

Keynote Address by Honourable Dr. Natalio D Wheatley, Premier at the Virgin Islands Tourism Summit Peter Island Resort

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The Future of Tourism in the Virgin Islands: Policy and Progress

Distinguished guests, stakeholders, and partners in tourism, good morning!

1.It is both a privilege and a pleasure to welcome you to the Virgin Islands' First Tourism Summit. This summit builds on past tourism symposiums and forums and marks a significant milestone in our journey towards shaping a vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive tourism industry that benefits all our people. We are gathered here today to create the future together. Partnerships have always been the key to BVI's success. It has worked for us in financial services, and we will emulate that success and make it work for us in tourism.

2.To build anything successfully, you need a plan. Before you create a plan, you need a vision shaped by a strong policy. We are here today to begin the process of creating that policy to guide that plan. Following this Summit, we will continue with consultations throughout the Virgin Islands so that everyone could give input to the National Tourism Policy. Tourism is everyone's business, and everyone will have an opportunity to have a say.

3. Tourism has always been a cornerstone of life in the Virgin Islands. It has provided livelihoods, fostered cultural exchange, and showcased the beauty of our islands to the world. However, as we stand at a crossroads in our economic development, it is imperative that we rethink how tourism can serve as a catalyst for broader socio-economic progress. Our vision goes beyond attracting visitors; it encompasses building a resilient industry that respects our environment, uplifts our communities, celebrates our heritage and deliver economic prosperity.

4. This summit brings together key players from the public and private sectors, experts in tourism, and our valued community partners. Together, we will explore innovative strategies, share insights, and build consensus on the way forward. Today is not just about identifying challenges—it is about embracing opportunities and fostering partnerships that will drive the Virgin Islands towards a prosperous and sustainable future.

5. It is quite fitting that this Summit is taking place at Peter Island Resort, one of the Virgin Islands iconic resorts, following its seven-year recovery from the catastrophic destruction at the hands of hurricanes Irma and Maria. Peter Islands' return is symbolic of the completion of the hardship our industry has endured and stands as a testament to the resilience of our tourism and our people. Today, we all stand together, ready to embark on a new journey to chart the future of tourism.

6. In preparation for the journey, we have made some significant improvements to how tourism works and is supported. We now have an established Ministry of Tourism that is now responsible for managing and regulating tourism activities, developing tourism policies, overseeing tourism infrastructure development, and managing festivals and events. Many of these functions were previously housed in the Tourist Board. The separation of tourism management from tourism promotion now allows the BVI Tourist Board to focus on its core responsibility of marketing the destination and ensuring a quality experience for our visitors, whilst the Ministry lead Government's support for the industry. This new structure will soon be placed in legislation in the form of the Tourism Bill for the Ministry of Tourism and the Festival and Events Bill for festivals and events management. These changes provide the fit-for-purpose structure to support our vision for the future of tourism.

7.The future of tourism should be built on some key pillars, including the following:

- a. Sustainability: Our tourism industry must thrive in harmony with nature. Our pristine beaches, marine ecosystems, and lush landscapes must be safeguarded through sustainable practices and responsible tourism. The protection and preservation of our environment must be paramount.
- b. Cultural Integration: We must integrate our history, festivals, music, cuisine, and arts into the tourism experience and offer visitors an authentic and immersive experience. The Virgin Islands has a rich and diverse cultural heritage that must be showcased to the world.
- c. Economic Empowerment: We must ensure that the benefits of tourism are felt across all sectors of society. Our tourism policy will prioritise creating economic opportunities for local small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- d. Enabling environment: We will foster a more business-friendly environment and ease doing business in the Virgin Islands to encourage both local and foreign investment and facilitate your interactions with the Government.
- e. Partnerships: As I mentioned before, we will embrace the power, a model we are familiar with and know how to make it work. We will look to you in the private sector for your ideas, innovation, creativity, and advice.

8.The National Tourism Policy will focus on those areas where the Government can catalyse change and facilitate growth. Let me share some of what the Government wants to see as we seek to create a vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive tourism industry that benefits all our people.

9.We will use A National Tourism Policy and Plan to guide the development of tourism through a National Tourism Policy and a National Tourism Plan. We expect that by June of 2025, we would have an approved National Tourism Policy, inclusive of wide public consultation, Cabinet and House of Assembly approval.

10.We will deliver a unique, authentic and high-quality visitor experience supported by fit for purpose tourism infrastructure to increase the spread of visitors to maximise the experience of each sub sector without degrading the

experience of any sub-sector.

11. We will provide a level of service to raise the standard and quality of service that will enhance the visitor experience and incentivize visitors to return and recommend BVI. This must be supported by training that is mandatory for everyone engaging in services to the public.

12. We will Create a diverse experience and authentic Virgin Island experience with the development of key historical, heritage and cultural assets with tourism to add value to the experience. This entails working in partnership with landowners with tourism assets through Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) arrangements where both the industry and land owners benefit equally.

13. We will use Technology to Engage Visitors before, during and after arrival to ease their entry to the Territory, enhance marketing, increase visitor spend, get visitor feedback on their experience, build loyalty and increase overall yield per visitor.

14. We will Establish a National Clean and Green Environment (CEG) Branded programme to promote a clean and green lifestyle. This is a branded programme complete with its own media, education programme, incentives and specific action plans to promote recycling, reuse, reduction and other waste management initiatives geared to residents and visitors, as well as an ongoing national clean up programme. A green lifestyle aligns strongly with the BVI demographic.

15. We will Establish a Tourism Investment Programme for Micro Enterprises (TIP ME). This will provide avenues for the people to monetise the culture and provide the authentic experiences to enhance the visitor experience. Also known as community tourism, this will bring BVI history and culture alive.

16. We will Align BVI Tourism Branding with other BVI Promotional Branding. For the most part on the average, the demographic and lifestyle of persons who visit, do business, invest, partially live, register assets such as planes and vessels and are friends of the BVI are fairly similar. By aligning the branding, you leverage marketing and promotional resources and offer a greater value proposition. Each sector's positioning and brand equity is preserved and leveraged under the

common national branding platform.

17. We will Establish a Tourism Apprenticeship Programme (TAP) for experiential learning to increase skill development, standards and earning potential of hospitality employees. This can be done locally to introduce students to hospitality and have employees experience different environments locally. Using the resources of its international brands, contacts and friends, employees can experience different environments internationally to better appreciate different standards.

18. We will Embrace the Tourism Shared Economy. AirBnb is the model for tourist shared economy in accommodation and allows all persons to engage in and benefit from tourism. In order to maintain the destination standard associated with the BVI tourism brand, there needs to be regulation of this sector with standards and encouragement for expansion within those standards only. There also needs to be bridges built between traditional accommodation and

shared economy accommodations as they cater to different markets and there is room for both. Standards need to include construction standards for which there should be assistance provided in the design phase and access to financial resources for the building phase.

19. We will aggressively Re-Build the Charter Yacht Sector and Align the overall Recreational Vessel Sector with Ship Registration. The actions required to get the charter yacht sector back on track have already been identified and agreed and includes changes to legislation, policies, procedures and rules. These should be put in place without haste. The legislative and policy issues to allow the inventory of vessels operating in the BVI to be placed on the BVI Ship Registry should be put in place immediately.

20. We will tightly Align Agriculture and Fisheries with Tourism to increase local Economic activity from Tourism. National plans for agriculture and fisheries should include separate plans for the national population and the visitor population. The visitor population plan should be developed in partnership with the hospitality sector to identify a specifically demanded basket of products

to ensure a consistent supply at an established standard on a specific schedule. This alignment

strategy can be applied to other key supply chain items.

21. We must work on taking care of the environment together. Without it, there is no tourism in the Virgin Islands. It is our most powerful unique selling proposition. It is our value proposition. We will encourage eco-friendly practices, will expand marine protected areas and strengthen regulations to prevent overfishing and pollution, **we will** develop a certification program that sets benchmarks for sustainability in the tourism sector, we will invest in modern waste management systems, including recycling initiatives and waste-to-energy projects, to minimize the environmental impact of increased tourism, we will work with conservation organizations to protect these ecosystems through reforestation efforts, erosion control measures, and the preservation of wildlife habitats, effective beach management is crucial to preserving these iconic landscapes, ensuring public access, and maintaining the environmental integrity of coastal areas and we will encourage partnerships with local businesses and NGOs to support beach maintenance and improvement efforts while ensuring local communities participate in beach management initiatives through advisory committees and volunteer programs.

There are many other points I can share, but I will stop there and allow you to add your thoughts and ideas. I look forward to further consultations and to your valued input.

In conclusion, let me express my deep gratitude for the response we have received from the industry. Your presence here today is a signal to me and my ministers that you are committed to creating a tourism sector that will deliver the prosperity and sustainability for the Virgin Islands. We are prepared to facilitate your participation and build a strong partnership where we work together in the best interest of the Virgin Islands.