agriculture and not much else would come of it.

Tourism's History

Tourism in Dominica has only become a viable market within the last ten years. Since 2000 the government has helped to promote Dominica using its selling point as the “Nature Island”. Many of the islanders did not know that what they had here was special; it was just seen as home. The government of Dominica put the island's name out there as a tourist destination and left it up to the hotels, tour operators, and small businesses to pull in the tourists. Also the government decided to build the ship berth in Roseau and allow cruise ships to come to port on the island for the first time. When many of the hotels and tour operators are asked what their relationship to the government is, the majority of them reply that they have a relationship with the Ministry of Parks so that they may get park passes for their guests.

In comparison with the research done by the study abroad class in 2001 tourism is now being looked at in a more positive light. Since 2001 the total number of tourist has grown from 275,998 to 464,558 last year. Tourism on the island has almost doubled and the total tourism expenditure has increased by almost \$68 Million EC (Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica, 2009). While in 2001 cruise ships were looked at in a negative light, due to their limited stay time and their meals being provided for them by the ship, they are now seen in a more positive light due to the amount of money that they pour into transportation, town markets, and the money they spend on passes into the National Parks once or twice a week, especially during off season. They are not expected to be a sustaining market as they once were in 2000, but according to Ken are tolerated for the 20% increase in income they provide for the vendors at the market on the days that they are berthed.

In 2007 Chemonics International produced a “Dominica Sustainable Tourism Policy & Marketing Strategy” for the Discover Dominica Authority that had just been created by the Dominican Government. One of the main points of the strategy was that “the private sector must understand how to develop unique and authentic experiences that can be delivered only by Dominicans.” It also points out that sustainable tourism, a type of tourism used in Dominica, “requires local governments, businesses, and other tourism stakeholders to anticipate development pressures and apply limits and management techniques that sustain habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal and local culture...It aims for quality tourism, not quantity.” (Chemonics International, 2007). As Yvonne Bellot stated in the 2001 report, tourism hadn’t become that big in Dominica because tourists wanted sun, sand, and surf (Ajayi et al., 2001). These are items Dominica cannot readily supply, this means that Dominica must promote the tourist attractions that they do have as the unique “Nature Island” of the Caribbean, and it means that Dominica must use niche market tourism based on what the island can provide and where.

Niche Market Tourism

Niche market tourism in Dominica can be split up three separate ways: geographically, type of tourist, and attractions. In this paper I will split the markets up geographically into five different sectors and address them based on the attractions in that area and types of tourists they pull in. It is important to remember that even though the island is considered small, it is hard to travel due to lack of a fully developed infrastructure, the rugged terrain and the high rainfall.

Southwest

The Southwest region includes the capitol city of Roseau with a mass population of 20,000. This is the city where the majority of the cruise ships put in to port, and many tourists are here for sun and the Caribbean. This area pulls cruise ship tourists, or “excursionists.” These tourists are often here to enjoy the unique island in the Caribbean for one day and therefore have limited time to see sights. Many of them have arrangements made through the cruise company to get a taxi to a nearby attraction on the island. These attractions are normally Trafalgar Falls, which has seen upwards to 2,500 visitors on a cruise ship day, and the Wotten Waven Sulphur springs. At the village of Wotten Waven there is a small business called Screw’s Spa that has made a profit from pooling up the warm Sulphur Springs and selling their product to the excursionists. On a cruise ship day, Tuesday and Thursday or Friday, it is normal to see upward to 10 vans parked outside his spa at a time. Each of these vans carries between 12 and 20 passengers. The excursionists also stay in the city of Roseau and traverse the markets and local wares. There are many shops lining the streets along the port that sell the type of souvenirs that excursionists are looking for to take home to loved ones. The botanical gardens are also located in Roseau with an aviary that houses the 2 endemic species of parrots found on the island.

The Southwest, like much of the island is a pull for divers from around the world. According to Ken George-Dill Dominica is ranked in the top ten for diving destinations. There are many hotels along the coast of the southwest that specialize in diving and whale watching packages. When asking the hoteliers in the area what they thought drew tourists to this area of the island they would reply with the vast number of hotels, and the diving that is offered in the area with Champagne Bay. Many of the tour operators would reply that Trafalgar Falls and the Sulphur Springs were the biggest pull for the tourists that were visiting in the Southwest area.

Northwest

The Northwest portion of the island is much drier and more rugged then the rest of the Nature Island. The cruise ships that put in to port at Portsmouth, the only other town on the island, are much smaller and a more elite type of “excursionist.” The northwest side of the island offers the visitor a historical view of the island. Fort Shirley and Cabrits National Park show a visitor the past and struggles that the island went through during British colonization and is the first place in the Caribbean that Africans were given freedom and a majority in the

governmental system. The type of tourist that comes to the Northwest is on average more educated in history and the environment than the excursionists that put in at Roseau.

For the adventure tourist the Northwest side of the island holds a rugged beauty waiting to be explored. The Indian River offers tubing and boat rides that give you an amazing view of the vegetation, and you are also traveling along the river filmed in *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*. Syndicate Parrot Reserve located south of Portsmouth offers a visitor a short hike into the rainforest to view the 2 endemic species of parrots in their natural habitat. There are also the Bwa Net Falls which are some of the lesser visited waterfalls.

The Northwest also pulls people from all over the world visiting loved ones that are attending medical school at Ross University. Portsmouth has more a more diverse food selection due to the vast amount of cultures that attend the university. A lot of the students are from the west, such as Americans and Canadians, and there is also a fair representation of students from the east such as Chinese and Pakistanis.

Southeast

The Southeast portion of the island holds two of the most well known “eco-lodges” in the Caribbean, which in itself can be an attraction. Three Rivers, located in Rosalie, is an internationally recognized ecological establishment that offers classes about sustainability, and conservation while taking on projects for the community to help with energy consumption. Three Rivers is a very minimalistic location and markets themselves to hikers, and scientists interested in research on the area.

While Three Rivers is not for the faint of heart, Jungle Bay, located 45 minutes south of Three Rivers in Delices, is a resort and spa that embraces rather than exploits the nature around it. Jungle Bay, also ecologically friendly on a smaller scale, caters to a guest looking for spas, hikes, relaxation, and tamed nature near an ocean view. Jungle Bay helps sponsor medical facilities for the local community, along with reading programs.

Both facilities advertise Victoria Falls and Sari Sari Falls in the near vicinity. Victoria Falls is approximately a 45 minute hike along a windy trail with multiple river crossings until you reach the last portion that requires you to scale boulders to climb up a river gorge. Victoria Falls is fed from the infamous Boiling Lake so it carries many minerals and the foul smell as well. Appealing to stronger hikers looking for a short trip into the wilderness Victoria Falls can be combined with Sari Sari Falls. Sari Sari Falls is only a 20 minute hike that has a steep decline down near a river bed. The trail is very slippery when wet and is possible for most hikers.

Northeast

The Northeast portion of the island holds the oldest culture in the area, the Carib Indians. Currently around 2000 Carib Indians live on the territory, which is just over 15 sq. km. The Caribs are faced with many of the same issues that plague other indigenous peoples. How can they preserve their culture and way of life while still having a presence in the island's government and decision-making process? Many of their younger generation are growing up and moving to Roseau or out of the country and rarely returning to the area. Technology is also having significant impact on their culture with the new inventions replacing techniques that they had used for hundreds of years to make crafts, harvest, and make food. One of their greatest treasures to an outsider is Cassava bread. It is non-rising bread made of a root that is ground down and added with coconut, and then fired on a large pan. Their crafts are still made of a reed that was brought over by their ancestors over 2000 years ago and is dyed in mud for almost a week before being cleaned one last time before weaving. All of their practices are still natural but it does not have the same pull to their youth that it once did. This portion of the island draws in educated visitors who have an interest in culture and history.

What the Northeast part of the island offers that many visitors are not aware of is the "Cold Soufriere." These are cold springs that bubble up from old volcanic vents. They act as if they are hot; however they are cool to the touch. WARNING: Do not attempt to touch any of the other springs on the island that display these properties; they are extremely dangerous and produce very high burns. These are often offered to the tourists who have done the work and taken the time to research the island as they are not widely advertised.

Interior

As with most of life, the best part is not the easiest to get to, and you have to work harder to achieve it. This can be said for the interior section of the island which houses the majority of the islands wonders. The Interior of the island houses Middleham Falls, Ti Tou Gorge, Boiling Lake, Freshwater Lake, the Valley of Desolation, Boeri Lake, and the Emerald Pool. This area is a high draw for adventure tourists and eco-minded visitors. It is extremely rare to find an "excursionist" in this area as they have neither the time nor the interest in the long hikes, which at some points can reach up to six hours one way. The majority of the interior attractions are promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Parks, unlike the other attractions along the islands coast that are promoted by individual businesses.

Middleham Falls can be accessed from two entrances, one above Roseau on the Imperial highway and one near Laudat. It requires approximately an hour or hour and a half hike through rainforest along a well defined trail that ends by a waterfall dropping approximately 80 meters from its summit into a deep pool where you can swim. This attraction draws hikers looking for a pleasant time, while still demanding physical fitness at certain points along the trail with stream and river crossings.

The Valley of Desolation and Boiling Lake are seen as some of the most harsh environments and hikes on the island. It draws true thrill seekers, such as Chuck Norris and Mick Jagger, who have the desire to physically and mentally challenge themselves. The trail crosses along boiling mud, through lush rainforest, and up mountain peaks. It is highly recommended that you have a local guide for this hike. The trail itself is felt to be just as much an attraction as the 63m wide lake is.

Ti Tou Gorge is a refreshing beginning and end to the Boiling Lake. Strong Swimmers are attracted to the gorge for its view at the very end of a waterfall cascading into a pool surrounded by the gorge walls. It is said that if you are only able to experience one attraction on the island; this is the one to do.

Boeri Lake, Freshwater Lake, and the Elfin forest draw experienced hikers who want to experience a mystical feel as they hike high above the clouds and are able to swim in these refreshing lakes. Emerald Pool is a much easier and shorter hike down into a mystical pool fed by a small waterfall, attracting a range of hikers from novice to experienced. The Emerald pool allows the visitor to feel completely encapsulated in a magical cave with its large overhanging wall and “magical mud” along the wall of the cavern.

Discussion

Tourism on the island is largely niche market tourism with much of the island relying on advertising to a particular type of tourist, whether it is a diver, hiker, or thrill seeker. The island must rely on niche market tourism to support its economy and advertise its uniqueness as the only “Nature Island” in the Caribbean because it simply cannot compete with the other islands in the mass market tourism field. The other islands draw tourists relaxing in the sun, on sandy beaches watching the waves crash in while it is freezing at home. Many islands market fun in the sun and alcohol. Dominica, due to the lack of its sandy beaches and party spots must rely on its natural beauty and cultural past to pull in revenue from visitors. If Dominica is serious about surviving and thriving in the tourism market, niche market tourism needs to be deeply analyzed

and supported by the government, businesses, and locals who have a stock in the success of the market. Some of the suggestions offered to improve the market were to add nightlights to the runway, upgrade the island infrastructure, and educate the population on the effects their waste has on the environment the tourists are coming to see. The habitats and attractions pulling in the hikers, divers, thrill seekers, and history buffs need to be maintained and the waste in the areas needs to be managed in order to promote the attractiveness.

Conclusion

In this report I have addressed niche market tourism's definition according to Onecaribbean.org, the tourist trends over the past ten years, and the type of tourism that Dominica is now using, and needs to continue to use in order to be competitive in today's tourism market. Information from government officials, business owners, and locals who all have a stock in the island's tourism was used in order to gauge which attractions were widely promoted, how they were promoted, who they were promoted by, and who their target audience was. It is a common belief that tourism is a viable option to use in sustaining a portion of Dominica's economy and that certain plans need to be implemented in order to maintain and build upon the current market.

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