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# The Bahamas

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## Rebranding The Bahamas: new government to promote culture, low-key

Sun, seas, beaches – over the years, all have been key ingredients in The Bahamas' thriving tourism industry. To increase the number of visitors, The Bahamas welcomed high-rise hotels and sprawling "mega" resorts with the most dazzling being the colossal Atlantis Resort on Paradise Island.

Now, a newly elected government is remaking the image of The Bahamas in order to reverse ongoing dips in visitor arrivals and spending. To provide new direction for the tourism industry, the government is promoting more than the beach. For starters, Bahamian culture.

Elaborating on the need to emphasize culture, something that's non-existent in big resort areas, the head of the newly created Ministry of Tourism and Aviation, Neko Grant says:

"We believe that persons visiting our shores come for an experience. There is some rest and some relaxation, but they also would like to have a cultural experience. And that is one of the reasons that we certainly are high on culture. If you don't look after it (culture), it will fade away from you. We want to expose visitors to more of it." As an example, Grant noted the government plans to promote more cultural festivals.

A new direction for resort properties

In addition, the government is now looking askance at future "mega" resort projects, particularly on The Bahamas' sleepy and idyllic outer islands, known as the "Family Islands." Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham's fiscally conservative government says it prefers low-key projects. New hotel and resorts should "blend into" the landscape on the main islands of the 700-island Bahamian archipelago, says Neko Grant.

"There's no question that we are rebranding our islands," he said, during an interview. "Our predecessors were high on (mega) anchor projects. Our focus is on things Bahamian, if you will." On the idyllic outlining islands, for instance, the administration favors high-end "boutique" hotels owned by The Bahamians – not glass-and-steel high-rises. And in the heart of Nassau, the capital, sidewalk cafes with a local flavor will be welcome in a revitalized Bay Street area. All together, The Bahamas is poised to spend nearly \$27 million for marketing and promotion in the fiscal year to remake its "brand." "We feel there is a need for the visitors coming to our shores to have a truly Bahamian experience," Grant said.

In addition, the emphasis on Bahamian ownership is seen as a way to keep more tourist dollars in The Bahamas and to improve services by giving more Bahamians a stake in the tourism industry. The tourism industry employs one half of the workforce and generates at least 40 percent of the \$6 billion economy – so even a hiccup in the sector can cause immediate effects. Last year, The Bahamas registered 4.8 million tourist visits — 300,000 fewer than in 2004 for a 6 percent decline. Grant blames much of the decline on a softening of the cruise ship market, which also affected other Caribbean destinations. Still, other factors are nevertheless keeping the tourism sector from reaching its potential, he said. For one thing, customer satisfaction must be improved on some islands, a problem that is being addressed through educational programs.

"We're very much concerned about our rate of return visits," Grant said.

It ranges from about 55 percent on some islands to nearly 70 percent on others." He noted the outlying islands of Abaco and Bimini score the highest rate of return visitors.

Prime Minister Ingraham and his Free National Movement party, which came to power in a stunning election upset on May 2nd had described some of the revitalization measures for the tourism industry during the campaign.

The change of direction comes as The Bahamas basks in an unprecedented development boom that's fueling an accelerating economy. It involves some 53 projects worth about \$13 billion. Most Bahamians have welcomed the jobs created by the boom, which took off during the previous administration of Perry

The Bahamas Travel



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Christie and his Progressive Liberal Party. At the same time, however, there was growing unease that too many big hotels and resorts were threatening The Bahamas' charm and fragile environment.

The anti-development sentiments were strongest with respect to the underdeveloped outlying islands. At least one legal action was taken to stop a project. Recently, the Caribbean Development Bank called upon The Bahamas to balance its fast-paced growth against environmental considerations.

The previous administration, on the other hand, had called for "anchor" projects on each of the main Bahamian islands to attract investments and create jobs. But Grant said, "We are concerned (about mega projects), and we would wish for projects that are coming on stream to not be over imposing on the host island. We would wish for these projects to blend in."

The new administration is reviewing projects approved by the previous government. "In cases where they're inconsistent with the way we think, efforts will be made to negotiate changes," Grant said. He nevertheless stressed that governments are continuous, and responsible governments "don't go around breaking contracts. We consider ourselves a responsible government."

Among the big projects the previous government attracted to The Bahamas were: the Ginn Sur Mer mega resort in Grand Bahama; the Baha Mar mega project on Cable Beach in New Providence; and projects on the outlying islands of Rose Island and Mayaguana.

The Atlantis Hotel was built during Ingraham's previous term between 1992 and 2000 – well before the current development boom started. The resort employs more than 8,000 Bahamians.

As part of its new tourism policy, the government is:

- Encouraging the development of tourism for Bahamian-owned businesses
  - Upgrading Nassau's International Airport and constructing a new airport terminal
  - Studying the feasibility for building a cruise ship terminal in Freeport, Grand Bahama
  - Diversifying its tourism market to attract tourists from countries other than the United States.
- Americans represent well over 75 percent of visitors to The Bahamas.

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