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We must ensure that the **contribution of tourism** to our economy, environment and society are **properly valued**, and in doing so we must **redefine** how we as an industry measure our **success**.

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**HON. ANTHONY MAHLER**  
**MINISTER OF TOURISM AND DIASPORA**  
**RELATIONS**

*Keynote Remarks at the Belize Tourism Industry Association's Annual General Meeting*

*December 3, 2020*

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Good morning to all the hardworking and dedicated tourism stakeholders who have invested blood, sweat, tears and money to help build the tourism industry to its pre-covid level! And good morning to all those stakeholders who remain committed to rebuilding the industry.

With protocol having been established, I would like to thank the tourism industry's leading organization for giving me the opportunity to say some words at today's Annual General Meeting. I truly believe that the only way we can overcome the huge obstacle that we are facing today is to forge a meaningful and strong partnership between government and private sector.

I would also like to commend the outgoing Board led, by Mrs. Melanie Paz, for its hard work and dedication to the tourism industry over the past two years. Under normal circumstances, serving our country and industry in such capacities can be quite arduous and with little or no reward or recognition. So I can only imagine how difficult it has been over the last nine months during which peoples life's work has been totally decimated. I commend you and I salute you!!!



**MINISTRY OF TOURISM**  
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## Impacts of Tourism on Economies

Although I am speaking to people in the know, there were and still may be, many critics who did not and will never appreciate the importance of tourism to the global and Belizean economies. Many have now changed their minds after Covid 19 struck! But for those who are still hesitant, here goes:

- Globally tourism generates 3 trillion dollars and for Belize over 1 billion dollars;
- Globally 1 in 10 jobs while in Belize 1 in 4 jobs;
- Globally approximately 2 trillion dollars in investments and in Belize that number is over 200 million;
- Globally 10.3 percent of GDP and in Belize 25% of GDP.

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## Impacts of Covid 19

But just when we were celebrating some major milestones related to overnight and cruise arrivals, Covid 19 struck. Now during my time at the Belize Tourism Board we experienced many shocks to the world and to Belize. During the course of almost eleven years we experienced SARS, Ebola, Foot-in-mouth disease, Chikungunya, Mad Cow disease, September 11 and a few major hurricanes and storms. However, I can say with absolute certainty, that none of what we experienced back then ever had the crippling effects that Covid 19 has had on the world and on Belize.

My friends, we are truly living in a very uncertain time. A time when many stakeholders are on the brink of losing everything. A time when the tourism industry has been shaken to the core! Today almost all stakeholders are struggling to keep afloat - our tour guides, tour operators, restaurant owners; people who own gift shops, bars, attractions, small, medium, and large properties. No one has been spared the devastating blows of Covid.



## Quick Responses

However, for all of you who are hurting badly, I can assure you that I have spoken to the Prime Minister and my colleagues in Cabinet and we are committed to doing whatever we can to ensure that our tourism industry has the support it needs to navigate through the Covid 19 minefields. In fact, just last week the Ministry of Health relaxed the Quarantine Regulations by pushing the curfew back from 9pm to 10pm and by allowing open air restaurants to operate at 50 percent of their capacity. This only came about after dialogue with the private sector. And over the last week or so, I have called for a thorough review of the systems and policies that are currently being utilized at the PGIA. The visitor experience at this most important point of entry is unacceptable! To improve the efficiency at the airport, we are exploring the use of the Rapid Antigen Test for 72 hours and extending the PCR Test to either 5 or 7 days.

I have asked that a thorough review of the Gold Standards be conducted to ensure that we give as many properties as possible an opportunity to host international visitors. And I have asked the good folks over the Ministry of Tourism and Diaspora Relations to work with the Statistical Institute of Belize to review the functions of the Belize Health App to ensure that it aids in the processing of visitors rather than creating unnecessary bottlenecks. After all, research shows that ease of traveling to a destination is one of the main reasons why travelers select a destination. We will also conduct a thorough review of the current financial programs aimed at assisting struggling stakeholders. From my understanding the process is way too cumbersome and bureaucratic.

## Our Brand

As we begin to advance beyond the haze of this pandemic there is one certainty that remains, demand for Belize is still strong! Over the last three or so decades we have been able to build a country brand where our core values of environmental and social responsibility have served as the bedrock upon which we have seen sustained growth and development in the tourism industry. We must not deviate from our core values but must utilize them as an advantage that separates Belize from other destinations.



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## Marketing & Technology

However, to return to a path of growth and development, our Marketing and PR campaigns must be streamlined and focused on our core markets. We must expand the use of technology, especially during this time when marketing budgets have been slashed. Today, technology can be the great equalizer for small destinations to go pound for pound against the big boys.

According to a recent Google Travel study, 74% of travelers plan their vacation via the Internet. Today, more than ever, travelers use technology to research and select a destination for their vacation. So I will spend a little time just to highlight some of the technological advancements that we can utilize here in Belize.

For example the smartphone has become a traveler's guide book, map, camera, video, travel agency, best restaurant locator, and more. According to Trip Advisor, 45% of travelers use their smartphone for everything having to do with their vacations.

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Today **technology** can be the **great equalizer** for small destinations to go pound for pound against the big boys.

Another fascinating technological advancement is Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality. For example, a traveler can “teleport” himself or herself to anywhere in the world. Actually that is what you can get using Everest's EVEREST VR app, which allows you to experience the highest point on earth without actually leaving your home. Imagine Belize applying this technology to give potential visitors a Blue Hole Experience.

The Internet of Things (IoT) is also bringing some excitement to the tourism industry. Some of these include integrating sensors connected to the Internet inside items like cars, suitcases, buildings, and more. For example, Virgin Hotel properties provide an app to their customers that allows them to interact with the room's thermostat or even control the television set. And believe it or not, some suitcases now come with a device that allow you to monitor the whereabouts of your luggage from your smart phone.

I also believe that Big Data can assist in making better decisions when preparing your budget and marketing plans. For example, Meliá hotel chain uses information collected from their guests to analyze the amount spent, the reason for the trip, the country of origin and verifies this information with public data from government sources. This allows them to create the most appropriate customer profile and achieve a higher success rate in their targeting campaigns.

## The Tourism Reality

Pre-COVID tourism in Belize was on what I consider an organic growth path. The industry saw expansions in airlift, room stock, other investments and employment in the industry. However, I am a firm believer in analyzing the data to understand the reality over the past few decades.

The Tourism Master Plan projected that Belize would grow from an Average Length of Stay of 8.36 days to 10.6 days. Today, our length of stay is at 6.10 days. Average Daily Expenditure was projected to go from US\$133/day to US\$213/day in the overnight sector, yet today, the figures are showing an average daily expenditure of US\$156.45/day. This is just a marginal growth over the past ten years. Also, the average Occupancy Rate is hovering around 35 percent. The international airport still does not have a jet bridge. We still do not have a cruise port! The fastest growing tourist destination in the country went without light and water during one of the busiest periods of the season. And to tell you the truth, the overall supporting infrastructure is still lagging behind after hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent.

Now, my objective is not to paint a picture of doom and gloom! Instead it is to inspire you our private sector partners to see the opportunity at hand. While I agree that the road ahead will be a challenging one, if Belize is truly to emerge from these ashes better than before, there is much work to be done.

To the BTIA and to the tourism private sector at large, this is my commitment as Minister of Tourism and Diaspora Relations. I commit to do all that is in my power to ensure that our tourism stakeholders recover with integrity and dignity. I also commit that all monies allocated for the upgrade of the tourism product will go into meaningful projects and not the waste that we have experienced over the last thirteen years.

It is also critical that we collectively identify the “green fields” that will put the country back on a path of sustained growth. Remember that most countries are in the same position as we are and each will be fighting just as hard to get their share of the market.

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From a wide-angle point of view, I can say that collaborative destination management is a must. I can say that we must engage in a “Quality” over “Quantity” approach. We need to focus on building our resilience to all threats, whether exogenous or local. We must ensure that the contribution of tourism to our economy, environment and society are properly valued, and in doing so we must redefine how we as an industry measure our success. Only through these fundamental actions can we forge an industry that will be equitable and viable for the foreseeable future and beyond.

So, I end by expressing my commitment to ensure that the Belizean tourism product regains and reaffirms its value in the near future. We as a destination have for many years existed in the shadows of Costa Rica and Jamaica. We must never settle for mediocrity or for second place. In my mind, there is no other destination better than Belize. But it is our collective job to responsibly package this to the world and to deliver on the promise of a unique and first-class Belize experience.

Thank you once again for this opportunity and I look forward to your partnership as we together charter a new future for tourism in Belize. I thank you.



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