



# Proceedings of the Two-Day Tourism Summit



GOVERNMENT OF THE  
**VIRGIN ISLANDS**  
Ministry of Tourism, Culture  
and Sustainable Development



**BVI YACHTING HOTEL & TOURISM  
ASSOCIATION**

## *Executive Summary*

- 5 The Virgin Islands Tourism Summit, held at Peter Island Resort, served as a pivotal forum for shaping the future of the British Virgin Islands' (BVI) tourism industry. Hosted by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development, the two-day event brought together key stakeholders, including government officials, tourism professionals, business leaders, and international experts, to discuss strategies for sustainable tourism development.
- 10 Key themes emerging from the summit included the importance of sustainability, cultural integration, economic empowerment, public-private collaboration, and infrastructure enhancement. Stakeholders underscored the need for a well-defined national tourism policy that aligns with the region's unique attributes and long-term vision.

Notable highlights from the summit included:

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- Strategic Policy Commitments: Premier Hon. Dr. Natalio Wheatley outlined the government's commitment to finalizing the National Tourism Policy by June 2025, emphasising sustainability, local economic opportunities, and sectoral diversification.
  - Economic and Industry Resilience: The BVI's tourism sector has rebounded strongly, with 2024 marking the second-highest visitor numbers in history. The government pledged legislative
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- reforms and strategic partnerships to support tourism growth.
  - Infrastructure and Accessibility: Discussions focused on airport expansion, ferry system improvements, and seaport upgrades, aiming to enhance visitor experiences and connectivity.
  - Sustainability and Environment: The summit highlighted the underutilization of the \$15 million Environmental Levy Fund and called for stakeholder input in guiding its effective use. Stronger
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- environmental protection measures, including waste management, reforestation, and marine ecosystem preservation, were prioritized.
  - Cultural and Experiential Tourism: Experts, including CTO Secretary General Donna Regis Prosper, emphasised the integration of culture, heritage, and local entrepreneurship into the tourism experience.
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- Workforce Development and Service Standards: Keynote speaker Bill Freeman and Panellists stressed the critical role of training, customer service excellence, and hospitality education to elevate the BVI as a premier luxury destination.

- The summit concluded with a call to action for collaborative governance, data-driven decision-making, and continuous stakeholder engagement to ensure sustainable, high-value tourism growth. The discussions
- 35 and recommendations made at the summit will inform upcoming policy frameworks, legislative initiatives, and investment strategies, ensuring that tourism remains a driver of economic prosperity and cultural preservation in the Virgin Islands.

## *Introduction*

40 The Virgin Islands Tourism Summit 2025, hosted at Peter Island Resort, convened government officials, tourism professionals, and private sector representatives for a focused dialogue on the future of the BVI tourism industry. This inaugural event was designed to assess challenges, identify opportunities, and chart a sustainable path forward for the territory's tourism sector.

45 The summit was formally opened by Permanent Secretary Joseph Smith-Abbott, who highlighted the collaborative foundation upon which this gathering was built. He noted that the event's discussions would build upon the OECS Regional Tourism Policy consultations of early 2024, which included contributions from over 70 stakeholders. His remarks were followed by Sharon Flax-Brutus, Interim Executive Director of the BVI Yachting, Hotel, and Tourism Association, who urged participants to use the summit as a platform for meaningful action, rather than a routine gathering.

50 The Chairperson of the BVI Tourist Board, Delma Maduro, commended the summit's organizers and attendees, recognizing the event's importance in shaping the future of tourism in the Virgin Islands. She acknowledged recent successes and growth in the sector but stressed the necessity of sustainable development and expanding untapped opportunities. Maduro also highlighted the role of public-private partnerships in enhancing tourism experiences and reinforcing the balance between overnight and cruise tourism, ensuring that the BVI retains its status as a world-class destination.

55 Junior Minister for Tourism, Hon. Luce Hodge-Smith, further emphasised the territory's legacy of tourism excellence and the need for innovation. Reflecting on the visionary leadership of past pioneers, she underscored the importance of environmental conservation and community engagement in protecting the Virgin Islands' natural assets. Hon. Hodge-Smith called for the adoption of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to improve operational efficiency and visitor experiences. She also stressed the need  
60 for capacity-building initiatives, ensuring that local talent is nurtured and equipped to thrive in the evolving global tourism landscape.

Premier and Minister of Tourism, Hon. Dr. Natalio Wheatley, set the tone for the discussions with an in-depth opening address, in which he articulated the government's vision for a more structured, resilient, and inclusive tourism industry. His speech underscored five key policy pillars for tourism:

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1. Sustainability – Protecting natural assets while expanding eco-tourism opportunities.
  2. Cultural Integration – Showcasing the Virgin Islands' history, traditions, and cuisine.
  3. Economic Empowerment – Ensuring local entrepreneurs and small businesses benefit from tourism.
  4. Enabling Environment – Streamlining business operations and regulatory processes.

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  5. Partnerships – Strengthening collaborations between the public and private sectors.

Additionally, the Premier reaffirmed the government's commitment to finalizing a comprehensive tourism policy by June 2025, ensuring alignment between sustainability, infrastructure development, and market diversification.

75 Throughout the two-day summit, stakeholders examined critical topics such as strategic investments, legislative reforms, transportation infrastructure, environmental conservation, visitor experience, and workforce development. The event also featured a keynote address by Donna Regis Prosper, Secretary General of the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO), who reinforced the importance of strategic partnerships, people-centred tourism, and regional competitiveness.

## **Day 1**

### **80 Formal Welcome to the 2025 Tourism Summit**

Joseph Smith-Abbott, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development, delivers an official welcome address. He acknowledges key stakeholders, including government officials, tourism partners, and organizations like the BVI Tourist Board, Yachting, Hotel, and Tourism Association, and the Caribbean Tourism Organization.

85 Smith-Abbott highlights the collaborative efforts behind the summit and underscores its importance in shaping a robust national tourism policy. This initiative builds on consultations from early 2024, during which over 70 stakeholders contributed to the OECS regional tourism policy. He emphasises the need for shared insights and expertise to develop a strategy reflective of the Virgin Islands' unique characteristics and opportunities.

### **90 Call to Action for Stakeholders**

Sharon Flax-Brutus, Interim Executive Director of the BVI Yachting, Hotel, and Tourism Association, takes the stage, expressing optimism for 2025 and congratulating local establishments on recent accolades. She emphasises the association's role in bridging public and private stakeholders to advance tourism. Flax-Brutus urges attendees to view the summit not as a routine event but as a catalyst for meaningful change.

### **Addressing Challenges in the Tourism Sector**

Flax-Brutus candidly addresses challenges in the BVI tourism industry, including lagging growth compared to regional competitors and a lack of strategic collaboration. She stresses the need for improved communication and inclusion, particularly in tourism leadership and policymaking.

100 Flax-Brutus warns against complacency, advocating for renewed focus on tourism management fundamentals to maintain the BVI's unique positioning as a boutique luxury destination.

She calls for honest and constructive dialogue during the summit, urging stakeholders to prioritize effective solutions. Rebranding efforts for the BVI are underway, and she stresses the importance of stakeholder input in reshaping the territory's image. Infrastructure development, attraction diversification, and the review of park fees are identified as pressing issues that require immediate attention.

### **Identifying Key Challenges and Opportunities**

Sharon Flax-Brutus continues to address the critical challenges and opportunities facing the BVI tourism sector. She highlights the importance of collaboration in addressing issues such as climate change, infrastructure, sustainability, and the guest experience. Flax-Brutus specifically raises concerns about the underutilization of the Environmental Levy Fund, valued at over \$15 million, calling for greater industry stakeholder input in its use.

She emphasises enhancing the guest journey from arrival to departure, prioritizing sustainability to preserve the BVI's natural beauty, and improving infrastructure, such as airport expansions and

115 ferry systems. Training and development of local talent are also highlighted, as Flax-Brutus calls for greater support for BVI natives in leadership roles. The speech concludes with a call to action for making tangible changes, underscoring that the outcomes of this summit must extend beyond discussion to create lasting impact.

### **Welcome Address by Delma Maduro**

120 Delma Maduro, Chair of the BVI Tourist Board, commends the organizers and attendees of the summit, recognizing its significance in shaping the future of tourism in the Virgin Islands. She celebrates recent successes and statistics indicating growth but stresses the importance of sustainable development and exploring untapped opportunities. Maduro underscores the role of partnerships in crafting meaningful tourism experiences and strategies.

125 She highlights the diverse contributions of stakeholders—ranging from villa operators to yacht charter companies—and urges attendees to engage actively in discussions over the summit’s duration. Maduro also emphasises the need for policies supporting eco-friendly practices, preserving the natural environment, and balancing overnight and cruise tourism to sustain the BVI’s reputation as a world-class destination.

### **Remarks by Junior Minister for Tourism, Hon. Luce Hodge-Smith**

Junior Minister for Tourism, Hon. Luce Hodge-Smith, delivers a heartfelt welcome to attendees. Reflecting on the Virgin Islands’ tourism journey, she acknowledges the visionary contributions of past pioneers who elevated the BVI to international recognition. Hodge-Smith emphasises the importance of environmental conservation and community involvement to protect the territory’s  
135 natural assets.

Honourable Hodge-Smith calls for innovation, including embracing modern technologies like artificial intelligence, to improve operational efficiency and visitor satisfaction. Additionally, highlights the necessity of capacity building through education and training to prepare locals for the global tourism market. Recognizing the economic significance of tourism, she stresses that  
140 every resident plays a role as an ambassador for the Virgin Islands. The minister concludes by encouraging attendees to contribute actively during the summit, with the shared vision of advancing a sustainable and prosperous future for BVI tourism.

### **Opening Address by the Premier and Minister of Tourism**

The Premier and Minister of Tourism, Hon. Dr. Natalio Wheatley, welcomes attendees to the  
145 inaugural Virgin Islands Tourism Summit, emphasising its role in shaping the future of tourism in the BVI. He acknowledges key stakeholders, including cabinet members, invited guests, and private sector representatives, highlighting their contributions to the territory’s tourism sector. He recognizes Mr. Russell Harrigan for proposing the summit and praises Peter Island Resort as a symbolic venue, representing resilience and recovery following its reconstruction post-  
150 Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

The Premier describes the summit as part of a broader conversation to develop a shared vision for tourism. He underscores the importance of creating a robust tourism policy that will guide a

comprehensive national tourism plan, ensuring inclusivity by engaging residents through consultations across the Virgin Islands.

## 155 **Reflections on Resilience and Vision for Tourism**

Premier Wheatley reflects on the Virgin Islands' resilience during the challenging years from 2017 to 2024, which he compares to "seven years of famine," and expresses optimism for the future, dubbing 2025 the start of "seven years of plenty." He celebrates the tourism sector's recovery, noting that 2024 saw the second-highest visitor numbers in the territory's history.

160 The Premier highlights the establishment of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development as a pivotal restructuring that separates tourism management from promotion, enabling the Tourist Board to focus on marketing while the Ministry oversees policy, infrastructure, and event management. He credits Sharon Flax-Brutus for advocating the creation of the Ministry and announces plans for legislative changes, including a tourism bill and a festival and events bill, to formalize this framework.

## **Key Pillars of the National Tourism Policy**

The Premier outlines the foundational pillars of the national tourism policy:

**Sustainability:** Emphasising harmony between tourism and the environment, with initiatives to protect beaches, marine ecosystems, and landscapes.

170 **Cultural Integration:** Incorporating local history, festivals, and cuisine into the visitor experience for authenticity.

**Economic Empowerment:** Prioritizing opportunities for small businesses and local entrepreneurs.

**Enabling Environment:** Streamlining business operations to attract investment and foster growth.

175 **Partnerships:** Strengthening public-private collaboration, leveraging private sector innovation and creativity.

He announces plans to finalise the national tourism policy by June 2025, following wide public consultations and approvals from the Cabinet and House of Assembly. The policy aims to enhance visitor experiences, improve service standards, and maximize the economic impact of tourism while preserving the unique offerings of each sector.

## 180 **Strategic Initiatives and Programs**

The Premier details specific initiatives to support the policy:

**Technology Integration:** Using digital tools to enhance marketing, visitor engagement, and feedback.

**Environmental Programs:** Launching a branded "Clean and Green Environment" program to promote sustainability through education, recycling, and national cleanup efforts.

185 **Community Tourism:** Encouraging local communities to monetize cultural and historical assets for tourism.

**Shared Branding:** Aligning tourism branding with other BVI sectors to create a unified national identity.

**Apprenticeship Programs:** Partnering with H. Lavity Stoutt Community College to develop hospitality skills locally and internationally.

190 **Tourism Shared Economy:** Encouraging regulated growth in sectors like Airbnb to diversify offerings and maintain quality standards.

### **Embracing Innovation and Collaboration**

The Premier concludes by emphasising the need for innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity to drive sustainable tourism development. He reiterates the government's commitment to facilitating growth while ensuring that tourism benefits all sectors of society.

### **Addressing Shared Economy Accommodations and Charter Yacht Sector**

The Premier emphasises the importance of creating bridges between traditional accommodations and shared economy options, ensuring they cater to different markets while maintaining high standards. Assistance during design and construction phases, as well as access to financial resources, is identified as crucial. He highlights efforts to revitalize the charter yacht sector, including legislative and policy changes, such as the integration of recreational vessel inventory into the BVI ship registry. Collaboration with the charter yacht industry is acknowledged as key to progress.

### **Aligning Agriculture and Fisheries with Tourism**

205 A strategy to align agriculture and fisheries with tourism is introduced to boost local economic activity. Separate plans are proposed for meeting the needs of the local and visitor populations, developed in collaboration with the hospitality sector. This includes creating a demand-specific supply chain to ensure consistency, standards, and timely delivery. The Junior Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries is identified as the leader for this initiative.

### **Environmental Sustainability and Preservation**

The Premier stresses that the BVI's environment is its strongest asset, underscoring the necessity of eco-friendly practices and stronger environmental regulations. Initiatives include expanding marine protected areas, establishing sustainability benchmarks, and investing in modern waste management systems. Collaborative efforts with conservation organizations are also emphasised to ensure effective reforestation, erosion control, and wildlife preservation. Beach management is identified as a key area requiring public access, environmental protection, and local community involvement.

### **Infrastructure Development and Transportation Improvements**

220 Acknowledging the need for enhanced transportation, the Premier highlights achievements such as six direct flights on American Eagle and ongoing collaborations with other airlines like Caribbean Airlines and LIAT 2020. Plans for extending the airport runway are being developed

to further improve accessibility. The Premier assures attendees of the government's commitment to providing a seamless and enjoyable travel experience.

### **Acknowledgment of Industry Contributions and Summit Objectives**

225 The Premier expresses gratitude to the tourism industry for its commitment to the Virgin Islands' prosperity. He recognizes Sasha Flax for her integral role in organizing the summit and leading tourism efforts within the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development. The Premier concludes with a call to action for constructive dialogue and collaboration, emphasising that the summit aims to establish a shared vision for the future of Virgin Islands tourism.

### **230 Concerns from the Ferry Industry**

During the Q&A session, a representative of the ferry industry raises concerns about the lack of attention to seaport infrastructure and passenger experience, pointing to dilapidated docks and environmental issues. The Premier acknowledges these concerns, citing ongoing investments such as a \$16 million budget for the Western Ferry Terminal and plans for improvements at other ports. He reassures attendees that these initiatives aim to enhance both infrastructure and visitor experience.

The representative also highlights high costs for ferry operations in the BVI compared to the U.S. Virgin Islands, including fuel expenses and registration fees. She stresses the need for greater industry consultation and government support to address these challenges. The Premier responds by reiterating the government's commitment to solving these issues progressively and invites further collaboration.

### **Sports Tourism and Economic Diversification**

245 Dawn Herbert of the BVI Athletic Association raises the potential of sports tourism as an economic driver. She shares challenges related to accommodation and direct flights but highlights growing interest from international stakeholders in hosting events in the Virgin Islands. She emphasises the importance of upgrading local facilities, such as the AO Shirley Ground, to attract international events by 2026.

250 The Premier welcomes her input, acknowledging the need to diversify the tourism product and integrate sports into the broader tourism strategy. He assures attendees that the government is considering innovative approaches to expand tourism offerings and maximize economic opportunities.

### **Diverse Opportunities in Tourism: Emphasising Sports Tourism**

255 The Premier reiterates his belief that the Virgin Islands' tourism should embrace diverse offerings, including sports tourism. He acknowledges ongoing efforts to improve infrastructure for sports, such as the Greenland Field and the A.O. Shirley Recreation Ground, supported by international organizations like FIFA. He emphasises the government's commitment to supporting businesses and events that cater to the growing demand for varied tourism experiences, including sports, cultural activities, and culinary events like the Caribbean Baking Awards and the Food Fete.

260 The Premier highlights the shift in travel preferences, noting that visitors are increasingly seeking diverse experiences beyond the traditional “sun, sea, and sand,” positioning sports tourism as a critical growth area for the BVI.

### **Balancing Cruise Tourism with Other Sectors**

265 A question about balancing cruise tourism with overnight and yachting sectors sparks discussion about overcrowding and environmental degradation caused by cruise passengers. The Premier acknowledges the economic importance of cruise tourism, which supports livelihoods for taxi operators, vendors, and port revenues. However, he also recognizes the challenges posed by overcrowding at popular sites like Cane Garden Bay and The Baths.

270 To address these issues, the government plans to diversify attractions, replicate initiatives like the beach management plan at Long Bay, and invest in infrastructure at other beaches such as Brewers’ Bay. Diversifying destinations for cruise passengers is essential to maintaining a balance between environmental protection and tourism growth.

275 The issue of applying the environmental levy to cruise passengers is raised, highlighting the potential to generate significant funds for sustainability initiatives. The Premier notes that such a levy could discourage cruise tourism but agrees to further explore this possibility in collaboration with relevant ministries and stakeholders.

### **Carrying Capacity and Sustainable Tourism**

280 A participant raises concerns about the carrying capacity of the BVI’s limited landmass for both tourists and residents. The Premier acknowledges the need to revisit carrying capacity studies, which examine environmental and infrastructural limits, such as sewage, water, and electricity systems. He mentions a recent \$100 million loan to enhance infrastructure and the importance of population studies to address these challenges holistically.

### **Inclusive Marketing and Diversity in Tourism**

285 The discussion shifts to the need for more inclusive marketing strategies that accurately reflect the multi-ethnic and diverse makeup of the BVI community. A participant criticizes past campaigns for promoting a narrow image of the ideal tourist or local representative, calling for a broader representation of races and ethnicities in marketing materials. The Premier agrees, emphasising the importance of welcoming all visitors, regardless of ethnicity, and diversifying tourism markets to enhance resilience and appeal.

290 He also highlights opportunities to attract high-spending tourists from new markets, such as Asia, as part of broader efforts to diversify and strengthen the tourism product.

### **Closing Remarks and Open Discussions**

295 The Premier concludes by acknowledging the importance of addressing long-standing challenges and fostering an open dialogue about the future of BVI tourism. He recognizes that discussions about tourism strategies, including marketing and branding, are ongoing and emphasises the need for collaboration among stakeholders to refine these approaches.

He expresses gratitude to the participants for their contributions and reaffirms the government's commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive, and sustainable tourism industry. The session ends with a promise to continue addressing key issues raised during the summit and a call to action for attendees to stay engaged in shaping the Virgin Islands' tourism future.

## 300 **Appreciation and Rebranding Discussions**

The session resumes with expressions of gratitude to the Government of the Virgin Islands and partnering organizations for organizing the summit. A brief discussion follows about the implications of rebranding the territory's tourism identity, specifically regarding the distinction between "Virgin Islands" and "British Virgin Islands." A participant observes that the "British" designation aids in global recognition and queries whether resources should be invested in rebranding efforts to achieve similar visibility under a different name. This topic is left open for further deliberation.

## **Sequential Approach to Policies and Initiatives**

A participant inquires whether the government has a prioritized or sequential approach to implementing the various policies and initiatives outlined by the Premier. The question underscores the resource-intensive nature of such efforts and seeks clarity on the government's top three priorities. This query is noted for follow-up, as the discussion transitions to the keynote address.

## 315 ***Keynote Address by Donna Regis Prosper: Strategic Partnerships for Sustainable Caribbean Tourism***

### **Introduction and Context**

Donna Regis Prosper, Secretary General of the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO), delivers the keynote address, emphasising the critical role of strategic partnerships in driving sustainable tourism across the Caribbean. Drawing from her extensive experience in the tourism sector, she highlights the significance of collaboration and innovation in navigating the challenges faced by the region.

Regis Prosper acknowledges the Virgin Islands' resilience and vibrancy, reflecting on her time living and working in the territory. She lauds the summit's focus on sustainability, aligning it with CTO's framework of the "Five P's of Sustainable Tourism"—Purpose, Planet, People, Partnership, and Prosperity. She emphasises that partnerships lie at the heart of achieving a sustainable and restorative tourism future.

### **Rethinking Caribbean Tourism**

The Secretary General challenges the audience to consider whether the region's natural beauty alone is sufficient to sustain its tourism sector. She stresses the need for strategic development to create innovative, resilient tourism models. CTO's current priorities include advocacy, market intelligence, competitiveness, people development, and regenerative tourism.

### **Key Strategies for Sustainable Tourism**

**Strategic Regional Partnerships:** Public-private sector collaborations are essential to pooling resources, sharing expertise, and addressing challenges like sustainable infrastructure, waste management, and eco-friendly technologies. CTO exemplifies the power of partnerships by coordinating efforts across 25 member countries and 65 private-sector organizations.

**Community-Centric Product Development:** Empowering local communities is vital for sustainable tourism. By engaging residents, artisans, and cultural organizations, the region can develop authentic tourism experiences that retain revenue locally. Regis Prosper highlights CTO's "Community-Based Toolkit," which provides practical guidance for fostering partnerships with local communities and ensuring that tourism benefits are equitably distributed.

**International Knowledge Sharing and Innovation:** Collaborating with global institutions, NGOs, and universities allows Caribbean nations to access cutting-edge technologies and solutions to challenges like climate change and resource constraints. Partnerships with entities like UN Tourism and George Washington University facilitate knowledge sharing and the adoption of best practices.

**People Development:** Recognizing people as the cornerstone of tourism, Regis Prosper underscores the importance of training and education. The CTO, in partnership with the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA), has developed 192 courses on topics ranging from sustainable tourism to customer service, aiming to equip tourism professionals with the skills needed to meet evolving industry demands.

### **Training, Youth Engagement, and Next-Generation Tourism Development**

Donna Regis Prosper highlights CTO's commitment to training and education in the tourism sector. The organization has launched an online learning platform offering instructor-led and self-paced courses, emphasising skill enhancement to improve visitor experiences. Recognizing that many young people do not initially view tourism as a viable career path, CTO has developed e-books for primary school students to foster early interest. A 2025 training calendar is also set to be released, aiming to expand opportunities for professional development in the region.

Regis Prosper emphasises the need to adapt to evolving travel preferences, noting that travellers now prioritize health and safety post-pandemic, sustainability, technological innovation, and experiential travel. She cites regional resilience in the tourism industry, with strong post-pandemic recovery trends and a growing willingness among travellers to pay premiums for sustainable and adventurous experiences. The CTO is exploring regenerative tourism, which focuses on restoring and improving ecosystems and communities.

### **Regional Trends Shaping Tourism**

**Post-Pandemic Tourism and Health:** While the Caribbean has shown resilience, the focus remains on health and safety measures, including hygiene standards and contactless travel, which are increasingly important to travellers.

**Sustainability and Regenerative Tourism:** Travellers are willing to pay more for sustainable and adventure tourism experiences, with 41% of them prepared to pay over 30% extra for eco-

friendly options. The CTO advocates for regenerative tourism practices that enhance both ecosystems and communities.

**Technology and Innovation:** Digital transformation is reshaping tourism, with technologies such as contactless check-ins, smart infrastructure, and mobile apps enhancing the visitor experience. Social media is recognized as a tool for personalizing and promoting authentic travel experiences.

**Experiential Travel:** Travellers now seek deeper connections with destinations through cultural immersion, learning local skills, and engaging with authentic experiences. The Caribbean is uniquely positioned to meet this demand through its cultural diversity and natural beauty.

### **Emphasis on Collaboration and Inclusivity in Tourism Development**

Regis Prosper addresses questions on expanding regional ferry connectivity and promoting farm-to-table tourism. She highlights the Virgin Islands' well-developed ferry model as a strong foundation for marine connectivity in the Caribbean. Expanding this base could enable multi-destination travel and facilitate authentic, organic experiences across islands.

She underscores the importance of collaboration between governments, private entities, and communities. Initiatives like farm-to-table experiences represent a lucrative niche market, particularly for eco-conscious travellers. These authentic experiences offer a unique competitive edge for the Caribbean and align with growing global tourism trends.

### **Final Reflections and Key Takeaways**

Regis Prosper closes by encouraging attendees to leverage opportunities for multi-destination travel and authentic, immersive experiences. She reaffirms that the Caribbean's strength lies in its people, whose natural warmth and hospitality are unmatched globally. Collaboration, inclusivity, and strategic planning are essential to ensuring the region's tourism industry remains resilient, competitive, and sustainable.

She urges stakeholders to view summits like this not as mere talk shops but as platforms for generating transformative ideas. By embracing partnerships, technological advancements, and sustainable practices, the Virgin Islands and the broader Caribbean can position themselves as the world's most desirable and responsible tourism destinations.

### **Regional Collaboration and Crime in Tourism**

Donna Regis Prosper addresses the need for regional collaboration on issues such as establishing a unified head tax for cruise passengers. While acknowledging its potential benefits, she notes the complexity due to varied taxation policies across Caribbean nations and the significant political will required for such a unified approach.

On crime, Prosper emphasises the importance of tackling it holistically. She advocates for community-based tourism and providing meaningful employment opportunities to mitigate crime. Tourism, she explains, can be a solution by engaging local communities, creating jobs, and fostering an environment that reduces the socio-economic factors contributing to criminal activity.

## **Financial Services and Cashless Transactions**

410 A discussion on cashless transactions highlights their importance in modernizing the tourism sector. Prosper mentions ongoing efforts by the Caribbean Finance Association to provide financial education and improve systems for cashless transactions. These initiatives aim to enhance compliance and convenience while aligning with global tourism trends.

## **Resilience to Climate Challenges and the Hurricane Season**

415 The CTO's focus on resilience is reiterated as climate change exacerbates the frequency and severity of hurricanes. Prosper underscores the need for disaster-resilient infrastructure, including stricter building codes and incentives for compliance. She also stresses the importance of timely and accurate messaging during hurricane disruptions to ensure the affected islands receive support while unaffected destinations continue to attract visitors.

420 Education plays a crucial role in preparing communities to face these challenges, and the CTO provides resources to build capacity and awareness. Prosper also highlights examples of collaborative recovery efforts in hurricane-affected areas, demonstrating the strength of regional partnerships.

## **Panel Discussion: Balancing Growth and Sustainability in Tourism**

425 The panel explores the intersection of tourism growth and sustainability, with key concerns including:

**Resource Management:** Panellists stress the urgent need to address water and energy consumption, especially given the increased demand from visitors and the local population.

430 **Pollution:** Both marine and land pollution are highlighted as significant issues. The lack of a robust recycling program in the Virgin Islands and broader Caribbean exacerbates the problem. Panellists advocate for systematic waste management practices, including separating compost, recyclables, and general waste.

**Yachting and Marine Impacts:** The high volume of visiting yachts poses risks to marine ecosystems. Concerns include waste discharge and the environmental degradation caused by anchoring in sensitive areas. Panellists call for better regulations and enforcement to mitigate these impacts.

## **435 Closing Reflections on Sustainability and Tourism's Future**

The session ends with a focus on actionable strategies to harmonize tourism growth with environmental conservation. Stakeholders are encouraged to adopt long-term, sustainable practices, emphasising the need for inclusive collaboration across sectors and communities.

## **Environmental Protection and Sustainable Tourism**

440 Participants emphasise the critical need to safeguard the natural environment, which forms the backbone of the BVI's tourism industry. They highlight that destruction of natural resources would lead to long-term consequences for the territory's appeal and sustainability. The discussion calls for collective responsibility to preserve these vital assets.

## **Addressing Infrastructure and Overcrowding**

445 Concerns are raised about the strain on infrastructure caused by overcrowding, particularly in popular tourist destinations like Cane Garden Bay. The capacity to manage increased visitor numbers is questioned, with speakers stressing the need for comprehensive infrastructure development to support sustainable tourism growth. A proper understanding of the territory's carrying capacity is seen as essential to maintaining a high-quality guest experience.

## **450 Legislation and Enforcement Gaps**

Panellists agree that outdated or inadequate legislation hinders environmental protection and tourism management. Examples include the lack of effective regulations for anchoring, public facilities, and waste management. While stronger legislation is necessary, they argue that enforcement mechanisms must be robust and efficient. There is a consensus that collaboration  
455 between government and stakeholders is critical for successful implementation and enforcement.

## **Funding and Fees for Environmental and Tourism Resources**

The discussion highlights the underfunding of entities like the National Parks Trust, which oversees critical tourism infrastructure but lacks resources due to inefficiencies in fee collection and allocation of the environmental levy. Participants argue for increasing user fees for national  
460 parks and other attractions to ensure these sites can be properly maintained and managed. They note that visitors are often willing to pay for high-quality experiences, and the current fees are too low to cover operational costs.

## **Strengthening Legal Protections and Stakeholder Consultation**

The conversation turns to the importance of stakeholder consultation in crafting effective  
465 legislation. Without adequate input from practitioners and industry professionals, laws risk being impractical or overly burdensome. Collaboration is emphasised as a means of ensuring that regulations protect the environment while supporting the sector's growth.

## **Trust and Collaboration Between Government and the Private Sector**

Participants discuss the relationship between the government and the private sector, emphasising  
470 the need for government to act as a facilitator rather than a controller. By supporting private initiatives and fostering an environment conducive to business growth, the government can better encourage investment in sustainable tourism practices.

## **Outdated Systems and Human Resource Challenges**

Participants critique inefficiencies in labour and immigration processes, noting delays in  
475 obtaining work permits and cumbersome requirements that waste time. They highlight that these outdated systems impede business operations. Education is also identified as a cornerstone of sustainability, with a glaring lack of interest in tourism-related studies among local students. For instance, only one student enrolled in hospitality management despite tourism being a primary economic pillar.

## 480 **The Role of Education in Tourism Sustainability**

Education is emphasised as vital for fostering sustainable tourism. Institutions like the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (HLSCC) are seen as key to equipping locals with skills for tourism-related jobs. Stakeholders are challenged to collaborate with educational institutions to design relevant curriculums that align with industry needs, ensuring the local workforce is prepared to meet the demands of the tourism sector.

### **Workforce Limitations and the Need for External Labor**

The small local population is highlighted as a major limitation in meeting the workforce demands of the BVI's economy. With only a fraction of the population eligible or able to work, external labour remains essential. However, there is a call for better preparation and development of local talent through initiatives like reintroducing civics education to foster national pride and engagement.

### **Challenges in Developing a Skilled Workforce**

The importance of practical skills, such as swimming for marine-based jobs, is underscored as critical for the tourism industry. The Acting Labor Commissioner speaks to the new Labour Management System, which aims to streamline the hiring process by requiring all individuals seeking jobs to register. Despite the system's potential, concerns remain about employers circumventing regulations and prioritizing non-local candidates.

### **Sustainability and Development Balance**

The discussion shifts to balancing sustainability with development. Education is reaffirmed as central to achieving this balance. Starting from primary school, students must be educated about the significance of tourism to the economy and the environment. The Ministry of Education is encouraged to integrate tourism-related learning into the curriculum to inspire early interest and commitment.

### **Economic Value of Ecosystems and Tourism**

The economic value of the BVI's ecosystems is highlighted, with the territory's beaches identified as the most critical feature, contributing \$197 million annually to the economy. Overcrowding and poor beach management are flagged as major threats, with studies showing that 40% of visitors would not return if beaches are overcrowded. Effective management and environmental protection are essential to sustaining tourism and encouraging return visits.

### 510 **Carrying Capacity Studies and Lessons for Tourism Management**

Carrying capacity studies, such as one conducted for the Baths, offer data-driven insights into sustainable tourism. The study revealed that the site's carrying capacity is 893 visitors at any given time. Revisiting and implementing such studies can prevent overcrowding and degradation, ensuring long-term sustainability.

### 515 **The Balance Between Growth and Sustainability**

The panel underscores the necessity of balancing growth with sustainability in the Virgin Islands, emphasising the significance of carrying capacity studies. For instance, the Baths can accommodate only 893 visitors at any given time, a figure rooted in research. The panel highlights that environmental degradation directly undermines tourism, a critical economic driver. Examples  
520 include the impact of indiscriminate land clearing, which causes sedimentation in marine environments, smothering reefs vital to the BVI's tourism appeal. There is also widespread concern about littering and poor waste management.

Panellists call for strategic development, suggesting that improving the value of tourism sectors, rather than sheer growth in numbers, is essential. This includes implementing carrying capacities  
525 across all tourism sectors, from charter boats to beach access, to protect natural resources and maintain the BVI's attractiveness.

### **Environmental and Social Accountability**

The discussion shifts to the importance of fostering an environmental ethic across all levels of society. Tourism businesses and individual stakeholders must align with environmental protection  
530 standards to ensure long-term sustainability. Panellists express the need for stronger regulations and comprehensive education to address environmental issues, including pollution and waste management, while emphasising that protecting the environment is a shared responsibility.

### **Lunch Break and Transition**

A brief interlude follows, during which attendees break for lunch. After the meal, the session  
535 resumes with an acknowledgment of the Peter Island staff for providing an excellent dining experience. The next session is introduced, focusing on the role of government in fostering tourism growth and diversification.

### **Introduction of Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace**

Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, a tourism expert and former Minister of Tourism for the Bahamas,  
540 is introduced as the next speaker. With extensive experience in Caribbean tourism and a personal connection to the Virgin Islands through his ancestry, Vanderpool-Wallace expresses his vested interest in the region's development. His presentation will focus on the government's role in creating an enabling environment for sustainable tourism and economic growth.

### **Tourism's Economic Impact and Misconceptions**

Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace begins by emphasising the substantial economic potential of  
545 tourism when managed effectively. Citing the Bahamas as an example, he notes that during a specific period, its GDP per capita exceeded even that of Singapore, thanks to a supportive government enabling environment. However, he highlights that tourism remains one of the most misunderstood, mismeasured, and mismanaged sectors globally. The reliance on simplistic  
550 metrics, like arrival numbers, often undermines a nuanced understanding of its economic impact. He advocates for a shift toward a more sophisticated, experience-driven approach to tourism development.

### **The Importance of the Visitor Experience**

555 Vanderpool-Wallace stresses the primacy of the visitor experience as the cornerstone of a successful tourism strategy. Unlike price cuts or marketing tactics, the visitor experience is unique and difficult for competitors to replicate. This shift aligns with global trends where travellers prioritize meaningful experiences over material possessions. He argues that tourism must be inclusive, benefiting and involving all community members to maximize its economic and social potential.

## 560 **Government's Role in Tourism Development**

He outlines the government's critical role in fostering tourism for four key reasons:

- **Foreign Exchange:** Tourism brings in the foreign exchange necessary for importing goods.
- **Employment:** It creates job opportunities across multiple sectors.
- **Income Distribution:** Tourism provides opportunities to spread economic benefits broadly.
- 565 • **Sustainability:** Effective management ensures the sector's longevity and resilience.

Vanderpool-Wallace asserts that tourism success depends on government policies that engage all stakeholders and create a vision to unify efforts. He highlights that tourism should be guided by a clear mission and that a coordinated community effort is crucial.

## **Building a Vision for Tourism**

570 Sharing insights from his time in the Bahamas, Vanderpool-Wallace describes how a unified vision can transform the tourism sector. A clearly articulated mission helps align the actions of individuals and organizations. For example, in the Bahamas, their vision emphasised satisfying experiences for residents, investors, and visitors. This approach required understanding local perspectives through surveys and adapting initiatives to address gaps.

575 He shares a striking example of transforming perceptions: initially, only 17% of parents wanted their children to pursue careers in tourism. With concerted efforts to educate and inspire communities about tourism's potential, this figure rose to 70% within a decade.

## **Engaging Youth and Changing Perceptions**

580 Vanderpool-Wallace recounts his efforts to engage high school students about tourism. Recognizing their initial disinterest, he abandoned the conventional script and instead shared personal insights, including his earnings as a senior executive in the tourism industry. By doing so, he aimed to demonstrate the tangible benefits of pursuing a career in the sector, thereby reshaping students' perceptions of tourism as a viable and rewarding career path.

## **Inspiring Youth Through Transparency and Opportunity**

585 Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace emphasises the importance of inspiring young people to pursue careers in tourism by being transparent about the benefits and opportunities the industry offers. He recounts how candid discussions about his own earnings and perks as a senior tourism executive captured the attention of previously disengaged students. Recognizing the need for relatable messaging, he highlights the value of running local commercials that illustrate tourism's

590 economic cycle in simple terms, showing how spending by visitors benefits the broader community.

### **The Importance of Everyone in Tourism**

He shares a story about an immigration officer whose thoughtful gesture to a visitor became a teaching moment. This example underscores the idea that everyone in the community plays a role  
595 in creating positive visitor experiences. To amplify this message, the story was transformed into a commercial, reinforcing the concept that tourism involves everyone, from frontline workers to behind-the-scenes contributors.

### **Lessons Learned and Challenges**

Vanderpool-Wallace reflects on some of the challenges encountered during his efforts to promote  
600 tourism. For example, an “adopt-a-school” initiative encouraging hotels to support local schools failed due to lack of engagement. Similarly, while tourism education was included in the school curriculum, it was undermined by teachers who did not view the sector as a viable career path for students. These setbacks highlighted the need for sustained efforts and continuity across different leaderships.

### **605 Measuring Tourism’s Economic Value**

He critiques the practice of equating all visitors in tourism metrics, such as counting cruise passengers and land-based visitors equally. This mismeasurement distorts the true economic value of different types of tourism. For example, land-based tourists generate a significantly greater economic impact due to their prolonged stays and higher spending. Vanderpool-Wallace  
610 advocates for a nuanced approach to measuring tourism that accounts for direct, indirect, and induced contributions to the economy.

### **The Role of Sustainability and Profitability**

Sustainability, according to Vanderpool-Wallace, must include profitability for tourism operators. Without financial success, the industry cannot sustain itself. He emphasises the need to listen to  
615 visitors’ feedback and engage local communities in developing shared business goals. Effective data collection and analysis can also guide strategic decisions and enhance sustainability.

### **The Importance of Data Utilization**

Highlighting the potential of data analytics, Vanderpool-Wallace notes that immigration and visitor records offer a wealth of untapped information. Using this data strategically can transform  
620 tourism management, identifying trends, and informing policy decisions. He shares examples of countries in the region that have successfully leveraged data to drive tourism growth and improve their offerings.

### **Embracing Technology While Preserving Human Interaction**

While acknowledging the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in personalizing  
625 visitor experiences, Vanderpool-Wallace emphasises that the human touch remains irreplaceable

in the tourism industry. The sector's reliance on personal interactions makes it uniquely resilient to technological disruptions, underscoring the continued importance of cultivating exceptional customer service.

### **Tourism as a Community Effort**

630 Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace emphasises that tourism relies on the entire community to deliver a cohesive visitor experience. He highlights the complexity of the tourism sector and the need for accurate measurement and management. Paraphrasing Einstein, he suggests that while some things are easy to measure, they may not truly matter, and vice versa.

### **The Need for a Re-Education Campaign on Tortola**

635 In response to a question about the differences in tourism friendliness between Tortola and its sister islands, Vanderpool-Wallace acknowledges the challenge of varying attitudes toward tourism within a multi-island territory. He stresses the importance of continuous and persistent messaging to cultivate a culture of hospitality. He shares innovative approaches, such as creating  
640 engaging daily broadcasts about tourism and incentivizing awareness through interactive campaigns. His key takeaway is that tourism behaviour should not only be about accommodating visitors but also about fostering better interactions within the community itself.

### **Making Tourism Appealing to Youth**

A participant discusses the importance of presenting tourism as an attractive career option to young people. Vanderpool-Wallace agrees, noting that glamorizing and showcasing success  
645 stories within the sector can inspire more youth to engage. He also advocates integrating tourism concepts into broader educational curricula to make them more relatable and impactful. By framing tourism-related scenarios in subjects like arithmetic or physics, students can connect real-world applications to their studies without feeling forced into a specific career path.

### **Telecommunications and Infrastructure Development**

650 Addressing a question about telecommunications infrastructure, Vanderpool-Wallace outlines the necessity of significant investment, even in less populated areas, to support tourism. Using the Bahamas as an example, he describes the challenge of providing high-quality services across dispersed islands. He emphasises that infrastructure improvements, including health care and  
655 education, are critical to encouraging people to stay in or relocate to underdeveloped areas, thereby fostering balanced economic growth.

### **The Role of Government in Laying Foundations**

A participant highlights the crucial role of government in building infrastructure and providing educational opportunities. They stress that investing in sectors such as engineering and construction is essential for equipping the next generation to support tourism and other industries.  
660 Without these foundational investments, expectations for future growth will remain unmet.

### **Infrastructure Challenges in Tourism**

665 A participant raises concerns about the lack of adequate infrastructure to support tourism in the Virgin Islands. They highlight significant cost disparities between registering a vessel in the British Virgin Islands (BVI) and the U.S. Virgin Islands, noting that such issues hinder tourism-related operations. Vanderpool-Wallace acknowledges the challenge of limited government resources and the need to prioritize investments based on potential returns. He emphasises that governments face difficult decisions when allocating resources but must ensure that all necessary improvements are considered and addressed in due time.

### **Creative Solutions to Infrastructure Bottlenecks**

670 In response to comments about the strain that expanded air travel could place on the BVI's road infrastructure, Vanderpool-Wallace suggests integrating ferry services to mitigate congestion and streamline tourist movement. He recalls historical practices of using boats as a primary mode of transportation and proposes revisiting such systems to address contemporary challenges. This underscores the importance of planning infrastructure holistically to support growth while  
675 maintaining efficiency.

### **Public-Private Collaboration for Tourism Investment**

A new panel discussion begins, focusing on public-private partnerships to enhance tourism infrastructure and attract investments in the BVI. Panellists agree that there has been minimal recent investment in tourism infrastructure, with the last major push occurring in the early 2000s.  
680 They highlight the competitive nature of regional tourism and stress the need for intentional efforts to attract and support investors.

Panellist Russell Harrigan underscores the absence of a centralized investment authority in the BVI to guide and facilitate tourism-related investments. Drawing comparisons to other Caribbean jurisdictions with robust investment agencies, he calls for the establishment of a dedicated entity  
685 to streamline processes and drive development.

### **Strategies for Attracting Tourism Investments**

Panellists discuss successful investment models in other territories, such as St. Lucia, Bermuda, and Jamaica, where governments have funded agile investment arms to secure and develop tourism projects. These entities identify properties with development potential, engage architects  
690 to draft plans, and present tailored opportunities to investors. Such proactive and intentional strategies have proven effective in other regions, and panellists advocate for the BVI to adopt similar practices. They note that while this approach involves complexities, it could yield significant benefits for the territory.

### **The Role of Infrastructure in Investment**

695 Panellists agree that inadequate infrastructure, such as water, electricity, and waste management systems, is a critical deterrent to tourism and broader economic investments in the BVI. They highlight examples like Anegada, where power and water issues hinder events like Lobsterfest, forcing businesses to rely on generators. This lack of foundational infrastructure increases operational risks for investors. Panellists emphasise the need for long-term planning, including

700 stormwater management and sustainability measures, to position the BVI as a leading Caribbean destination.

### **Infrastructure and Risk Management in Investment Decisions**

Investment decisions hinge on the level of risk associated with infrastructure deficits. Without robust infrastructure provided by the government, risks for investors escalate, making the BVI less attractive. Panellists underscore that data is another critical component of infrastructure. 705 Accurate statistics about tourism trends, visitor demographics, and economic contributions are essential for informed planning but are currently lacking in the territory.

### **Government's Role in Attracting Investment**

Panellists discuss how governments can collaborate with the private sector to attract investments:

- 710 • **Start Locally:** Engaging existing investors to understand their challenges can help identify barriers to further investment.
- **Address Bureaucracy:** Streamlining processes and reducing repetitive administrative hurdles can significantly enhance investor confidence.
- 715 • **Improve Reputation:** Potential investors often consult local businesses to gauge the viability of investing in the territory. Negative experiences with bureaucracy or inefficiencies can deter new investments before formal discussions begin.

One panellist shares a unique anecdote where an investor evaluated the health and wellbeing of local children to assess the broader social conditions of the BVI, demonstrating that perceptions about the country's overall environment play a critical role in investment decisions.

### **720 The Future of BVI's Revenue Streams**

The conversation shifts to the importance of diversifying revenue streams as the financial services industry stabilizes and, in some areas, declines. Tourism offers a viable alternative, but sustainable development requires careful planning to balance economic growth with social impact. Panellists note that delays in decision-making by government agencies hinder 725 development and create uncertainties for investors, who rely on precise timelines to mitigate risks.

### **External Factors and Incentives for Development**

Panellists acknowledge external challenges like rising interest rates and inflation, which make developers hesitant to initiate projects. They suggest that the government can counteract these factors by offering incentives such as:

- 730 • Reduced import duties for construction materials.
- Tax breaks for a fixed period post-construction.
- Government participation in improving key infrastructure, such as addressing flooding, sewage, and power issues, to make properties more attractive.

### **Challenges in Attracting Investment**

735 The panel discusses how systemic inefficiencies deter investment. Extended processing times for  
work permits and licenses create a perception that the BVI is not investor-friendly. Developers  
often express frustration about the difficulty of doing business in the territory. While some  
businesses manage to thrive, their success is often achieved in spite of these challenges. Panellists  
emphasise that the private sector is the economic engine of the BVI and argue for stronger  
740 collaboration between government and businesses to improve the investment climate.

### **Public-Private Collaboration and Resilience**

Panellists highlight the need for a better partnership between the government and private sector.  
Currently, many issues, such as high insurance costs and exorbitant banking fees, add to the  
operational difficulties faced by businesses. There is a call for more tangible engagement between  
745 government and small businesses, which form the backbone of the local economy. Resilience and  
perseverance are crucial for local businesses, but the lack of support and the high cost of doing  
business remain significant barriers.

### **Local Investment and Tourism Growth**

The panellists emphasise the importance of nurturing local investors and encouraging the  
expansion of existing businesses. They note the BVI's potential for boutique hotels, estimating  
750 that the territory needs 2,000 more hotel rooms to meet demand. The focus is on small-scale,  
high-value development rather than large, all-inclusive resorts. Improved airlift and transportation  
infrastructure could support this growth, but sustained efforts are needed to ensure that local  
operators can capitalize on these opportunities.

### **Data-Driven Development**

The panel discusses the critical role of data in shaping government policy and private investment  
decisions. Accurate and timely data collection is lacking in the BVI, hindering informed decision-  
making. For example, the government does not have precise figures on the population or visitor  
demographics. Panellists urge investment in data infrastructure to enable better planning and  
760 policy development. Examples include using landing cards or online systems to collect visitor  
information and understanding expenditure patterns to guide tourism strategies.

### **Reflections on Historical Data Practices**

Panellists recall how data collection was once more robust during earlier decades, informing  
government decisions and tourism policies. However, this practice has diminished, leaving  
765 decision-makers without the tools needed for effective governance. A return to data-driven  
approaches is deemed essential for managing the increasingly complex challenges of the modern  
era.

### **Commendable Initiatives in the Government's Agenda**

One panellist praises initiatives mentioned in the Speech from the Throne, such as the proposed  
770 Tourism Act, management of Crown lands, and environmental considerations. These policies  
indicate a positive direction but must be paired with effective implementation and the integration  
of data-driven decision-making.

## **Progress on Legislation and Planning**

775 The discussion emphasises the importance of translating policy goals into actionable legislation. While government speeches and plans are commendable, they need to be followed by swift legislative action to address tourism development. Finalizing the tourism plan is identified as an urgent priority to provide clear guidance for projects like the airport development and other policy decisions.

## **Opportunities with Existing Investments**

780 An audience member raises concerns about the lack of partnerships with existing businesses, such as trust companies and marinas, to address local infrastructure and service gaps. They argue that rather than solely focusing on attracting new foreign investors, the government should tap into the resources of the 180 trust companies and numerous marinas already operating in the BVI. While the panel acknowledges this opportunity, they caution against shifting governmental responsibilities to the private sector.

## **Local vs. Foreign Investment in Real Estate**

790 The panel discusses the post-Irma surge in local investment in real estate, largely driven by government incentives like the Stamp Duty Exemption Act. Many locals bought damaged properties and redeveloped them for personal use or rental purposes. However, foreign investment has declined significantly, with only 22 property sales to foreign investors in 2024 compared to 45 in 2022. Panellists highlight that foreign investment brings in new capital, whereas local investment circulates existing money, both of which are essential for economic growth.

## **Benefits of Foreign Investment**

795 Foreign investment is highlighted as a crucial source of "new money" entering the economy. Stamp duties on foreign property purchases generate significantly higher government revenue compared to local transactions. However, panellists emphasise the need for a balanced approach to ensure both local and foreign investments are encouraged while maintaining the territory's character and economic stability.

## **Balancing Development and Environmental Preservation**

800 The conversation shifts to concerns about overdevelopment and its impact on the natural environment. Panellists note that the BVI has seen relatively little "greenfield" development—construction on previously undeveloped land—compared to other Caribbean islands. Most investments focus on expanding or redeveloping existing properties. They propose conservation easements as a potential tool for preserving undeveloped land. This mechanism, provided for under the National Parks Act, allows private or public entities to purchase development rights from property owners, thereby safeguarding critical areas.

## **Encouraging Responsible Development**

While respecting property owners' rights to capitalize on their assets, panellists emphasise the importance of balancing development with conservation. They advocate for policies that protect

810 key environmental areas without infringing on private ownership, ensuring that the BVI remains an attractive and sustainable destination for residents and visitors alike.

### **Balancing Conservation and Development**

815 Panellists highlight the importance of balancing land development with conservation, suggesting strategies such as conservation easements and land banking. Conservation easements, included in the National Parks Act, allow property owners to receive compensation while preserving their land. Panellists advocate for using such tools to protect critical areas, ensuring development aligns with the territory's environmental and cultural values.

### **Diversifying Tourism and Improving Statistics**

820 The discussion transitions to the diversification of tourism products, with emphasis on eco-tourism and branded boutique properties over large-scale developments. Accurate and comprehensive tourism statistics are identified as vital to balance investments in different transportation modes, such as ferries and airlines. The lack of data on how travellers arrive and move within the BVI hampers the ability to create policies that support all stakeholders, including ferry operators who face increasing challenges due to competition with airlines.

### **825 Challenges in Ferry Operations and Local Investments**

830 A ferry operator highlights the difficulties faced by locally owned businesses due to limited government investment in seaport infrastructure. Despite making significant investments in vessels, operators contend with inadequate facilities and rising operational costs. Panellists acknowledge the crucial role of ferries in the BVI's tourism economy and stress the need for balanced support across tourism-related industries to maintain a diverse and inclusive economic ecosystem.

### **Leasehold vs. Freehold for Foreign Investments**

835 A key topic involves whether major developments, such as hotels, should operate under leasehold or freehold agreements. Panellists note that investors perceive leasehold as riskier compared to freehold, which may deter foreign investment. However, the decision between these ownership structures should align with the BVI's long-term goals and cultural sensitivities. The conversation emphasises the importance of evaluating how investment structures affect developers' risk assessments and decision-making processes.

### **Low-Hanging Fruits for Immediate Action**

840 Participants propose actionable steps the government can take to improve the business environment:

- **Simplifying Administrative Processes:** Reducing bureaucracy by integrating government databases for seamless operations across departments like labour and immigration.
  - **One-Stop Shop for Work Permits:** Streamlining labour and immigration processes into a unified system to save time and resources for employers.
- 845

- **Improving Online Access:** Expanding digital services to reduce in-person visits, particularly benefiting small businesses that rely on efficient, technology-driven operations.

### **Streamlining Government Processes for Businesses**

850 The discussion emphasises the need to simplify and digitise government processes. Participants advocate for an integrated government platform allowing all services—such as labour, immigration, taxes, and licenses—to be managed online from a single system. This would particularly benefit small businesses and those reliant on mobile technology. While progress has been made, such as legislation enabling digital payments, delays in implementation remain a concern.

### **855 Improving Customer Service and Reducing Bureaucracy**

860 Calls for enhanced customer service within government offices are reiterated. Participants stress that professionalism, respect, and efficiency should be consistent across all government interactions, whether online or in person. The issue of excessive bureaucracy is also highlighted as a significant barrier to investment, with stakeholders urging for streamlined processes and a proactive, intentional approach to attract and retain investors.

### **Data Collection and Utilization**

865 Panellists point out that while data on arrivals is being collected (e.g., from entry forms), it is not being adequately processed or analysed to inform decision-making. Participants advocate for immediate action to collate and analyse this data, emphasising its importance for strategic planning and improving the tourism experience.

### **Challenges in Immigration and Labor Processes**

870 The complexities of labour and immigration processes are discussed, with a focus on how these affect both employers and workers. Employers report inefficiencies, such as prolonged passport retention and the requirement for workers to travel off-island to finalise work permits. While some changes have been made to address these issues, participants stress the need for further improvements to make the system more user-friendly and efficient.

### **Incorporating Yachting and Marine Industry Data**

875 Participants highlight the importance of the yachting and marine tourism industry, which provides substantial economic benefits through locally owned marinas and visitor spending. They advocate for better integration of marine accommodations into tourism data to fully capture the sector's contribution. Concerns about overcrowded anchorages during peak seasons are also raised, suggesting a need for sustainable management of marine resources.

### **Local Investment Challenges and Bank Policies**

880 The discussion shifts to challenges faced by local investors, particularly in accessing financing from banks. Participants note the high interest rates charged to locals compared to foreign

investors and the stringent requirements for securing loans. These factors are seen as significant barriers to local investment and economic growth.

### **Challenges with Bank Interest Rates and Investment**

885 The discussion touches on the difficulties local investors face with high-interest rates from local banks compared to more favourable rates in the U.S. Participants note that U.S. citizens investing in the Virgin Islands are required to provide extensive U.S.-mandated financial information due to FATCA regulations. Despite this, local banks often impose higher rates due to perceived risks. The Premier acknowledges the challenges, explaining that the government can influence rates through direct capital support for initiatives like low-interest loans via the National Bank, though  
890 this requires budgeting and legislative processes.

### **Improvements in Labor and Immigration Systems**

The labour management system has been revamped to streamline processes, reducing approval times for work permits and integrating immigration checks into a single workflow. Officials highlight the importance of accurate documentation to ensure efficiency. Plans are in place to  
895 further digitise and simplify services, such as online payments and a one-stop shop for permits. Despite progress, the department remains understaffed, and participants emphasise the need for better promotion and education about these changes.

### **Enhancing Data Collection and Usage**

Efforts to improve data collection include the automation of embarkation and disembarkation cards and the integration of labour and immigration systems. The Premier's Office acknowledges  
900 that while data is being collected, its analysis and publication remain limited, hampering effective use. Emphasis is placed on making data accessible and actionable to inform government and private sector decisions.

### **Sports as a Tool for Social and Economic Development**

905 A participant highlights the potential of sports programs to address youth crime and unemployment. Historically, sports have played a central role in youth development, providing structure, education, and opportunities. Calls are made for the government to reintroduce and expand sports programs to bridge social gaps and foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young people.

### **910 Customer Service Initiatives in Government**

The Deputy Governor's Office has implemented a customer service improvement initiative, including feedback mechanisms where citizens can rate services. This data is intended to inform staff appraisals and identify training needs. While these measures aim to enhance service delivery, ongoing efforts are needed to address widespread perceptions of inefficiency and poor customer  
915 service in government offices.

### **Administrative Constraints on Hiring and Resource Allocation**

The discussion touches on the limitations within the public service system. The Premier clarifies that while hiring or firing public officers falls under the Governor's purview, the government can engage consultants and allocate responsibilities as long as they align with the Constitution.

## 920 **Revisiting Investment Policies and Legislative Frameworks**

925 Panellists highlight the lack of awareness and engagement regarding the Investment Act, Business License Act, and Trade Commission, despite their relevance to fostering investment. They suggest revisiting these frameworks to ensure they are fit for purpose, emphasising the need for an investment body to facilitate both local and foreign investment. The discussion also revisits the balance between facilitating investment and maintaining community integrity.

## **Addressing Crime and Community Safety**

A speaker reflects on the relative safety of the BVI compared to other Caribbean regions, noting that the absence of bars on windows or compounds reflects a community largely free from fear of crime. However, proactive measures are recommended to maintain this status.

## 930 **Intentionality in Investment Strategy**

The importance of a deliberate and well-structured approach to creating an attractive investment environment is reiterated. Emphasis is placed on deeper engagement with smaller stakeholders in the tourism industry to ensure inclusivity in planning and development.

## **Public-Private Partnerships and Land Use Development**

935 The Premier outlines plans to revisit the Investment Act, integrating insights from stakeholders to make it more effective. The act will replace older legislation, such as the Hotel Aid Act and Pioneer Status Act, establishing long-term investment agreements to enhance collaboration between the public and private sectors. Public-private partnerships, such as proposed developments in Road Town, are also highlighted as opportunities for community involvement in tourism and trade.

940

## **Youth Empowerment and Community-Based Tourism**

945 Speakers advocate for integrating youth into the tourism economy through community-driven initiatives. Programs like M.A.L.E, which support young men at risk, are seen as essential to reducing crime and harnessing local talent for the industry. Private sector support and collaborative efforts are urged to make these programs impactful.

## **Final Reflections and Closing Remarks**

950 Director of Tourism Clive McCoy delivers closing remarks, emphasising the day's progress in setting the foundation for a sustainable and innovative tourism future. He commends the contributions of all stakeholders and highlights Peter Island Resort's reopening as a symbol of the territory's resilience. The focus for the following day will include enhancing visitor experiences, improving customer service, and advancing marketing strategies.

## **Day 2**

### **Introduction of Virtual Speaker Bill Freeman**

955 The first session features Bill Freeman, President of the Freeman Group, who will deliver a virtual presentation on visitor experience and customer service standards. His extensive career in hospitality and tourism spans decades, including the development of quality assurance processes for high-profile hotels and expanding into aviation and tourism sectors. The Freeman Group's work in enhancing guest experiences is highlighted, setting the stage for his presentation. He recounts the implementation of tourism service standards in the BVI, Cayman Islands, and Turks and Caicos, noting that the program in Cayman, branded as "Cayman Pride," remains active after 17 years. He reflects on challenges in sustaining similar programs in the BVI, attributing their failures to the absence of a dedicated Ministry of Tourism, which he argues is essential for overseeing service training and standards.

### **Freeman Group's Expertise and Industry Insights**

965 Freeman provides an overview of the Freeman Group's global operations, highlighting its diverse portfolio, including over 84 hotel openings across Europe, the U.S., Hawaii, and the Caribbean. The company's work spans independent hotels, large management companies, casinos, airlines, and even hospitals, showcasing the adaptability of its processes across industries. He emphasises the importance of standards tailored to specific sectors, noting the differing dynamics between luxury resorts and healthcare facilities.

### **Emerging Trends: All-Inclusive and Ultra-Luxury Resorts**

Freeman identifies a significant shift in global tourism toward all-inclusive and ultra-luxury resorts. He notes that his presentation will focus on luxury resorts. Highlighting their growing popularity, he explains how destinations are increasingly catering to ultra-wealthy travellers, requiring a seamless, high-end experience from arrival to departure.

### **Evolving Travel Patterns and Global Competition**

Freeman references a BBC article listing the "25 Best Places in the World to Travel," which includes destinations like Dominica and Vietnam. He encourages reflection on how these recommendations contrast with travel trends from decades ago when Caribbean destinations dominated resort tourism. He underscores that the Caribbean is now competing on a global scale with destinations offering exceptional service and unique environments, facilitated by improved accessibility.

### **Revenue Potential and Market Challenges**

985 Tourism's global revenue potential is pegged at \$5.8 trillion, but Freeman warns of the risk of losing market share to destinations like Vietnam, which aggressively market themselves and invest in service training. He stresses the need for Caribbean destinations to protect and grow their share by improving service standards and strategically positioning themselves in the global market.

## **Rise of Ultra-Luxury Tourism**

990 Freeman discusses the challenges and opportunities presented by ultra-luxury tourism. High-spending travellers expect seamless, premium experiences, from airport arrivals to resort stays. He recounts an example from Australia, where proactive airport staff assisted lost travellers, highlighting the importance of exceeding guest expectations and ensuring a flawless journey.

## **Demand for Exclusive Experiences**

995 Freeman identifies growing demand for private villas, bespoke services, and tailor-made experiences. He stresses that destinations catering to ultra-luxury travellers must offer unique, personalized services that differentiate them from competitors, meeting the expectations of high-value clients seeking exclusivity and distinction.

## **Guest Expectations and Proactive Interaction**

1000 Bill Freeman discusses the significance of guest interaction in the luxury tourism sector. Guests value proactive and engaging staff over technical perfection. For example, a resort's long-term success can hinge on staff consistently anticipating and addressing guest needs, fostering a personalized and welcoming environment.

## **Luxury Brands Expanding into the Caribbean**

1005 Freeman notes the growing interest of luxury hotel brands like Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons in destination tourism, with examples such as the Mandarin Hotel in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. This signals a confidence in the Caribbean as a viable market for high-end tourism. However, these brands are also expanding globally, and Freeman emphasises the need for the region to stay competitive.

## **High-End Tourism Demands**

1010 Luxury travellers seek exclusive offerings such as private islands, luxury yachting, and world-class diving. Gourmet dining and pristine beaches are also highly desirable, aligning well with the offerings in the British Virgin Islands. Freeman highlights the importance of creating memorable, tailored experiences to meet these expectations and remain competitive.

## **Universal Visitor Expectations**

1015 Freeman reviews common visitor expectations, such as friendly service, knowledgeable staff, and proactive assistance. These expectations apply across all tourism segments, from luxury resorts to more modest accommodations. He stresses the need for a shared understanding of these expectations among stakeholders to enhance the overall guest experience.

## **Freeman Group's Approach to Service Standards**

1020 Freeman outlines his company's method for implementing service standards:

1. Engaging stakeholders from all sectors to agree on service goals.
2. Establishing distinct standards tailored to different roles, such as immigration officers or hotel staff.
3. Developing a destination-specific training program that involves both private and public stakeholders.
- 1025 4. Certifying and monitoring trained personnel to ensure they consistently meet the standards. Freeman underscores the importance of simple yet impactful standards, such as an immigration officer wishing a visitor a happy birthday, to create lasting impressions.

### **Sustaining and Measuring Service Standards**

1030 Freeman praises the Cayman Islands for maintaining service standards for over 15 years, attributing their success to internal training resources and ministry support. He discusses updates to the Freeman Group's methodology, such as integrating visitor feedback with inspections and providing self-audit tools for stakeholders to ensure continuous improvement.

### **Tourism-Dependent Economies and Training Investments**

1035 Freeman highlights an article from the *Virgin Islands Daily News* that emphasises the need for tourism-dependent economies to invest in training and developing their workforce. He recommends the article as an insightful resource and reiterates the importance of aligning financial investments in marketing with workforce development to deliver on the promises made to tourists.

### **Lessons from JetBlue: The Value of Friendly Service**

1040 Freeman shares insights from his work with JetBlue Airways, which prioritized friendliness as a strategic business advantage. The airline's investment in staff training and interaction, such as replacing negative language with positive alternatives, significantly improved customer experiences. Freeman advises the British Virgin Islands to allocate part of their marketing budget to training tourism staff, as developing people is essential for delivering high-quality service.

### **Call to Action: Training and Alignment**

1045 Freeman concludes by emphasising the critical role of training and coaching in ensuring that tourism staff understand and meet service standards. Without dedicated investment in workforce development, the promises made through marketing campaigns risk going unfulfilled, undermining the guest experience and the destination's reputation.

### **Marketing Promises and Delivery**

1050 Bill Freeman emphasises the importance of ensuring marketing promises align with actual visitor experiences. He recounts his visit to New Zealand, where the friendliness of its people matched its branding, making every citizen an ambassador for the country.

### **Introduction of Panellists**

1055 The session transitions to a panel discussion on customer service and exceeding expectations in the BVI.

## **The Role of Friendliness and Human Connection**

Shonia Matthews discusses the importance of friendliness in the BVI's reputation as a high-end destination. She highlights that customer service extends beyond serving—it requires genuine  
1060 empathy, proactive engagement, and a readiness to meet diverse cultural and linguistic needs. Matthews emphasises the critical role of front-line workers, such as linesmen, security, and service ambassadors, in shaping the initial impressions of cruise ship visitors. She advocates for fostering a warm and welcoming atmosphere, even in challenging situations like language barriers, using creative solutions like translation tools.

## **1065 Technology's Role in Enhancing Customer Experience**

Shamora Penn-Maduro underscores the importance of technology in improving the visitor experience. She explains that modern travellers extensively research destinations before arriving, making it crucial for the BVI's digital presence to reflect its offerings accurately. She advocates  
1070 for keeping websites and social media updated with engaging content, such as reels, to attract and inform visitors. Penn-Maduro recounts an example from the Annapolis Boat Show, where inconsistent messaging about ED cards highlighted the need for alignment between promotional materials and on-the-ground realities.

## **Consistent Messaging and Staff Training**

The discussion turns to aligning marketing messages with service delivery. Albert Wheatley, with  
1075 his background in human resources and hospitality training, highlights the challenges of preparing organizations to meet visitor expectations. He draws attention to the critical role of employees in delivering quality service, citing Richard Branson's philosophy: "Clients do not come first. Employees come first." Wheatley argues that a strong human resources function is essential for identifying the right personnel for roles and providing consistent training to maintain high service  
1080 standards.

## **The Right Fit for Customer-Facing Roles**

Wheatley discusses the importance of hiring individuals suited to customer-facing positions. Using personality profiling, he emphasises matching employees' traits to their roles. For example, an  
1085 introverted accountant may not thrive in a customer-facing role, whereas a dynamic individual with strong interpersonal skills might excel. Wheatley stresses the need for consistent training to ensure employees are prepared to deliver exceptional service.

## **Revisiting the TIST Program and the Importance of HR Support**

Albert Wheatley underscores the importance of revisiting the Tourism Industry Service Standards (TIST) program developed with Bill Freeman, which standardized service excellence across the  
1090 destination. He advocates for creating systems that ensure consistent service quality, independent of individual employees. Wheatley highlights the importance of recognizing and incentivizing

frontline workers while emphasising the interconnectedness of personal well-being and job performance. Strong HR support is crucial to building a motivated and service-oriented workforce.

### **Visitor Services Support Program**

1095 Wheatley elaborates on his role as Visitor Services Support Coordinator, where he addresses crises involving visitors, such as accidents, thefts, or deaths. He explains the program's three priorities:

1. Assisting visitors during crises.
2. Protecting the destination's reputation.
3. Building government capacity to improve service efficiency.

1100 Wheatley provides examples of streamlined processes, such as faster communication between government departments, that enhance the visitor experience. He emphasises that even behind-the-scenes improvements in service delivery contribute to a better perception of the BVI as a tourist destination.

### **The Role of Training and Going Beyond Expectations**

1105 Shonia Matthews discusses the significance of training employees to exceed guest expectations. She stresses the importance of genuine willingness to serve and demonstrates the value of putting training into practice. Matthews shares an example of a high-pressure situation where an autistic guest went missing, illustrating the need for teamwork, technology, and empathy to resolve challenges. The collaborative effort to locate the guest highlighted the BVI community's dedication to going above and beyond for visitors.

1110

### **Addressing Cultural Sensitivity and Visitor Expectations**

Audience members raise concerns about cultural sensitivity and visitor behaviour, particularly regarding European tourists. Instances of rudeness and cultural misunderstandings are cited as challenges for service providers. Suggestions include sensitizing visitors before they arrive and training local employees to handle difficult situations with professionalism and patience. The discussion emphasises the need for balanced cultural awareness on both sides to foster better interactions.

1115

### **The Importance of Follow-Up in Training**

1120 An audience member highlights the importance of follow-up in training programs, stressing that initial workshops are insufficient without continued evaluation and support. Effective training programs must include accountability measures and consistent reinforcement to ensure service excellence becomes a lasting standard.

### **Sustaining Training Programs**

1125 An audience member stresses the need for continuity in training programs. Without follow-up mechanisms, employees often revert to old habits, negating the value of the initial training. To

ensure long-term success, organizations must implement ongoing evaluations and establish structured measures for improvement after trainers leave.

### **Mystery Shopping and Ambassadorial Standards**

1130 The discussion shifts to mystery shopping as a tool for assessing service standards. The process involves evaluating employees against pre-established criteria to ensure they meet ambassadorial expectations. Bill Freeman explains how mystery shopping can improve service consistency and accountability across a destination. He highlights its role in uniting visitor data with on-the-ground experiences, particularly in managing initial interactions, such as those with immigration officers, who play a pivotal role as ambassadors of the country.

### **1135 Aligning Training with Tourism Strategy**

Freeman emphasises the importance of aligning training programs with the broader tourism strategy and marketing objectives. Using JetBlue's "Inspiring Humanity" campaign as an example, he explains how a clear vision can guide employees to embody a destination's values. He notes that understanding the country's overall goals fosters a sense of purpose among employees, helping them navigate challenges such as difficult customer interactions while maintaining professionalism.

### **Supporting Employees and Empowering Service Delivery**

1145 Albert Wheatley and other Panellists discuss the importance of supporting employees' personal well-being to enhance their ability to deliver excellent service. They stress the need for employers to create a positive work environment by showing empathy and providing emotional and professional support. This approach enables employees to handle difficult situations, such as demanding or rude visitors, with grace and composure.

### **Preparing for Cultural and Language Challenges**

1150 Panellists highlight the cultural and linguistic diversity of visitors, particularly from cruise ships, and the challenges it presents for service providers. Pre-shift briefings, team preparation, and a focus on empathy help employees manage these situations effectively. The discussion reiterates that while the guest is not always right, they should always come first, and service interactions should remain positive to ensure lasting impressions of the BVI.

### **Integrating Service Excellence and Business Excellence**

1155 Sharon Banfield from the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) emphasises the need to balance service excellence with business excellence. They explain that challenges like long customs processes or operational inefficiencies can undermine even the best customer service efforts. The representative encourages the use of CTO tools and programs to address these gaps and ensure that dialogue translates into actionable improvements across the tourism sector.

### **1160 Business Excellence and Service Tools**

Ms. Banfield emphasises the critical link between business excellence and service excellence. Providing employees with essential tools and resources, such as gloves for baggage handlers, is a fundamental step toward ensuring they can perform effectively. She introduces the *Hospitality Assured* program, accessible via their website, which helps businesses throughout the Caribbean achieve certification and improve both business and service practices.

### **The Role of Technology and Early Training**

A stakeholder discusses the use of modern tools, such as real-time translation technologies, to overcome communication barriers with international visitors. He highlights the importance of integrating such tools into the BVI's tourism strategy. Additionally, he underscores the need to start training from a young age, equipping the next generation with the skills and mindset necessary for excelling in the tourism sector. He shares an example of mentoring a young taxi driver, illustrating how early training and consistent guidance can foster future industry leaders.

### **Leadership and Accountability in Service Delivery**

Albert Wheatley discusses the importance of leadership in achieving excellent customer service. He stresses that leaders must possess the skills and knowledge to effectively manage their teams, warning against appointing individuals based solely on personal connections. Employees need competent leaders who can provide guidance, foster accountability, and set a strong example of professionalism.

### **Cultural Sensitisation and Destination Training**

Audience members highlight cultural differences among visitors, particularly Europeans, and how behaviours such as loud communication or resistance to speaking English can be perceived as rudeness. They suggest that while pre-arrival sensitisation of visitors may not always be feasible, destination training for all BVI residents could mitigate such challenges. By educating locals about cultural nuances and providing tools for effective communication, the tourism industry can enhance its service quality and maintain a positive image.

### **Reinforcing Tourism Values and Holistic Training**

Panellists and audience members advocate for comprehensive destination-wide training programs. They call for government prioritisation of tourism education to ensure all residents—beyond just frontline workers—understand their role in creating positive visitor experiences. Programs like the Disney initiative, which emphasise leadership buy-in and shared community values, are cited as effective models. Panellists also emphasise the importance of fostering a sense of pride and empathy within employees, enabling them to overcome challenges with professionalism and kindness.

### **Culture and Visitor Experiences**

The session transitions to a new panel discussion on enhancing visitor experiences through culture, hospitality, and diverse attractions.

1200 Dr. Katherine Smith begins the discussion by highlighting the unique character of each island in the Virgin Islands. She suggests leveraging cultural diversity and heritage as a visual and experiential selling point for visitors. She references the sight of traditional Moko Jumbies (stilt dancers) as an example of how cultural elements can immediately create a sense of place and identity.

### **Visualizing Culture at Entry Points**

1205 Dr. Katherine Smith highlights the importance of visually representing the unique cultural heritage of the Virgin Islands at key entry points like seaports and airports. She suggests using art, murals, and heritage displays tailored to each island's history and identity. For example, Anegada's rich history of shipwrecks could be showcased through maritime-themed visuals and storytelling. Dr. Smith emphasises that authenticity in storytelling, paired with engaging visual elements, can create a strong cultural impression on visitors.

### **Modernizing Museums and Leveraging Cultural Assets**

1210 Dr. Smith advocates for modernizing the Virgin Islands' museums to make them more interactive and technologically advanced, reflecting global trends. She suggests incorporating lighting, exhibition technology, and engaging storytelling to create immersive experiences. Additionally, she emphasises promoting local literary arts, traditional crafts, and paintings, which reflect the islands' cultural identity. Dr. Smith highlights the importance of sharing stories of triumph, such as those of Virgin Islands historical figures like Perrine Georges, to connect visitors with authentic narratives.

### **Cultivating Cultural Practitioners and Youth Engagement**

1220 Dr. Smith stresses the need to cultivate cultural practitioners, including musicians, dancers, and storytellers, while actively involving younger generations in preserving and promoting cultural traditions. She identifies the performing arts, language, and historical narratives as vital components of the Virgin Islands' identity. Dr. Smith underscores the importance of embedding cultural education into the school curriculum and community training programs, ensuring all residents can confidently represent their culture to visitors.

### **Cultural Identity and Tourism's Dependency on Culture**

1225 Dr. Smith discusses how culture underpins the success of tourism, serving as its foundation. She calls for a unified approach to cultural education and tourism strategy, emphasising that all residents—whether in frontline tourism roles or other sectors—must understand their role as cultural ambassadors. She also highlights a new historical manual for tour guides that outlines Virgin Islands' stories and encourages its use to deepen cultural knowledge among tour operators and locals alike.

### **The Evolution of Culture in Tourism**

Thomas Warner introduces the idea of evolving cultural traditions to engage younger generations while preserving historical roots. Using sport fishing as an example, he recounts how fishing transitioned from a subsistence and trade activity to a leisure pursuit. Warner describes the success of the North Drop Open, a blue marlin catch-and-release fishing tournament. Supported by the Premier's Office, the event revitalises the Virgin Islands' maritime heritage while generating economic activity by attracting international participants and their spending to the BVI.

### **Fishing as a Tourism Asset**

Warner emphasises the strategic value of leveraging the Virgin Islands' location in one of the world's richest fishing grounds. Events like the North Drop Open not only celebrate the islands' fishing heritage but also create high-value tourism opportunities that bring external revenue into the local economy.

### **Sport Fishing as a Tourism Asset**

Warner discusses the inclusive approach of the North Drop Open fishing tournament, which involves marinas and boats from various islands, such as Tortola, Virgin Gorda, and Jost Van Dyke, as well as international participants from Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Florida, and Texas. This event not only generates revenue but also aims to establish the BVI as a premier sport fishing destination. Warner highlights the potential of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a resource-rich fishing area, and stresses its untapped potential, with an estimated \$80 million worth of fish available. He encourages young people and investors to explore opportunities in both commercial and sport fishing industries.

### **Hike BVI: Innovating the Visitor Experience**

Sef Graham recounts the inception of Hike BVI during the pandemic when social media interest transformed his hiking hobby into a thriving business. Motivated to showcase Tortola's natural beauty, often overshadowed by other islands, Hike BVI now offers culturally rich hiking tours, herbal remedies education, and food tours. Graham emphasises diversifying activities beyond beaches to appeal to repeat cruise visitors. The success of these excursions, which include stops at local businesses for culinary experiences, reflects visitors' desire for authentic, local interactions rather than standardised international offerings.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in Tourism Infrastructure**

Graham notes the challenge of offering tours on weekends due to the closure of key attractions like the prison museum and the Old Governor's House. These closures result in cancelled tours, reducing opportunities for visitor engagement and revenue. Despite this, Hike BVI collaborates with local schools to educate young residents about their cultural and natural heritage, inspiring the next generation to value and potentially build businesses around their unique environment.

### **Preserving and Passing Down Heritage**

Dr. Katherine Smith highlights the importance of passing cultural and historical knowledge to the next generation. While some families maintain strong oral traditions, structured education and hands-on experiences, such as those facilitated by initiatives like Hike BVI, are essential for ensuring young people connect with their heritage. Dr. Smith underscores the role of schools and community programs in embedding cultural pride and awareness in future generations.

### **Passing Down Cultural Knowledge**

Dr. Katherine Smith highlights the importance of oral traditions and experiential learning in passing cultural knowledge to future generations. Notable cultural icons like Aragon Dick-Read and Angel Smith gained their insights through stories from elders. To perpetuate such knowledge, a systematic approach is needed, involving manuals, workshops, and ongoing monitoring. Cultural tourism, she argues, strengthens local identity while providing economic opportunities. Dr. Smith also emphasises the historical alignment of traditional practices, such as agriculture and recycling, with modern trends like farm-to-table dining and sustainable tourism.

### **Leveraging Local Architecture and Practices**

The BVI's unique architectural and cultural heritage, such as thatched roofs and traditional festivals, can form the foundation of a distinct tourism product. Dr. Smith stresses the need for confidence in promoting the local culture, recognizing its deep historical roots and ability to merge old and new traditions. These cultural practices, she asserts, should be celebrated as unique and valuable assets to the tourism industry.

### **Restaurants as Cultural Ambassadors**

Thomas Warner discusses the role of restaurants in transforming local culture into memorable visitor experiences. By incorporating locally sourced ingredients and emphasising the connection between food, history, and place, restaurants can create experiences that leave lasting impressions. He provides examples of immersive activities, such as harvesting pineapples or catching fish that are then prepared into meals, to illustrate how food tourism can blend with other cultural offerings. Warner highlights the sense of community in areas like Carrot Bay, where traditions like morning swims in the "healing pool" and communal gatherings enhance the cultural experience.

### **Modern Tools to Enhance Visitor Experiences**

Audience members and Panellists discuss the potential of digital platforms to provide centralized access to information about local products, activities, and attractions. While previous attempts at similar platforms, faced challenges in adoption, participants agree that digital tools could bridge the gap for tourists seeking curated experiences. However, it is noted that visitors often research destinations extensively before traveling, and the key lies in ensuring visibility and accessibility of information online.

### **Enhancing Visibility Through Digital Marketing**

Graham, from Hike BVI, shares insights on improving visibility through strategic use of hashtags and search engine optimization. By building an algorithm tailored to their services, Hike BVI became easier to find online, improving accessibility for potential customers. Dr. Katherine Smith reinforces the importance of business owners understanding their online presence and adapting their digital strategies to remain visible to tourists conducting research before their visits.

### **Inculcating Customer Service in Education**

Gregory Callwood stresses the importance of teaching the value of customer service in schools, emphasising that every individual in the BVI should understand the meaning of “TIPS” (To Insure Prompt Service). He advocates for incorporating these lessons into the curriculum, ensuring that future generations recognize the role of quality service in supporting the tourism industry.

### **Deep-Sea Fishing and Protecting Marine Resources**

Chad Lettsome highlights the untapped potential of deep-sea fishing in the BVI, pointing out challenges such as piracy from foreign vessels in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). He recalls past efforts to encourage young people to participate in fishing and emphasises the need for better enforcement of maritime boundaries. Thomas Warner supports this view, suggesting the establishment of a commercial fishing industry that balances sustainable harvesting and local investment. He also mentions using the marine training program at HLSCC to educate youth about the lucrative opportunities in fishing.

### **Efforts to Safeguard Marine Borders**

The Honorable Premier outlines steps being taken to secure the BVI’s marine resources, including legislation to formalize the EEZ and partnerships with the UK for satellite technology to monitor activity within the zone. He mentions plans to establish a border agency equipped to respond to illegal activities like unauthorized fishing, drug trafficking, and human smuggling, ensuring that the BVI’s maritime resources are protected and sustainably managed.

### **Cultural Impact Through Media**

Astrid Wenzke recalls a historical anecdote involving Gregory Callwood, who served as a tour guide for a renowned German actor filming a destination-focused movie in the BVI. The film, which aired repeatedly on German television, brought significant attention to the region, illustrating how cultural storytelling and authentic representation can elevate a destination’s profile internationally.

### **Rebranding and Expanding Historical Tours**

Wenzke also encourages Graham to reframe and promote Hike BVI’s offerings beyond hiking, emphasising the historical and cultural depth of the tours. She highlights the importance of marketing these experiences more broadly, suggesting that they could attract a wider audience by emphasising their educational and cultural components.

## **Call for Replicating Cultural Spaces**

1340 Sophia, a participant, shares her appreciation for cultural experiences like visits to pineapple farms and historical homes. She references a replica home displayed at the Pier Park during Christmas and compares it to St. Croix's Agricultural Fair, suggesting that similar efforts could enhance cultural engagement and provide tourists with immersive experiences.

## **Creating Permanent Cultural Features**

1345 Sophia suggests establishing permanent cultural exhibits, such as a replica home of yesteryear, at the Pier Park to provide cruise passengers with a tangible introduction to BVI's history. She proposes adding QR codes that link visitors to a list of nearby cultural and culinary experiences, enhancing accessibility and engagement with local traditions.

## **Cultural Education in Schools**

1350 Mrs. Smith-Callwood highlights the integration of cultural education across all grade levels in the BVI's schools, from kindergarten through high school. Social studies and civics curricula focus on historical sites, industries, and the importance of cultural heritage. Students participate in field trips to places like the Callwood Rum Distillery and local plantations, which reinforce classroom lessons with hands-on learning experiences. She emphasises the role of outdoor and experiential learning in fostering appreciation for BVI's culture and tourism products.

## **Defining and Celebrating Culture**

1355 A participant raises the question of how to define BVI's culture amid its status as a melting pot of diverse influences. Dr. Katherine Smith suggests focusing on shared human experiences and commonalities to unify the community while celebrating diversity. She references past initiatives, such as the Caribbean Unity Weekend and Christmas Around the World, as examples of events that successfully blend BVI's mainstream culture with the traditions of its multicultural population.

## **1360 Addressing Operational Challenges**

1365 Janet Oliver, a participant points out a persistent issue in the Caribbean: the closure of cultural sites, museums, and attractions on weekends and holidays. She emphasises that resolving this challenge is crucial for enhancing the visitor experience and reinforcing the region's image as a premier tourism destination. Oliver calls on policymakers to address funding and staffing issues to ensure consistent availability of key attractions.

## **Introduction to Innovative Marketing Strategies**

1370 Julie Cuesta, Executive Vice President of International Marketing and Communications for Myriad Marketing, is introduced. With over two decades of experience in tourism marketing, Julie has worked on numerous campaigns, including hurricane recovery efforts for the BVI. She plans to share insights on innovative marketing strategies for destination success, emphasising rebranding efforts and emerging tourism trends.

1375 Questa begins her presentation by reflecting on her long-standing partnership with the BVI, her admiration for the destination, and her expertise in crafting impactful marketing campaigns for international clients. Her talk will address how digital marketing, public relations, product development, and consumer activations can position the BVI as a standout destination on the global stage.

### **Innovative Marketing Strategies for Destination Success**

1380 Julie Cuesta, Executive Vice President of International Marketing and Communications for Myriad Marketing, began her presentation by introducing MMGY Global, a leading integrated marketing company specializing in the travel, tourism, and hospitality industry. With over 500 employees worldwide, MMGY Global is dedicated solely to this sector, reflecting their unwavering commitment to the power of tourism. Despite challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, the company remains steadfast in its belief that tourism enriches communities, fosters connections, and builds bridges across cultures.

### **The Importance of Destination Branding**

1390 Cuesta emphasised the critical role of destination branding in distinguishing a location amidst global competition. She highlighted that while many destinations boast friendly people, excellent cuisine, and natural beauty, a strong brand captures the unique essence and soul of a place. Effective branding not only attracts visitors but also unifies the community, providing a cohesive platform for decision-making and marketing strategies. She cited examples like BMW's "The Ultimate Driving Machine" to illustrate how a clear, compelling brand message can set a product apart in a crowded market.

### **Developing a Unique Destination Brand**

1395 In developing a destination brand, Cuesta outlined the importance of identifying unique assets, experiences, and the intrinsic character of the destination. She stressed the need for community involvement to ensure the brand resonates with both residents and visitors. By aligning the perspectives of locals, tourists, and industry stakeholders, a destination can craft a brand that authentically represents its identity and appeals to its target audience. Cuesta also noted that a well-established brand serves as a foundation for all marketing efforts, guiding decisions in advertising, 1400 partnerships, and social media engagement.

### **Current Travel Trends and Opportunities**

1405 Cuesta shared insights from MMGY Global's research, indicating a positive outlook for travel in 2025. According to the "Winter Edition" of the Portrait of American Travellers study, nearly 80% of U.S. adults plan to take a vacation in the next 12 months, a 7% increase from the previous year. The average vacation budget is expected to rise to \$5,051, with travellers planning to take approximately 4.1 trips per person. Additionally, interest in international travel over the next six months has reached its highest level since 2020, with many travellers planning trips between November and April.

1410 These trends suggest a robust commitment to travel among Americans, presenting a timely opportunity for destinations like the British Virgin Islands to refine their branding and marketing strategies to attract these prospective travellers.

### **The Importance of Destination Branding**

1415 Julie Cuesta emphasises the significance of building a strong destination brand, especially for the BVI. She notes that effective branding captures the essence and soul of a destination, creating a unique identity that resonates with travellers and sets it apart from competitors. This requires deep community involvement and understanding of what makes the destination special. She highlights that a good brand should align with both the community's values and the expectations of travellers, providing a platform for decision-making across all tourism and marketing activities.

1420 Questa explains that branding involves more than logos or taglines—it's about cultivating a shared vision. Whether focusing solely on tourism or adopting a broader, territory-wide approach, the process must encapsulate the destination's essence while considering the input of residents, businesses, and visitors.

### **Lessons from Iconic Brands**

1425 Using examples like BMW's "The Ultimate Driving Machine," Las Vegas' "What Happens Here, Stays Here," and New York's "I Love New York," Julie illustrates the power of memorable and enduring brands. She notes that while such brands evolve over time, their foundations remain strong, enabling them to resonate with audiences for decades. A destination brand, she argues, should provide a consistent platform for all stakeholders—hotels, tour operators, and government agencies—to communicate the destination's unique story effectively.

### **Why Now is the Right Time**

1430 Questa underscores the timeliness of investing in destination branding for the BVI. With strong travel interest from key markets like the U.S. and Canada, the BVI is well-positioned to capitalize on growing demand. Despite potential political and economic uncertainties, research indicates robust travel intentions, particularly among Americans and Canadians. She emphasises that the core of the BVI's appeal—natural beauty, hospitality, luxury accommodations, and activities—remains unchanged and should serve as the foundation for its branding efforts.

### **Travel Intentions and Consumer Behaviour**

1440 Julie Cuesta highlights the strong travel intentions among Americans and Canadians, who plan multiple international vacations annually and allocate significant budgets for these trips. The selection of destinations is typically the first step in planning, emphasising the importance of the BVI maintaining a strong presence to remain top of mind. Research reveals that travellers often consider multiple destinations simultaneously, underscoring the need for consistent engagement to ensure the BVI remains in their consideration set.

1445 A study conducted with the BVI Tourist Board found that 72% of visitors—whether arriving by cruise, yacht, or hotel—had an improved perception of the destination after visiting. This reflects the high satisfaction rate among visitors and highlights the potential for capitalising on positive experiences to boost repeat visits and recommendations.

### **Adapting to Modern Marketing Trends**

1450 Questa stresses the importance of data-driven marketing, especially as travellers increasingly rely on diverse information sources when planning trips. Younger generations, such as Gen Z and Millennials, use more sources than their predecessors, making it essential for destinations to be present across various platforms. Top sources include travel review websites, friends and family recommendations, destination websites, online visitor guides, and travel service provider platforms.

1455 To optimize marketing strategies, she advocates leveraging data from platforms like Expedia, Sojern, and even Amazon, which can target potential travellers based on their online behaviour. This approach ensures that marketing efforts are precise and reach the desired audience effectively.

### **Embracing Artificial Intelligence and Innovative Tools**

1460 Questa introduces the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in the tourism industry. One notable example is the use of advanced virtual assistants or chatbots that provide tailored travel recommendations. She cites the Outer Banks in North Carolina, where visitors can interact with an AI chatbot to plan trips, explore attractions, and access maps in real-time. This technology enhances pre-trip planning and could be a valuable tool for the BVI to adopt.

1465 AI-powered tools can also streamline itinerary planning for tour operators and destination management companies (DMCs), creating customized travel experiences efficiently. Questa encourages businesses to explore AI technologies to improve customer engagement and streamline operations.

### **The Rise of Edutainment**

1470 The concept of "edutainment" (education combined with entertainment) is gaining popularity, particularly in the U.S., as part of the experiential tourism trend. This approach involves creating engaging and informative content that entertains while educating the audience. It aligns with the growing demand for immersive and meaningful travel experiences, where visitors not only enjoy activities but also gain insights into the destination's culture, history, and environment.

### **The Importance of a Brand Promise and Stakeholder Involvement**

1475 Julie Cuesta elaborates on the concept of a brand promise and the process required to define it. She emphasises the need for comprehensive stakeholder engagement, which involves in-depth interviews and discussions with key figures across sectors, facilitated by organizations like the Ministry of Tourism or the Premier's Office. The goal is to achieve a consensus that reflects the community's shared vision while acknowledging differing opinions.

1480 Questa highlights the critical role of messaging consistency in maintaining a strong brand identity. She stresses the importance of aligning branding efforts with community aspirations and ensuring that all stakeholders—from travel advisors to tour operators—receive the tools and imagery needed to present the brand effectively.

### **Unified Branding Across Sectors**

1485 The discussion turns to the idea of a unified national brand that represents tourism, financial services, asset registration, and investment promotion. Questa uses Costa Rica's "Essential Costa Rica" brand as an example of successful national branding. This brand serves as a foundation for campaigns in diverse sectors while adapting to their unique needs. While acknowledging challenges in achieving a unified brand, Julie stresses the importance of aligning messaging to  
1490 avoid fragmentation and to ensure effective communication with international markets.

Questa also reflects on the previous BVI tagline, "Nature's Little Secret," noting that while some found it effective, others questioned its relevance to sectors like financial services. She underscores the importance of sticking to a brand once it is established, ensuring it evolves without losing its core identity. Community involvement and frank discussions are essential to define and sustain a  
1495 brand that resonates across sectors.

### **Consistency and Perseverance in Branding**

Questa reiterates the importance of consistency in messaging, especially for smaller destinations like the BVI, which lack the substantial marketing budgets of global brands. The goal is to build a brand that aligns with the community's identity and resonates with target audiences, particularly  
1500 in competitive tourism markets like the U.S. and Canada.

She emphasises the necessity of comprehensive preparatory work to build consensus among stakeholders and the community. Although pleasing everyone is impossible, the focus should be on creating a strong foundation that reflects the essence of the BVI while gaining broad support.

The session concludes with a comment highlighting the importance of comparing branding strategies across sectors, illustrating the ongoing dialogue about how to best position the BVI in  
1505 the global market.

### **Balancing Tourism and Financial Services in Branding**

The discussion highlights the challenge of creating a unified brand for the British Virgin Islands (BVI) that equally represents tourism and financial services. Julie Questa references successful  
1510 examples like New Zealand's "100% Pure New Zealand," which integrates its exports and tourism into a cohesive brand, despite regional economic differences. A participant raises concerns about ensuring the sister islands, which are predominantly tourism-focused, are not overshadowed by branding that leans too heavily on financial services. Julie underscores the importance of engaging diverse communities to ensure the brand reflects the unique contributions of all regions.

### **1515 Evolving Taglines and Addressing Stakeholder Expectations**

Questa reflects on BVI's history with taglines like “Nature’s Little Secrets,” noting its appeal but acknowledging current directions from the Tourist Board to move away from its use. She explains that circumstances—such as societal shifts, economic challenges, or major events like hurricanes and the pandemic—can necessitate revisiting or evolving a brand.

- 1520 She gives examples of timely campaigns, like the post-COVID initiative “Something to Celebrate,” which resonated during a specific period but would not be as impactful today. Julie also emphasises the need for brands to evolve without losing their core essence, advising that stakeholder input and community buy-in are critical in this process.

### **Legalities vs. Branding Identity**

- 1525 The session transitions to a discussion about the complexities of balancing legalities with branding. A participant highlights the use of "British" in the "British Virgin Islands" name as both a legal designation and a long-standing global trademark. Concerns are raised about the implications of dropping "British" entirely, given its historical and marketing significance.

- 1530 Questa acknowledges the tension between national pride and practical branding. She advises careful consideration of the potential global recognition loss if the term "British" is removed. Additionally, she notes that rebranding efforts could incorporate a strategic PR campaign to explain and justify such changes. However, she cautions against the challenges of competing with larger geopolitical forces, particularly those of neighbouring U.S. Virgin Islands, which have greater global visibility.

### **1535 Rebranding and Self-Determination: Balancing Identity with Global Recognition**

The ongoing discussion explores the complex issue of branding and identity for the British Virgin Islands (BVI). Participants reflect on historical slogans such as "The Real Virgins are British," "Nature’s Little Secrets," and "BVI Love," noting their varied reception and effectiveness.

- 1540 A recurring theme is the tension between asserting self-determination and retaining the “British” designation, which is seen as a distinguishing factor in global markets. Proponents of the "British Virgin Islands" name argue it provides recognition, security, and alignment with well-established trademarks, particularly in industries like financial services. The term “British” is also cited as a significant factor in marketing tourism, appealing to the American fascination with British culture and royalty.

- 1545 Conversely, some participants emphasise the importance of reclaiming the name "Virgin Islands," reflecting historical roots and aligning with the territory's passport designation. However, this shift raises concerns about differentiating the BVI from the U.S. Virgin Islands and the potential costs of rebranding, particularly for businesses and global registries that include “British Virgin Islands” in their names.

### **1550 Importance of Consultation and Consistency**

Julie Cuesta emphasises the critical role of an inclusive, consultative process in creating a successful brand. She notes that effective branding requires both community and traveller input and must transcend political administrations to ensure continuity and credibility. Historical examples, such as the consistent branding strategies of Australia and Britain, highlight the long-term benefits of sticking to a well-defined identity.

### **The Role of Slogans in Modern Branding**

In response to a query about the relevance of slogans in today's fast-paced world, Julie notes that while slogans can be a useful tool, they are less critical than a strong and unified brand identity. Campaigns can evolve over time to reflect current trends without sacrificing the integrity of the overarching brand. A participant draws a parallel with Jamaica's tagline, "Jamaica, No Problem," which has maintained its identity despite changing campaigns.

### **Perspectives on British vs. Virgin Islands**

Several voices in the discussion argue for retaining "British Virgin Islands" to leverage existing global recognition. Others suggest "Virgin Islands UK" or a dual-branding approach as possible compromises, allowing the territory to assert self-determination while maintaining international distinction. The conversation underscores the need for strategic deliberation to balance historical identity, national pride, and practical considerations.

### **The Branding Debate: British Virgin Islands and Its Future Identity**

The debate continues on whether the BVI should retain "British" in its branding or transition to "Virgin Islands" for simplicity and alignment with historical identity. Many participants emphasise the substantial brand equity associated with "British Virgin Islands," especially in tourism and financial services. This equity is highlighted by the popularity of merchandise featuring the British flag and the reassurance the branding offers to tourists, particularly from the U.S.

Julie Cuesta advises considering the broader implications of any change, including the possibility of maintaining the legal name while developing a marketing identity that could balance both local and international sentiments. She notes the importance of leveraging the consultative process to include stakeholder input and stresses that successful branding transcends political changes, citing international examples like Visit Britain and Australia.

### **Consultative Process and Collaboration**

The discussion reinforces the critical need for a consultative process in rebranding to ensure community buy-in. The failure of recent campaigns like "BVI Love" is attributed to the lack of thorough consultation and stakeholder involvement. Participants agree that inclusive dialogues can help mitigate resistance and build consensus. There's also a call for branding to reflect the destination's unique identity while adapting marketing campaigns to suit evolving trends and circumstances.

Examples from the BVI's history, such as "Nature's Little Secrets," are highlighted as successful initiatives that evolved through strategic campaigns. However, there's an acknowledgment that branding efforts need to remain relevant and cohesive across administrations and sectors.

## **Inclusivity and Stakeholder Engagement**

1590 The conversation shifts to inclusivity in branding. While the British identity is seen as advantageous for tourism and international recognition, the question arises about its impact on the sister islands, which are primarily tourism-focused and lack direct involvement in financial services. Participants call for a branding approach that uplifts all parts of the territory, ensuring no region feels excluded or short-changed.

1595 Historical branding campaigns like "Yes, We Are Different" and "Nature's Little Secrets" resonate with participants, but concerns are raised about recent shifts in messaging. Questa reiterates that branding should reflect the essence of the destination while campaigns can adapt to changing dynamics. She emphasises that effective branding creates a strong foundation for marketing, resonating with both locals and travellers.

## **1600 Key Takeaways and Next Steps**

The session concludes with a focus on collaboration, consultation, and the integration of stakeholder feedback into the ongoing rebranding process. The Junior Minister of Culture and Tourism highlights several critical themes emerging from the summit:

- 1605 1. Collaboration and Consultation: Effective partnerships between public and private sectors are essential for sustainable tourism development.
2. Data Collection: Accurate data is vital for informed decision-making and strategic planning.
3. Customer Service: The importance of delivering consistent, high-quality service across all visitor demographics is emphasised.
- 1610 4. Diversity: Recognizing and celebrating the territory's multicultural community is seen as integral to its identity.
5. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): The merging of key government agencies like customs and immigration is identified as an opportunity to streamline operations and enhance the visitor experience.
- 1615 6. Mindset Shift: While the "Virgin Islands way" is celebrated, there's a need to align local practices with global standards where necessary.

## **Reflections on Visitor Experience and Branding**

1620 Questa underscores that 72% of visitors felt their expectations were exceeded during their trip to the BVI—a statistic that should underpin future branding efforts. Participants agree that the territory's natural beauty, culture, and people are integral to its appeal but emphasise the need to go beyond the traditional "sun, sea, and sand" narrative to create a more holistic identity.

## **Key Learnings and Next Steps for Tourism Development**

The session emphasised the importance of data-driven decisions, collaboration, and consistency in developing a sustainable tourism industry in the Virgin Islands. Participants highlighted the value of using historical insights and new technologies, like artificial intelligence (AI), to enhance customer service and marketing strategies. While AI has the potential to streamline operations and improve efficiency, the human element in hospitality remains irreplaceable.

Discussions also revisited branding and its significance. Historical slogans like "Yes, We're Different" and "Nature's Little Secrets" were praised for their resonance, but the need for broader collaboration in branding decisions was stressed. Future branding efforts must balance local input with global marketing strategies.

The next steps include:

1. Community Consultations: Over the next three months, consultations will take place to gather input for an updated tourism policy.
2. Tourism Policy Framework: The policy will draw on guidelines from the OECS and CARICOM, aiming for a draft by June.
3. Public Engagement: Meetings will be held with subsectors like taxi drivers and sports tourism representatives to ensure inclusivity.

### **Administrative and Structural Changes**

The establishment of a Ministry of Tourism marks significant progress in administrative restructuring. These changes aim to:

- Enhance coordination of tourism initiatives.
- Separate administrative functions from promotional efforts, with the Tourist Board focusing on marketing.
- Support long-term strategic goals through streamlined communication and collaboration.

The Junior Minister also highlighted the importance of fostering public-private partnerships, integrating customer feedback, and maintaining momentum from the summit.

### **Acknowledgments and Closing Remarks**

The event concluded with expressions of gratitude from the Ministry of Tourism:

1. The Premier and Minister of Tourism was recognized for prioritizing tourism as a key economic pillar.
2. The BVI Tourist Board, Hotel and Yachting Associations, and event organizers received special thanks for their roles in ensuring the summit's success.
3. Peter Island Resort and its staff were commended for their hospitality and operational support.
4. The Experts, Julie Cuesta and Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, were celebrated for their valuable insights and contributions.

Special acknowledgments were given to the Panellists for sharing valuable insights that will shape the future of the tourism industry, as well as to the moderators, Mr. Damien Grange and Mr. Keith Dawson, for expertly guiding the event.

1660 All industry stakeholders, whether present in person or attending online, were commended for their active participation and ideas. The importance of collaboration was reiterated, with the recurring theme that tourism is everybody's business. Stakeholders were encouraged to continue contributing as the Virgin Islands moves forward with its goal of building a sustainable, resilient, and thriving tourism sector.

1665 The event concluded with a call to action, emphasising that the summit marked the beginning of a transformative journey for Virgin Islands tourism. Attendees were reminded that building upon the foundation laid during the summit requires collective effort from all involved.



# Responses to the Open-Ended Survey Administered on Day 2



GOVERNMENT OF THE  
**VIRGIN ISLANDS**  
Ministry of Tourism, Culture  
and Sustainable Development

## Context

The Tourism Summit provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue on the future of the British Virgin Islands (BVI) tourism sector. An open-ended survey<sup>i</sup> was administered during Day 2 of the Summit to canvas their views on those areas that should be covered in the National Tourism Policy to be drafted by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development.

Attendees shared extensive feedback on various aspects of tourism policy, emphasizing the need for strategic planning, sustainable development, cultural preservation, and customer service excellence. This summary consolidates and categorizes their insights under thematic areas, ensuring that all contributions are considered in the policy formulation process.

## Disaster Risk Reduction, Safety, and Inclusion

A critical component of the proposed tourism policy is disaster risk reduction and safety. The vulnerability of the Virgin Islands to natural disasters necessitates a policy framework that includes proactive disaster management measures to ensure visitor safety and business continuity. Moreover, stakeholders underscored the importance of fostering a tourism environment that embraces diversity, ensuring that religious beliefs, ethnicity, and gender identities are respected and included in the sector's development strategies. These elements are integral to creating an inclusive and welcoming destination for all visitors.

## Workforce Development and Customer Service Excellence

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the importance of continuous staff training and education as a key driver for sustainable tourism growth. Ensuring that hospitality workers, frontline officers, taxi drivers, and other tourism personnel are well-versed in service excellence is vital to enhancing visitor experiences.

Language training was highlighted as a necessity, particularly for those in direct contact with international visitors, enabling better communication and personalized service. Investment in customer service education was recommended, with a strong push for cultural sensitivity training to address concerns about racism in hospitality.

Further, businesses within the sector should educate their employees on regulatory compliance, particularly regarding tourism safety and financial regulations, including the risks of money laundering within the industry. A summit participant even offered expertise in this area, suggesting a need for targeted workshops.

## Cultural and Heritage Preservation

A recurring concern was the perceived erosion of BVI culture due to the increasing influence of external cultures. Participants urged policymakers to take proactive measures to protect and promote local heritage.

There was a strong call for investment in historical preservation, ensuring that historical sites are maintained and actively showcased to both tourists and locals. Many visitors reportedly express disappointment at the lack of well-maintained cultural attractions, indicating the need for a structured approach to cultural tourism development.

To enhance authenticity in tourism offerings, stakeholders advocated for greater integration of local cuisine into the tourism experience. Instead of serving generic fast food like hamburgers and hotdogs, which cruise ship passengers can access anywhere along their routes, BVI should prioritize showcasing its unique culinary traditions, adding differentiation to its tourism product.

## **Sustainable Marine and Environmental Management**

40 A significant portion of the feedback revolved around the protection of BVI's marine resources, particularly in the yachting and sports fishing sectors. There was a strong consensus that government regulations must be strengthened to prevent overfishing and ensure sustainable use of marine resources.

Concerns were raised about the lack of adequate monitoring of fisheries, with external parties exploiting BVI's marine resources due to weak regulatory enforcement. Participants urged the government to  
45 implement stricter controls, including penalties for violations.

Particular attention was drawn to spearfishing regulations, with calls to ban night spearfishing as fish are defenceless at night, leading to rapid depletion of snorkelling and diving sites. Additionally, participants emphasized that no one should be allowed to spearfish in areas frequently used by tourists for snorkelling, as these sites are integral to the yachting industry.

50 Investments should also be made in marine conservation parks and protected dive sites, ensuring the long-term viability of underwater tourism. Without adequate monitoring and intervention, the depletion of marine resources could have devastating long-term effects on the industry.

## **Integration of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Tourism**

There was a clear consensus that agriculture and fisheries should be integrated into the tourism economy.  
55 Farm-to-table initiatives could create stronger linkages between local farmers and the hospitality industry, reducing reliance on imported food and enhancing the authenticity of the visitor experience.

Sustainable fisheries were also highlighted as a critical component of the tourism product. If properly regulated, local fishing operations could support the hospitality industry while maintaining environmental balance. Policies should encourage responsible sourcing of seafood for restaurants, ensuring that conch and  
60 other marine species are not over-harvested.

## **Diversification of the Tourism Product**

Stakeholders emphasized the need to broaden BVI's tourism offerings beyond its traditional focus. Recommendations included:

- Eco-tourism development with guided tours of national parks, nature reserves, and coral reefs.
- 65 • Adventure tourism expansion through activities such as zip-lining, hiking, deep-sea fishing, and scuba diving.
- Wellness tourism initiatives, including yoga retreats and health-oriented experiences.
- Culinary tourism, featuring food festivals and cooking classes showcasing BVI's rich culinary heritage.
- 70 • Luxury tourism for high-spending visitors seeking exclusivity.
- Sports tourism, with a focus on hosting water sports competitions and tournaments.

Stakeholders also supported greater community participation in tourism, advocating for home-stay programs to enhance cultural exchange between tourists and locals.

## **Investment in Infrastructure and Transportation**

75 Concerns were raised about the state of BVI's tourism infrastructure. Participants urged the government to prioritize:

- Upgrading ports, particularly Beef Island and Virgin Gorda, as the current facilities do not meet the standards expected by high-end travellers.
- Enhancing ferry services between the islands and St. Thomas, rather than expanding the airport, which some believe is unnecessary given better maritime connectivity.
- Improving road networks to ensure smoother transport across the territory.
- Expanding affordable accommodations, such as eco-lodges and boutique hotels, to cater to different traveller segments.

## Marketing, Data Collection, and Digital Transformation

Marketing strategies were another major focus area. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of:

- Leveraging social media and influencer marketing to attract new visitors.
- Developing virtual tours and interactive content to showcase BVI's attractions before visitors arrive.
- Implementing data-driven decision-making by mandating that visitor arrival data be systematically recorded and maintained for marketing insights.

Participants also suggested utilizing AI-driven tools to streamline tourism policy review processes and assess market expansion opportunities.

## Tourism Governance and Policy Implementation

There was a strong demand for a holistic tourism strategy developed collaboratively among government ministries, tourism providers, cultural groups, and the public. Stakeholders stressed that:

1. The tourism policy must have a clear mission and vision, aligned with economic, social, and environmental goals.
2. A structured measurement system should track visitor numbers, spending, and environmental impact.
3. Regular review cycles should assess whether policies remain relevant and effective.
4. A five-year strategic roadmap should be developed, outlining tangible steps to achieve long-term goals.
5. The role of the Ministry of Tourism should be clarified, with many arguing that the Tourist Board should continue leading marketing efforts to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.

A case study was referenced, highlighting how Seoul, South Korea, successfully transformed itself into a global tourism hub through a well-structured strategic plan. BVI was encouraged to adopt similar long-term planning mechanisms.

## Final Thoughts and Recommendations

The Tourism Summit was widely praised as a successful forum for dialogue, but some felt it missed opportunities to inform stakeholders about how BVI is marketed and how industry players can align with these efforts. There was also debate on branding, with some advocating for a return to the slogan "Nature's Little Secret", emphasizing BVI's unique and exclusive tourism appeal.

Ultimately, the feedback underscores the urgent need for a cohesive, data-driven, and sustainably oriented National Tourism Policy that reflects the diverse perspectives and aspirations of all stakeholders.

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<sup>i</sup> The open ended survey was administered on the second day of the Tourism Summit to elicit feedback from all of the participants on the priorities and areas of focus that should be considered in the National Tourism Policy. The survey administered follows:

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## **National Tourism Policy Consultation**

The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development will consult and formulate a National Tourism Policy by June 2025.

1. Please list some areas the Ministry, BVI Tourist Board and the BVI Yachting Hotel and Tourism Association should focus on when considering a tourism sector policy.
2. Do you have any feedback based on the presentations, panels, or interests you would like to share that should influence or be explored further to inform the National Tourism Policy?