

Have trade fairs had their day?

Attending this year's World Travel Market (WTM) in London, the big international trade fair at which traditionally, buyers and sellers meet to strike deals for the year ahead, it was noticeable how diminished the size of the Caribbean village had become.

While the areas occupied by Latin American nations from Argentina to Peru and Costa Rica continued to increase, and those occupied by China, India and even Indian ocean destinations seemed to have doubled, many Caribbean nations that exhibited previously were either no longer present or had significantly reduced the space that they occupied. It also seemed that some of the Caribbean booths were dated, almost quaint in their presentation, and did not have the modernity, light and openness that now appears to be the style that an increasing number of exhibitor nations prefer.

The Caribbean exceptions to this were Jamaica, which continues to have a significant modern presence at the fair and makes great use of the public relations and selling potential the event offers; Cuba which appeared to have almost doubled the sales and promotional space that it occupied; and the Dominican Republic which continues to place significant emphasis on arrivals out of the UK and Europe.

In Jamaica's case the presence of the Minister, Dr Wykeham McNeill, and a large number of hoteliers, tour operators and attraction owners, continued to ensure that Brand Jamaica remained strong, but the same cannot be said for some other nations from the region.

Speaking to participants from the region about the Caribbean's diminished presence, they variously attributed this to: a dramatic fall in their promotional budgets as a consequence of the economic difficulties most Caribbean nations now find themselves in; the fact that huge trade fairs of the kind of WTM are becoming less relevant in regions and nations that are mature; the fact that an ever increasing amount of bookings and business now takes place on-line making traditional approaches to selling less relevant; and a sense that the UK market is in decline as a result of Air Passenger Duty and the country's particularly deep recession since 2007.

What this seems to suggest is a likely fundamental shift in future years, with some tourist boards and hoteliers suggesting that the emphasis should now be on spending and participating more in industry fairs in the markets where the Caribbean is trying to grow airlift and visitors. Their emphasis was on doing much more in future at events in Russia, Brazil, and in Latin America more generally, while concentrating on continental Europe and regions of the US and Canada away from the East Coast.

This is something that the event organisers themselves have also recognised with Reed Travel Exhibitions, the company involved in WTM in London, having organised earlier this year in Sao Paulo, Brazil, a WTM Latin America.

What all of this makes clear too is that not only is the way that tourism is sold changing rapidly, with more and more transactions taking place online both at a business to business and consumer level, but that as generational and technological change continues this will accelerate.

Well used, as Jamaica and Cuba were able to demonstrate in London, traditional events have their place; but more and more we should all expect to see tourist boards and hoteliers now heading for new locations like Moscow, Sao Paulo, and Panama.