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Bud Slabbaert | Luxury tourism and the Caribbean

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Contributed Photo Check in early so you can skip the crowds at security. *** Local Caption *** Graphic

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There is no universal definition for luxury tourism. One person's luxury is another's ordinary.

Even if there was a definition of a tweet length, what purpose does it serve? Why hide behind academic fabricated definition that is no better than an astrological horoscope profile can read in a boulevard magazine.



Everyone has his own perception what luxury tourism is, according to his own needs, desires or commercial interests. All the perceptions have wild variations. The perspectives are also multi-layered.

There is already a distinction between ultra-luxury and affordable luxury. For those who like the idea of developing luxury tourism for the benefit of a destination how about a straight-talk, three-word definition like 'big spender tourism'?

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The first thing that may come to mind for the development of such tourism segment is five-star-plus hotels. I would consider such naive thinking. My primary thoughts would be about what this clientele is really looking for, how it fits into their lifestyle, and what might meet their expectations.

Here are the 10 things that they expect:

1. Secluded pristine white sandy beachfront with crystal clear and turquoise waters.
2. Lush tropical emerald greenery with palm trees and flower bursting landscaped gardens.
3. Boutique properties styled after traditional island architecture
4. Harmonious sense of place that blends masterfully into the natural surroundings.
5. Private utopia to unwind, lifetimes away from the hustle and bustle.
6. Daily life adorned with elegance, intimacy and serenity.
7. Savouring the spice-of-life in a heaven like paradise
8. Impeccable personalised, detail-oriented service delivered by a passionate team.
9. Unmatched sophisticated amenities in style with contemporary comforts.
10. Cultural authenticity and genuine conviviality of the Caribbean.

These are the development benchmarks that need to be considered. If one cannot meet eight of the 10 on this list, the advice would be to try, try harder or start rethinking. Mind that this listing nowhere includes the two words that you might have expected, 'luxury' or even 'hotel'.

Commonly recognised as the Caribbean hub for exclusive guests like celebrities and tycoons, St Barth, apparently, has twice as many villas that are rented out than it has hotel rooms.

The next thing that may come to mind as essential to develop this exclusive tourism segment is to have a big international airport to receive these guests. Again, naive thinking. If we use a bit more class and elegance to replace the crude definition 'big-spender tourism', this category of people is usually known as high-net-worth-individuals (HNWI) and ultra-high-net-worth-individuals (UHNWI).

Most of these affluent persons arrive on private jets. Many of these jets only need a runway of about 5,000ft/1,500m, even when they come from far away. Some of the most beloved island destinations worldwide can only be reached via a hub airport. The one claim that can be made with high accuracy is that 'big spenders' typically don't arrive from abroad with cheap airlines or low-cost carriers.

Surveys and research in the Caribbean have indicated that private flyers spend an average of US\$69,000 on that destination. Furthermore, these visitors do have the means to invest in a destination, if they like the location.

It underlines the thesis that depending on 'head count statistics' is one of the worst mistakes made in tourism development. How much each 'head' actually spends is a better indicator for what concept should be advanced.

Loyal visitors

To top it all off, high-net-worth individuals are more loyal visitors to return to a particular destination and, in many cases, more than once per year. Destinations that offer more authenticity and are less commercialised are more to their liking. These people may not be considered vacationers anymore.

The multiple visits can make them integrated part-time members of the community and they may become valued friends. There is not only a positive economic impact coming from this visitor segment. It has a positive social impact also.

The affluent individuals are usually successful individuals. The saying goes that success breeds success. It may be a bit of exaggeration, yet it could rub off on a community that has to adapt to the expectations and demands of their guest who are actually raising the bar.

The upscale guests who have personal preferences that combine enrichment, enjoyment, but also education, can encourage communities to maintain their culture and society. They appreciate access to the local people, places and experiences that represent all that is authentic about a destination.

Becoming more affected to a community and destination may result in an increased willingness to assist in improving the quality of life of the members of a community. These visitors, who often wish to immerse into local culture than ever before, will protect the natural resources and the culture of a destination for future generations.

A fact is that on the international tourist market, there is one segment that keeps expanding regardless of any setbacks, be it recession, increased fuel prices, currency fluctuations; it is the upscale or luxury market that remains on top like oil on water.

I'm not advocating that luxury tourism is something all could or should pursue. In cases where destinations put more emphasis on mass tourism, it is hardly feasible because the two segments are like the oil of the affluent and the water of the masses, and they just don't mix.

While others see the minimum standard of luxury tourism as the development of five-star hotels, I have tried to give you a different, exclusive, boutique perspective. You can believe and do what you want, but if all of the above is appealing for destination tourism development, the clear-text advice is, "If you really want it, get your back up off the wall and get down it."

- Commander Bud Slabbaert is the initiator and coordinator of the annual Caribbean Aviation Meetup conference. The international results and solution oriented event brings airlift stakeholders from both aviation and tourism industry, as well as government authorities together. Email feedback to columns@gleanerjm.com and cdrbud@gmail.com.