

Editorial - Economic powerhouse

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The visit of German ambassador Heinz-Peter Behr last week should serve as an eye-opener on the largely untapped possibilities that European market offers. Up to now much of the attention regarding the "Old Continent" understandably regards the Netherlands and France from which "The Friendly Island" also has direct airlift, but Germany as Europe's economic powerhouse and surrounding nations hold great tourism potential.

Curaçao managed to attract Air Berlin flights recently and already has noticed a marked increase in the number of visitors from that part of the world. Some of that has to do with "Antilleans" living in Holland making use of the lower fares compared to the Dutch carriers KLM and ArkeFly that service the island, but even this may be considered positive, because it can help bring ticket prices down on the popular mid-Atlantic route.

Other islands such as the Dominican Republic and Cuba are already well-established as vacation spots for Germans and there is no reason St. Maarten cannot achieve the same over time. The appointment of Karel Frielink as Germany's honorary consul for both islands can be a useful asset in such efforts, along with increased presence at trade fairs in that country, as the ambassador rightly pointed out.

Also when it comes to cruise tourism there are opportunities (see today's related article), as witnessed by the biweekly calls of the German vessel Mein Schiff 2 that stays until close to midnight and thus gives Philipsburg at least some added business in the evenings, when the Dutch side's main shopping area is often likened to a ghost town. More such visits could provide an important boost to the local economy.

Perhaps most important, however, is to continue striving for diversification of the source markets for the island's tourism product, as past experience following, for example, the 9-11 attacks and the US financial/real estate crisis has shown that depending too much on North America makes the destination quite vulnerable. Some might argue that the European Community is facing huge problems of its own right now regarding the euro, but Germany actually is doing quite well and there can be little doubt that the current issues eventually will be sorted out one way or the other.

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