BAYAHIBE, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Caribbean Moves Forward

> BY MARK CHESNUT

There's no way around it: Last year was a challenging time for many parts of the Caribbean. Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria delivered a one-two punch to the region, causing massive destruction and damage on several islands.

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Today, meeting planners can already witness the results of a concerted effort by the public and private sectors, as well as many individuals, to get the region back on track as quickly as possible. It's no wonder that words like "resilience" and "cooperation" are often used when describing recovery efforts from the 2018 hurricanes.

Hugh Riley, secretary general of the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO), said that a strategic approach to recovery is necessary for the region's long-term success as both a business and leisure destination. "Building back better is a far more important objective than simply building back faster," he said. "Recent experience has also shown that we need to have a consistent stream of useful information about the areas that are affected, as well as those that are not. Meeting planners and vacationers alike are keen to understand where and how to make alternative plans if the destination they had booked is no longer available."

Indeed, Riley stressed that the meeting and incentive industry should feel secure when planning events in the Caribbean. "Meeting planners can be assured that our primary concern is for the safety and security of our citizens and our visitors," he said. "We don't compromise on that. The CTO works closely with the relevant national and regional entities to ensure that information is effectively disseminated in advance of a hurricane.

We're in contact with our private sector partners in the traditional and sharing-economy accommodation sector, as well as with travel professionals, airlines, cruise lines and others to ensure that proper preparations are in place. Of course, there is always advance notice of an approaching hurricane. Preparations include cancellation policies, shelter notifications and evacuation procedures."

Sharing information has been crucial to dealing effectively deal with these challenges, Riley added.

"Weather systems around the world have provided us with a wealth of useful information over the years,"

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a positive message about the recovery efforts around the region. Frank Pierce, director of sales and marketing for Zemi Beach House Hotel & Spa in Anguilla, said that communicating with meeting planners is a top priority. "We work to keep them updated on all situations to the best of our ability," he said. "We would like for them to know that we are 100 percent open for business on the island, and access is improving swiftly. It has been one year since Hurricane Irma, and Anguilla is a resilient and strong country."

Carla Santiago, a spokesperson for Hyatt, was similarly positive about Puerto Rico, where her company has multiple meeting-friendly properties. "Puerto Rico kicked off the year by hosting the annual Caribbean Travel Market Show, heavily attended by travel industry professionals," she said. "In the first quarter of 2018, our area also had the benefit of the annual convention of ICANN [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers], as well as hosting the return of sport groups attending the Jeep Volleyball Championship. "One interesting outcome and benefits we have experienced with our hotels includes the fact that we have been able to host meetings and groups at our hotels outside the San Juan metro area," Santiago added.

Harrigan said her organization has received a positive response from planners. "The BVITB continues to work with meeting planners to bring business back to the BVI," she said. "We have attended some of the top trade events for this market, and were heartened by the outpouring of support and goodwill as many planners have restated their commitment to bringing groups to the territory for the foreseeable future."

Getting the Word Out

Keeping planners informed about recovery progress and hurricane preparedness is a goal for many in the Caribbean — and it's the crux of a new cooperative effort, according to Riley. "The Caribbean Tourism Organization and our industry partners at the Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Association (CHTA) have established a joint-venture initiative to ensure that there is adequate funding for an effective communication

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