

Sandals a game-changer for Tobago

Regional tourism executives:



Former CEO of the Tobago Tourism Agency, Louis Lewis

ANDREA PEREZ-SOBERS SENIOR MULTIMEDIA REPORTER REPORTING FROM ANTIGUA
ANDREA.PEREZ-SOBERS @GUARDIAN.CO.TT

Former Tobago Tourism Agency chief executive officer Louis Lewis is of the view that Tobago should seriously consider the Sandals Resort brand as it can be a volume generator.

Speaking to reporters at the Caribbean Travel Marketplace forum in Antigua yesterday, Lewis said as it stands now, Tobago is not competitive as there is a lack of direct international connectivity with major source markets.

“As a result of that, Tobago has not been able to take advantage of huge markets. To get around that, you must have an accommodation sector that is strong, positive, and can cause a flow of arrivals, and that is what a property like Sandals brings to the table. It’s a volume generator. It can help boost the economy,” he said.

Lewis, who is now the St Lucia’s Tourism Authority CEO, also stated that Tobago is going to struggle

to be competitive in the regional tourism marketplace, as many islands have been upgrading their hotel stock, and that is what is needed to anchor the tourism growth on the island.

“Unless that is done, it is going to be a difficult task for Tobago to achieve its potential. I am for Sandals as that is the option on the table now, as it is a specific company that has a high occupancy level, making your airport viable and fostering strong linkages with the agriculture sector. If that is not done, there would be a lost opportunity to earn muchneeded foreign exchange,” Lewis outlined.

Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association president, Sanovnik Destang, also commented on the Sandals brand’s proposed move to Tobago, saying that the luxury resort has had a tremendous impact on the destinations it is in.

“It had that impact in St Lucia, and we are seeing it right now in St Vincent and the Grenadines.

There have to be other discussions that have to be had about the impact on society and sustainability.

If you look at other countries, the brand has been a force for the improvement of tourism and attracts a lot of airlift. It’s a win-win situation for the destination, but more dialogue will be needed with the relevant authorities,” he said.

Talk of renewed Sandals’ interest in Tobago resurfaced in March after former prime minister Dr Keith Rowley announced, during the commissioning of the ANR Robinson International Airport terminal, that he had convinced the resort chain to reconsider a possible investment in the island.

Then two weeks later, former prime minister Stuart Young met with Sandals executive chairman Adam Stewart and Tobago stakeholders, at which the parties agreed to restart discussions with a “clean slate.”

Despite the change of government in T&T on April 28, Tobago House of Assembly Chief Secretary Farley Augustine said that would not affect the island’s ongoing effort to bring Sandals back— this time with a fresh plan.

Augustine said Sandals had already received a letter from him and several key stakeholders—including the Tobago division of the Chamber of Commerce, religious bodies, farmers, and fisherfolk groups—welcoming them back to the table.

“We welcome any overture from them. From our end, we will continue to reach out through formal and informal channels so we keep the conversation going,” he said.