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Are we ready for Cuba?

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During the unjust and punitive trade embargo, Cuba managed to accommodate a trickle of vacationing tourists and medical tourism. It was a largely clandestine affair. But now that Cuba has resumed diplomatic ties with the US (United States), I don't sense any concern, anxiety or trepidation from our government officials, even though cruise lines are readying themselves to visit there.

My mother was born in Cuba. She has fond memories of her youthful days there. In spite of the revolution, she remained emotionally attached to Cuba, so much so that we took a trip there in about 2002.

I have never seen my mother so ecstatic. We embarked on several jaunts and even one very-late-night event. We never encountered any mendicants and we never feared for our safety at any time of day or night. Every citizen was courteous and made us feel special and welcome.

The places that we saw were clean and the people were disciplined. There was no news of any murders or robberies. There were no demonstrations, strikes or tourist harassment. I realise that Cuba is a socialist state and, therefore, has the ability to maintain the highest standards of discipline within its citizenry. Government eyes and ears are everywhere - on almost every corner.

That sort of thing is impossible to compete against, but we don't seem to be making any effort to clean up our act. We saw this day coming years ago, but I have not noticed any appreciable change to our tourism product.

Complacency

Maybe I'm mistaken, but our reaction to Cuba's new-found freedom seems extremely subdued, complacent and overly confident. I remember some years ago when the economic bubble in the US was just starting to rupture. The sitting minister of finance confidently announced that the economic downturn would not affect Jamaica. In fact, he said that we would benefit from it.

Well, we all know how that went. I get the feeling that the current administration is making the same mistake. They seem to be depending on our name and fame to keep us buoyant during the rapidly approaching Cuban tourism storm. I feel that they are hoping to have joint tours that incorporate a Jamaican component. Perhaps they are thinking that a few rich Jamaican entrepreneurs will invest in hotels located on Cuban soil and that most of the profits will be repatriated here. Well, I would not gamble our economic future on such tenuous expectations.

It seems to me that if a serious businessman heard that his good friend, with more resources, was about to open up a similar and long-awaited business right next door to him, he would hurriedly set his house in order. He would improve staff efficiency. He would clean up his environment and he would spruce up his building. He would make certain that the needs of the beggars, touts, and hangers-on were satisfied so that they would not be on the streets. He would find a way to reduce criminal activities so that his customers/clients would feel safe. He would put an end to the most common and vexing complaint from his clients - harassment.

If positive changes are being made, I really don't see any and if I don't see any then, obviously, enough is not being done to allow Jamaica to compete with the expected Cuban tourist boom.

I'm very concerned because tourism is our main source of foreign income. It is our 'sacred cow', but I still see grimy and congested streets in our tourist capitals. Criminal activities permeate popular tourist centres. I still see tourists being followed around and harassed.

Life behind the walls of the all-inclusive resorts represents a watered-down version of what we have to offer. The real Jamaica exists outside, in the surrounding towns and communities. Until those are clean, safe and harassment-free, we have a serious problem. I fear that we will be in for a life-and-death economic struggle for survival in the near future.

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