



Edited by

Acolla Lewis-Cameron · Leslie-Ann Jordan ·
Sherma Roberts

Managing Crises in Tourism

Resilience Strategies
from the Caribbean

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FOREWORD

ISLANDS AS ELSEWHERE

In the western imagination, warm water islands are always ‘elsewhere’ (Bonnett, 2020), a ‘pleasure periphery’, exotically situated at the fringe (Ash & Turner, 1976). They cannot be too close: they would otherwise risk becoming infected by the drabness of the routine of the cold and grey of daily life that characterizes much of the winters of Western Europe and North America; yet they also cannot be located too far so as to be unreachable except in one’s wildest dreams. For the millions of inhabitants of such islanded places as the Caribbean, however, these same islands are home. For most of their inhabitants, there may very well be nowhere else. And so, what may be a disappointing vacation cancellation to a wannabe tourist, may well mean the loss of work or employment to a Caribbean islander engaged in the hospitality industry.

THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES OF SMALL ISLAND JURISDICTIONS

As I write (mid-April, 2021), the Soufriere Volcano has been spewing ash over the north end of the island of St Vincent, the main and most populated island of the Caribbean country and small island developing state (SIDS) known as St Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG). News agencies have reported that some 16,000 people have been obliged to leave

their homes. One begs the question, however, as to where such people are being evacuated. The island of St Vincent is 29 km long and 18 km wide: a strong enough volcanic eruption can quickly send its whole population—about 110,000—into emergency mode, obliging a comprehensive evacuation off island. The destination of any evacuated Vincenians is not obvious: their country is independent and no other sovereign state is obliged to take on SVG's populace. Its neighbouring SIDS—St. Lucia, Grenada, Barbados, Antigua & Barbuda and Jamaica have however offered support. This is unlike a similarly named volcano on a similarly small Caribbean island—Montserrat, a UK overseas territory and not a state—which erupted in 1995. Then, that other Soufrière's eruptions had rendered more than half of that island territory uninhabitable, destroying the capital city, Plymouth, and obliging extensive evacuations: some two thirds of the population had left the island, many relocating not to neighbouring Caribbean island states, but to the motherland and colonial power: the UK.

Such situations help to frame the specific challenges that confront small island states and territories when faced by massive environmental or economic shocks. Were a similar eruption to unfold on a larger and continental country, individuals can be relocated and rehoused somewhere else on a sprawling land area. It is safe to assume that any 'disaster zone' can be cordoned off, while its residents are shepherded to safety in another part of the same jurisdiction. Not necessarily so in a small jurisdiction: when such disasters strike, they tend to affect the whole resident population and its whole land area. The few who can and have the means to do so—aptly referred to by Sheller (2013) as the 'kinetic elite'—would sail or fly away (if endowed with advance warning), possibly on their own boats or private jets. The rest of the resident population has to lump it, dig in, stay put and hope for the best, including benefitting from expressions of international solidarity. Any solace and assistance are more likely to be requested by those subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) that remain parts of larger and richer states. Here, patron states—Colombia, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, the UK, the USA and Venezuela, in the case of the island Caribbean—would come demonstrably to the help of their co-nationals, issuing largesse in what are often highly publicized actions. Sovereignty in such situations, in contrast, means that the affected small island state must approach and lobby the international community to provide support, and with no guarantees that such would materialize, and if so, whether on time and in the form that is most valued (Schultz et al., 2019).

I welcome this book to the ever-expanding stock of literature written by the Caribbean, about the Caribbean, and using frameworks and templates that make sense to the Caribbean as a small island region. Here is another valid contribution to a select body of knowledge that boldly seeks to better understand the predicament of Caribbean small states and territories. It does so effectively by deploying a methodology that critically examines ‘the dilemma of tourism overdependence’ in what continues to be the best known and most strongly branded tourism playground region of the world.

OVERDEPENDENCE: RECIPE FOR DISASTER

That overdependence is a recipe for disaster is self-evident. When a major industry suffers, then the whole economy can go into nosedive: this is a manifestation of vulnerability. When the suffering eases, the economy ‘bounces back’: and this becomes an expression of resilience. Such dynamics are aggrandized and enhanced, the smaller the size and population of a jurisdiction. No surprise, therefore, that small island states insist that their vulnerability to external shocks is an ingrained and structural weakness.

Yet, even in the 99+% of the time that the small island economy is not under the effects of a devastating volcanic eruption, earthquake, hurricane, flood, tsunami or any other natural or human-made mishap, the powerful economic lobby that drives its major industry is often locked in tight embrace with the political elite and ensures that its interests are protected since it is ‘too big to fail’. Let us not forget that the absence of economies of scale and of a large and competitive domestic market may mean that various services, some essential, that are delivered in small island states or territories are done so invariably by monopolistic service providers: energy, communication, sea and air transport, banking ... there may be a long list of companies that command no domestic rivals in small economies. Thus, powerful forces are at work to convince one and all that a dominant economic situation is not to be challenged. As a result, when the negative effects of such a dominance are exposed in the wake of an economic or environmental shock, the political narrative is carefully directed and massaged towards ‘bouncing back’ rather than thinking hard about alternatives and trying to prevent a similar future shock from having similarly devastating consequences.

This is why many countries do not learn from past mistakes. Even when major industries are thumped and pounded by events and trends, the kneejerk reaction is to re-establish the *status quo ante*: restoring major industries to their previous perch and status as, well, major industries. This is obviously a prequel for yet further shocks. And the cycle of vulnerability and resilience continues. And yet, this scenario is often presented as a paradigm: by definition, it allows no other interpretation of the state of affairs. As a consequence, moments of crisis are not also looked upon and considered as serendipitous episodes of opportunity to reconstitute, or at least reconsider, the economic fabric of a small country.

Which is why *building back better* is smarter advice and a more useful interpretation of resilience than merely bouncing back (Rhiney, 2020; Collodi et al., 2021). And we interpret *building* here beyond the literal meaning of the word: as in, building ‘hurricane proof’ houses (Halle-gatte et al., 2018; Barclay et al., 2019). A measure of this smart re-configuration of the economic set-up of a small island state and territory must also engage with the relative erosion of significance of those sectors and industries on which these economies are *too* reliant.

TOURISM: POSTERCHILD OF OVERDEPENDENCE; VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS

The poster child of over-reliance in the island Caribbean is tourism. The industry has grown and, in the space of a few decades, has basically transformed Caribbean island economies into tourism platforms and their ancillary services. It has grown in significance also because other traditional economic sectors—bananas, sugar, some manufacturing—have collapsed or lost market share (Fridell, 2011; Seleka & Dlamini, 2020). Tourism remains an industry that has melded so well with the representations of culture and nature of the Caribbean that one has become synonymous with the other. It remains an industry which has emerged and matured without the need for small island state stakeholders and governments in the region to argue for its protection, for subsidies or for favourable market access. It has gripped various island economies so tightly that the locals feel obliged to protest not just about constrained access to their own beaches; but even about being cheated of *views* of those beaches (e.g. Mycoo, 2006).

With the onset of COVID-19, and the subsequent restrictions imposed on international travel, the Caribbean region is now smarting from its own

tourism successes throughout the years. Hotels, restaurants, taxi and self-drive services, farmers and fishers, self-catering accommodation providers, tour operators ... all these have seen a massive decline in tourism demand for their products or services since Spring 2020. Some relief may have come about through the resort by locals to ‘staycations’ and/or fiscal stimulus and cheques issued by the state to companies under duress or laid off workers; but any per capita revenue here pales in comparison with international tourism receipts. Thus, the island states and territories whose economies have been most dependent on tourism are amongst the ones that have suffered the most in the post-COVID-19 epoch (Murphy et al., 2020). But the corollary also holds true: for countries like Trinidad and Tobago, and especially Trinidad—since Tobago is heavily dependent on tourism—where tourism is important but where the economy is more diversified and differentiated—thanks mainly to a strong manufacturing base and its suppliers—then, COVID-19 economic suffering has been less severe. Which would explain why we have a Tobago-based chapter in this collection; but none on Trinidad.

SMART, STRATEGIC, FLEXIBLE DIVERSIFICATION

I would like to dwell here on the mitigating measures that many citizens of small island states and territories naturally gravitate towards when faced with calamities of the kind being faced today in the island Caribbean. After all, it is not a question of if but when: in the last two decades, the region has had to contend with quite a plethora of crises: the economic consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA; the 2007–2008 financial crisis; various devastating hurricanes; earthquakes; the coronavirus pandemic; (and volcanic eruptions). More, no doubt, will be forthcoming. In such a context, individuals, families and households are naturally savvy and resourceful in a streetwise kind of way: none wishes to get caught napping and rendered destitute and adrift, without any fallback positions for eking a livelihood. And so, emerges an interesting but sustainable ‘parallel economy’ as ‘crisis management’: a tourism sector may loom large at a macro, national level; but there is a common, canny resort to various strategies of diversification at a micro (individual, family or household) level. It is as if people opt to take those smart and sound measures that make so much sense, providing ‘insurance’ against mishap; even as their governments, possibly locked into inaction by powerful lobbies, take no such initiatives to diversify. Here is a crisis-proofed version of resilience,

a portfolio deployed and resorted to by island communities ‘as they contend with the dynamism of their external and internal environments’ (Baldacchino, 2011).

These smart and sound measures include: (1) combining a private sector with a public sector job or contract: the latter is not dependent on tourism; (2) maintaining links with members of one’s diaspora overseas, since such members of one’s extended family could be counted upon to provide remittances or loans in times of need, and especially when major investment projects are contemplated; (3) spending some time oneself abroad, working elsewhere and saving enough money to stash for that rainy day, which will come; (4) petty self-employment, including part-time farming, fishing, herding, animal husbandry and odd craft, trade and construction work: these add variety to the spice of island life and ensure multiple (albeit limited) revenue streams; and (5) informal and grey economy activity, such as higgling, often undertaken under the radar of formal employment, and thus not captured by tax agencies.

Options (2) and (3) above are more significant in the cases of small island territories. The link with the metropole is a prized resource, and probably the most important benefit enjoyed by citizens of small island territories (unlike those of SIDS), and the main factor in thwarting any aspirations for their independence. ‘Securing double residencies, undergoing multiple stints overseas for work and education, tolerating complex transportation routes and itineraries, becomes the order of the day, every day, for those who have the resources and capabilities of doing so; and the dreams and desires of those who cannot’ (Baldacchino 2020, 123).

Thus, the same hotel housekeeper, restaurant waitress and taxi driver who are currently out of work because tourists have disappeared in the age of COVID-19, somehow ensure for themselves a decent income from non-tourism operations. Such operations are probably easier to set up and nurture for the non- and peri-urban segment of the population. This blend of formal and non-formal occupations is predicated on and is itself a nudge towards, a resort for strategic, flexible specialization (Baldacchino, 2019). This trait has long been acknowledged in the Caribbean (e.g. Comitas, 1964).

TWO DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGIES

Diversification strategies follow two complementary paths. The first involves diversification of the tourist product *within* tourism. Steering away from the bland ‘sun, sand and sea’ package and venturing instead towards the expansion and consolidation of particular niches—such as agro-tourism, carnival events or scuba diving—help the tourism industry to branch out ‘away from the beach’: engage with different market segments, tap into different local resources, and connect with different aspects of the local community (e.g. Cuffy, 2017). Cruise tourism has come on stream as such a new market niche, bringing senior citizens from Canada and the USA to the Caribbean; but their actual added value to local island economies is disappointingly limited (Chen et al., 2019).

The second path is to diversify *beyond* tourism. To do so effectively requires a combination of forward thinking, shrewd investments and, admittedly, some strokes of good luck. A number of countries have developed financial service sectors whose low tax advantages appeal to the rich citizens of other countries: but such practices have increasingly fallen within the purview of larger states who are loathed to see their tax revenue base contract (Vlcek, 2017). Controversial ‘citizenship by investment’ schemes were pioneered in the Caribbean: they offer naturalization and ‘passports for sale’ to those wealthy and keen enough on a back-up plan; but their association with shady characters tends to lead to serious reputational damage for the countries that dabble with them (Shachar, 2018). A few states and territories have natural and mineral resources that they can export bauxite from Jamaica; avocados from St Lucia; oil and gas from Trinidad; mace and nutmeg from Grenada; and aloe from Aruba. But selling such products without further processing at home does not accrue significant profit and does not create much stable employment. In contrast, the legacy of cultural icon and reggae artist Bob Marley on Jamaica is profound, enduring and integral to that island brand (Johnson & Gentles-Peart, 2019). The creative industries in particular hold considerable potential in the Caribbean region (Nurse, 2009).

The coronavirus pandemic unleashed in 2020 has provided an opportunity for a timely and sober reassessment of tourism, at much the same time that concerned stakeholders—including island citizens—were daring to question the wisdom of the mass tourism algorithm and were also emboldened enough to speak plainly about ‘overtourism’, possibly for the first time (Milano et al., 2019). The excessive strain on the natural

environment, the depletion of non-renewable resources, the monopoly power of service providers ... even the very dominance of the industry over the small Caribbean island economy, has cast tourism under a spotlight of intense scrutiny. Once the symbolic reset button is pressed, and life returns to some sense of ‘normal’ post-COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines, will life, and island tourism, be the same as they were pre-pandemic? And, if not, what changes can we expect, and on whose initiatives will they unfold? These are the pressing questions of our times.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me return to St Vincent and the Grenadines. The volcanic eruption of April 2021 grabbed the news headlines for a few days (until the death was announced of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh). Of course, for SVG, there is a beckoning future. Past the short burst of international visibility, SVG may yet have nudged an interest and curiosity in the broad community for it to emerge as a stronger tourism destination post-eruption (and post-COVID-19). At least one other island state has managed to grow its tourism economy *fourfold* after a volcanic eruption that disrupted air travel in Northern Europe back in 2010: Iceland.

I invite the readers of this book to delve into its chapters and share in its sober assessments of how one can take some ownership over one’s vulnerability and critically envision a resilient and sustainable tourism in, and for, the ‘elsewheres’ of the island Caribbean.

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It is our hope that this volume will ignite future research in this area and provoke innovative solutions, as we contend for a more sustainable Caribbean future.

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PART I

Background and Conceptual Context



Introduction

Acolla Lewis-Cameron

BACKGROUND

The operating environment for tourism continues to evolve in the increasingly crisis prone global tourism space. Destinations the world over are engaged in an ongoing exercise to effectively manage all components of the tourism system to ensure survival first and then increased competitiveness in the face of continuous shocks to the system. Most recently, the global tourism industry in 2020 has experienced unprecedented loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic unlike any other period of its growth and development. All major international tourism organizations are referring to 2020 as a period of unprecedented disruption as evidenced by massive decline in global tourism arrivals, export earnings from tourism and related employment. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has designated 2020 the worst year in tourism history citing a 74% decline in international arrivals and an estimated loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues; a loss that is 11 times greater than the fallout of the 2008–2009 global economic crisis (UNWTO [2021](#)). A

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