

Sustainable tourism experts loathe St Maarten while cruise passengers love it. Who is right?

By Chris Ashcroft

There is clearly a gulf between the views of cruise passengers and the experts sent by *National Geographic Traveler* (NGT) magazine to rate tourist destinations.

Last October's Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association survey compiled by BREAA, which monitored passenger experiences at 19 participating Caribbean island destinations, ranked St Maarten between first and fourth in categories measuring satisfaction of the overall visit, whether experience met expectations, the variety of things to see and do, friendliness of residents, and whether they would return for a resort vacation.

Overall, they rated St Maarten as their second favourite.

One month later NGT published its sixth 'Places Rated List' and St Maarten was placed in the 'Worst' category – rated 129 out of the 133 – based on its authenticity and stewardship.

NGT's panel of 437 judges mark down a place if they perceive it to be overcrowded. Scores are also much lower where the destination is perceived to have reckless development and commercialisation.

The panel were asked to evaluate only the places with which they were familiar, using six criteria weighted according to importance: environmental and ecological quality, social and cultural integrity, condition of historic buildings and archaeological sites, aesthetic appeal, quality of tourism management and outlook for the future.

National Geographic's Director of the Center for Sustainable Destinations, Jonathan Tourtellot, describes on NGT's website the evaluation process: "The panel began by posting points of view on each

place – anonymously, to ensure objectivity. After reading each others' remarks – a variation of a research tool called the Delphi technique – the experts then filed their final scores.

"The resulting Stewardship Index rating represents the average of informed judgments about each place in all its manifestations – as a whole."

Their verdict on St Maarten: "A typical mass-market disaster and one of the best examples of what islands should avoid in tourism development."

Comments like these were written anonymously (to ensure objectivity) by experts in the fields of historic preservation, site management, geography, sustainable tourism, ecology, indigenous cultures, travel writing and photography, and archaeology.

Tourism everywhere brings stresses to destinations – to beaches and coastlines, coral reefs and forests as well as ancient cities and marquee attractions – and to the main streets of small Caribbean capitals. Managing these stresses is of course a complex task – especially when governments have to make fine judgments in the name of generating revenues to support their growing populations.

In the Caribbean, more often than not, governments are limited to raising significant revenues from their only available income source – tourism.

Nothing is ever perfect. But the language used by NGT experts appears to support the notion that the past is always better, and that mass tourism is destroying the past.

There is also an implication that politicians totally disregard their role as guardians of heritage for the next



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The renovated Front Street, Philipsburg

generation, and are unsympathetic to the need for balance in developing their tourism strategies.

In the case of St Maarten this survey also implies that its government has turned its capital and coastline into the worst kinds of tourist development – with total disregard for the historical, artistic and culinary heritage of the Island.

Tim Smit, creator of the Eden Project in the English county of Cornwall, recently made a comment about the work of The National Trust in Britain. Interviewed for its magazine, he said: "Institutions like the Trust can appear to peddle comfy nostalgia, and nurture a perception that the past was a better place.

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So what is St Maarten's past? Its recent history is the tale of an island community in an almost constant fight for self preservation.

In the early 1990s almost two-thirds of the economically active population earned its salary in the tourism industry, while

tourism also contributed substantially to St Maarten's GDP, to foreign exchange earnings and government revenues. It was concluded that foreign exchange earnings from tourism could pay for all of St Maarten's imports in terms of products and services.

Then, in 1995, hurricane Luis hit; and ten days later hurricane Marilyn caused devastation. The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks further undermined tourism in the region in general, and for St Maarten in particular.

The closure of various hotels for an extended period resulted in a decrease in the room capacity, with the corresponding loss of revenue for hotel owners. Additional consequences were unemployment, a shift in the labour market, a decrease in consumption, and a decline in economic activities.

This was the St Maarten government's tipping point, as it accepted that this series of catastrophes exposed its economic vulnerability as a one-pillar economy based on tourism. Its response was to commence the process of economic diversification to acquire economic sustainability through the rebuilding of the

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Philipsburg's cruise terminal complex

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tourism industry and diversification of the economy.

A Comprehensive Economic Development Plan was developed to provide a road-map for the future, while acknowledging that tourism would remain the main pillar of the local economy with a need to sustain and improve the tourism infrastructure.

The government took the decision to rebuild its tourism sector. Emphasis was placed on increasing cruise tourism as a mechanism to jump-start the economy – based on the realisation that, along with timeshare owners, cruise visitors were the first to return to the island. Also, the strategy to attract the cruise industry required relatively small government resources, compared to the revenues required to reconstruct the St Maarten stay-over tourist product and to promote it in the target markets.

The result was that the number of cruise passenger arrivals increased from less than half a million in the beginning of the 1990s to one million in 2003.

In a presentation in 2005 The Hon. F.E. Richards, Governor of St Maarten, raised many of the challenges faced by St Maarten's government.

"The concept of sustainable development requires a general rethinking of economic development. It raises questions about whether traditional economic development brings greater prosperity and better living conditions in

the short term, while placing longer-term prosperity and the quality of life of future generations at risk.

"There is a close and dynamic relationship between infrastructure development and sustainable tourism development, because inadequate infrastructure is one of the most serious constraints on future tourism development.

"Many would say that this economic development and accompanying population growth has not been without some negative consequences, such as the apparent large number of motor vehicles on our roads.

"What we now need to keep in mind is the need to move tourism on to a path of long-term sustainability. Our focus, therefore, needs to be on 'managed growth', consistent with the theme of the tourism master plan, by means of our starting to:

- Promote the preservation and conservation of the St Maarten historical and cultural heritage as well as resources for the appreciation of our history and culture;
- Develop tourism along the lines of conserving the socio-cultural heritage, preserving the environment and sustaining development; and
- Contribute towards the enhancement of the quality of life of all the inhabitants of St Maarten.

"We need to develop tourism in such a

way that it meets the needs of today's residents and guests, while protecting and improving the opportunities of future generations to meet their needs."

Richards acknowledged the dangers of tourism growth: "Paradoxically, the industry carries within itself the seeds of its own potential destruction.

"Extensive exploitation of a resource, location, culture or amenity beyond its carrying capacity can lead to the destruction of those very qualities that attracted visitors to it in the first instance.

"This requires that all people involved in the tourism industry have foresight. Sustainable tourism development involves almost all aspects of life, and this means that the tourism industry must be viewed as an integrated whole with an impact not just on the economy, but also on society, culture and the physical environment."

Richards ended his presentation by highlighting the need for the population to engage in tourism and its future development: "Tourism can never live up to its fullest potential if the people of St Maarten do not take part in the ownership of the industry and if they do not commit to providing a high quality visitor experience.

"We, the people of St Maarten, are, after all, the hosts."

Richards and the government were conscious of the broader aspects of tourism when initiatives and actions were taken to rebuild finances and employment and to make a better life for tourists and the island's citizens.

In 2007 the government again committed itself to improvements in infrastructure, as it considered this activity a precondition for economic development and growth. It included projects that benefited the whole economy, such as road network improvement, sewage, drainage and waste management systems, and elements of the Development Vision for the Greater Philipsburg Communication Network.

Other projects were put in place to realise the further development of tourism industry and economic diversification – such as restoration of monuments and the establishment of nature parks.

The past has very much shaped the future development of St Maarten, and the language of the government is that that future must be one of sustainable development. But that

does not automatically mean that every development, every project and every action will be perfectly executed according to the tastes and opinions of lobbyists or academics or even the local population. Does it ever? But the government's language does indicate an understanding of the dangers of careless overdevelopment.

Cruise passengers arriving in St Maarten have an expectation that they will enjoy their stay ashore.

Even the spokesperson for The National Trust, in response to Smit's critical comments, admitted: "What we peddle is really good experiences. Some happen to be in historic houses, although a great many are visiting the countryside and coast."

More than a million cruise passengers now visit St Maarten every year. Every indication suggests that they thoroughly enjoy the experience – many claiming they will return for a land-based stay in future years.

It has always been the experience that counts. Whether it is visiting an ancient tea plantation building, learning how to paint, standing on the edge of a volcano or simply having a coffee on the sea-front alongside the redeveloped Philipsburg Main Street.


Even the enjoyment of shopping counts. This may not appeal to all of us while on vacation, but it happens to be part of the North American mass-market psyche.

Tourism is a complex subject, made more so by the current fad for innovation. Eco-tourism, green tourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, geo tourism – all find a place in the sector's new language, even though populations the world over seem not to understand what they mean.

For most tourists, the evaluation of their vacation is based on a few simple uncluttered criteria: Did I have a good time? Did I enjoy the place(s) I visited?

Of course, everyone would like to visit places which are uncrowded. The plain truth is that most of us cannot. We want to visit places we have heard of, or that have been recommended.

Many choose a cruise to deliver those choices. Does the fact that there are several thousand people enjoying a destination at the same time destroy their experience? In the vast majority of cases the answer is simply no.



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St. Maarten is the second favourite cruise destination in the Caribbean

Governments of Caribbean islands develop their infrastructure and their tourism products bit by bit, as they can afford to, and often take a great deal longer than originally stated – that is simply the nature of government. They do so generally with the best intentions to deliver something that meets the criteria of sustainability. But it may be that their interpretations don't meet those of their critics, because it is always a matter of taste. They are, though, usually intended to appeal not just to tourists but also to the local community.

This does not mean that governments should be immune from criticism of their tourism policy or its delivery. But when Tourtellot says: "The condition of any destination is a mix of what local governments, residents and business can control – pollution, cultural quality and authenticity, tourism management – and what they can't, such as natural disasters and global economic meltdowns" it is surely fair to expect all these conditions to be considered.

NGT claims that, in essence, when people care about the condition of a place, the scores go up. But when people see a place as a tourism cash cow scores tend to slip, as they do for reckless development and commercialisation.

It is stating the obvious that, if the pool of judges used for this survey includes nine archaeologists, eight conservation architects, 13 environmental engineers and planners and special analysts, 19

geographers, 11 heritage experts, 46 sustainable tourism consultants and 42 tourism consultants and developers, their opinions are going to be vastly different from those of people who simply arrive wishing to enjoy a holiday and experience a destination.

Presumably these experts go to vastly different places for their own holidays from the destinations chosen by the mass market, with the main criterion being whether the overall experience is good.

NGT takes the view that its survey is not a popularity contest. This is clearly the case, but it does not excuse the use of brutal language to dismiss the work of so very many people, in and out of government, to develop a tourism product that works and enhances the lives of the population. "More and more hotel rooms and bigger and bigger ships lead to less and less enjoyment and a diminished destination" is how one NGT expert described St Maarten.

Those who arrive on cruise ships to experience the destination take a very different view: they enjoy the destination – more today than ever before. It is their second favourite island in the Caribbean.

Who is right? The BREA survey reveals another important statistic: those visiting islands which attract over 1 million passengers each year leave feeling far more satisfied with their experience than those who visited islands which attract less than 300,000 passengers a year.

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In many cases it does not seem that the NGT experts care about anything except their interpretation of sustainability etc. There is no recognition of the burdens faced by governments which, in many cases, rely so heavily on tourism. Nor does there seem to be an appreciation of what mass tourists enjoy.

No one at NGT was prepared to speak about this survey in any detail. Nor was NGT Editor Keith Bellows prepared to explain why individual assessments of a destination exclude the obvious matter of self-preservation.

There is, though, a much wider point. A place that relies on tourism completely for its self-preservation has a greater challenge than any European capital or tourist city, and greater than any North American place.

It appears as if efforts to accommodate mass tourism are disliked, as NGT's judges seem to dismiss genuine efforts by tourism authorities and governments to improve the infrastructure, environment and attractiveness of their destinations. All of these good intentions would be reversed, at a stroke, if NGT's recipe for sustainable tourism were to be enacted.

The consequences of reducing tourism, by say a half, would see unemployment rise and consumption and economic activity decrease. Infrastructure projects would be halted and the island would again move into decline. And tourists – of all kinds – would start choosing somewhere else to visit. □