

The Quintessential Caribbean Destination

An Interview with The Honorable Lindsay F.P. Grant, Minister of Tourism, Transport and Ports, St. Kitts & Nevis

EDITORS' NOTE *Capping a career of public service, The Honorable Lindsay F.P. Grant was officially appointed as a Cabinet Minister following the February 2015 elections, serving as the Minister of Tourism, International Trade, Industry and Commerce. Following the successful re-election of Team Unity in 2020, Grant commenced his second term as Minister of Tourism with the oversight of international transport and ports added to his portfolio. With the unprecedented onset of*



The Hon. Lindsay F.P. Grant

COVID, Grant worked closely with the Ministry of Health to establish the health and safety protocols and travel requirements that have allowed the Federation to see one of the lowest rates of COVID in the Caribbean while allowing tourism to reopen. Under his tenure, St. Kitts has benefited from record setting air and cruise arrivals. Cruise passenger arrivals reached the one million passenger mark for the first time in the nation's history in 2018, and that milestone was reached again in 2019 earning St. Kitts the designation of a marquee port. He also oversaw the completed construction of a second pier at Port Zante allowing up to three Oasis or XCEL class ships to dock simultaneously. In 2019, Caribbean Journal awarded St. Kitts the title of Cruise Destination of the Year. Grant has established crucial alliances with airline partners which attained St. Kitts' recognition from international airlines at Routes Americas 2018 awards for its strategic airlift development. He has also negotiated partnerships with some of the top hotel and hospitality groups. St. Kitts won the Destination Stewardship Award for 2019 from the World Travel & Tourism Council, the world's top recognition in sustainable tourism. Grant has been a practicing lawyer since 1991, specializing in corporate and commercial law. He is a senior partner at the firm of Grant, Powell & Co., a position from which he is currently on sabbatical in order to fulfill his role in the new government administration. He began his career in the firm of Vieira & Grant and later became a senior partner in the firm of Lindsay Grant & Co. A member of the board of directors for a variety of private companies, Grant is also a member of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. In addition, he is a member of the Leeward Islands Cricket Board and a former President of the St. Kitts Cricket Association.

Previously, he was President of the St. Thomas Trinity Football Association and he has played on the St. Kitts & Nevis National Table Tennis team. Grant holds a master's degree in law from Harvard University with a specialty in banking and finance. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of the West Indies, having attended the Cave Hill Campus in Barbados. He also earned a Certificate of Legal Education from Norman Mandy Law School in Jamaica.

How has St. Kitts & Nevis been impacted by the global pandemic and what do you see as the priorities for recovery for the twin-island nations?

Like much of the rest of the Caribbean, and the world, we experienced a slowdown in tourism due to the onset of COVID and the subsequent emergence of new variants. The closure of our borders on March 25, 2020 had repercussions on all industries that are affected by tourism from taxi operators and restaurants to hoteliers and activity providers. Tourism is the primary economic driver in St. Kitts & Nevis, followed by manufacturing, but approximately 60 percent of our GDP is directly or indirectly impacted by tourism. After closing our borders, we continued to follow the science to inform our decisions. While other Caribbean destinations reopened their borders, St. Kitts & Nevis remained closed to travel and we observed

the impact that reopening had in other destinations. We reopened our borders on October 31, 2020 with some of the most comprehensive travel requirements in the Caribbean, developed in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the National COVID-19 Task Force. We remain committed to keeping our nationals, residents and visitors safe and will therefore continue to follow the science to inform our decisions as we move through the latter phases of reopening.

Our top priority at this time is to get 70 percent of our population vaccinated so we can achieve herd immunity which will hopefully allow us to get closer to returning to "normal." Vaccination is underway in St. Kitts & Nevis and we are encouraging all stakeholders in the tourism industry to speak to their doctor about receiving their free COVID-19 vaccination. I have received my first dose of the vaccine, along with other members of the Ministry and the Cabinet, to show support for the vaccination program which as of March 10 has seen 5,176 persons receive their first dose of the vaccine. The twin-island nation is home to roughly 53,000 persons, many of whom rely on tourism and related economic activities for their income, and therefore vaccinations are critical so we can move forward towards growth.

What have been the keys to the government's ability to so effectively manage COVID with very few cases and no deaths on the island?

Two primary factors have contributed to this success: the "All of Society Approach"

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we've implemented in St. Kitts & Nevis and the comprehensive travel requirements outlined by the Ministry of Health in partnership with the St. Kitts Tourism Authority and the Nevis Tourism Authority.

The "All of Society Approach" was a campaign that kicked off in March 2020 when we initially closed our borders to international travel. The focus of this campaign was to encourage our nationals and residents to adhere to the proven practices that help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 including frequent hand-washing, mask-wearing and social distancing. Before opening our international borders in October 2020, we had already successfully prevented the spread of COVID-19 within the Federation and wanted to reassure our nationals and residents that we would reopen and do so safely. We identified what protocols worked for other destinations and combined this with the existing science to develop our current travel requirements.

Our comprehensive travel requirements ask all persons arriving to St. Kitts & Nevis to take a nasopharyngeal RT-PCR 72 hours prior to travel. They must submit their negative test result along with the online KNA travel form (knatravelform.kn) and their booking at a Travel Approved hotel. Once on island, they "Vacation in Place" at their Travel Approved hotel where they are free to move about the property, partake in various hotels activities and use the available amenities. Those staying longer than seven days are tested on day 7 and if their test result is negative, they may book select tours and excursions through the front desk. Those who stay longer than two weeks will again be tested on day 14 and if their result is negative, they may leave their accommodation and freely move throughout the Federation. All persons departing St. Kitts & Nevis are asked to take a RT-PCR test 48-72 hours prior to travel.

These factors have resulted in St. Kitts & Nevis maintaining one of the lowest case rates of COVID-19 in the Caribbean. Presently, the CDC rates the Federation at Level 1: Low Covid Risk, and the State Department assigned the Federation a Level 2 travel advisory. We are the only Caribbean island currently placed at a Level 2 (Level 1 is only New Zealand, Taiwan and Macau).

Will you discuss St. Kitts & Nevis' economic shift over the past two decades from an island nation reliant on sugar production to an emphasis on growing the tourism sector?

In 2004, the economy shifted from being a monocrop sugar-based economy to a service-based tourism economy. Our tourism industry, when compared to other Caribbean industries who have made the transition from sugar or bananas, is still in its infancy stage which allows it to be quaint and charming, as tourism was many, many years ago in other Caribbean islands – friendly, open, with the ability to choose which bar, beach or restaurant you prefer. St. Kitts & Nevis remains the quintessential Caribbean destination. It is the Caribbean we remember and love from 50 years ago.

St. Kitts & Nevis offers a unique tourism product that focuses on its 500 years of history and emphasizes cultural experiences and activities. Paired with a striking landscape and secluded beaches, St. Kitts & Nevis has attracted renowned hospitality groups like Four Seasons, Hyatt Hotels & Resorts and Marriott International, each of which has a property in the Federation. We do not have any all-inclusive properties because we continue to focus on encouraging visitors to venture outside of their hotel to see the island, meet the people and experience the local life and culture.

What do you tell tourists about the advantages St. Kitts & Nevis offers from a tourism standpoint and do you feel that the twin-island nation is well-understood globally?

In today's day and age, the advantage we offer is safety. St. Kitts & Nevis has been recognized worldwide for its efficient management of the COVID-19 pandemic, so for those seeking a safe destination where they can rest assured that the necessary precautions are taken for their health, they should look no further than St. Kitts & Nevis.

While we lack the global profile as some other, more mass-market Caribbean islands, we are continuing to welcome visitors from all over the world and we hope they return home with fond memories and plenty of stories to tell. Right now, we are receiving global recognition for our response to the pandemic and I hope this will encourage visitors to put St. Kitts & Nevis on their travel bucket list. With vaccination efforts underway, it is imperative that we get our people vaccinated so we can get back to inviting visitors to explore our unique and authentic experiences. It is my goal as Minister of Tourism to ensure all those in the tourism sector are vaccinated so our visitors can enjoy the traditional Caribbean experience that St. Kitts & Nevis offers them.

We have always actively encouraged visitors to explore the island which has allowed various local businesses to flourish. From beach bars to restaurants to artists, all of these businesses have been able to benefit from tourism and this makes for a more authentic experience for our visitors who can easily try a variety of local cuisine, shop the latest local fashions and learn about the unique culture of both St. Kitts and Nevis. Our efforts to preserve our culture are evident throughout. Historical sights or points of interest dating back hundreds of years abound. There's the majestic UNESCO World Heritage Site of Brimstone Hill Fortress, the St. Kitts Scenic Railway, the only authentic railway in the Caribbean, Romney Manor, and the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton – one of the Founding Fathers of the U.S. – in Nevis, to name a few.

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Then there's the island culinary scene which has seen local restaurants and bars flourish with the influx of tourism. Dozens of different eateries

offer up an opportunity to try local dishes like salt-fish, conch and fresh-caught lobster. From El Fredo's in Basseterre to Mugsy's in Dieppe Bay, and from Reggae Beach Bar & Grill down by Cockleshell Bay to Marshalls or Serendipity for fine dining, along with the selection of live beach bars and restaurants that line St. Kitts' infamous "The Strip," there's no shortage of places to dine offering up delectable local cuisine.

How accessible is St. Kitts & Nevis as a tourism destination and what are the key markets that you are focused on for future growth?

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, St. Kitts & Nevis was easily accessible via non-stop airlift from several gateways in the U.S., through the U.K. and Canada, and via cruise ship lines. Worldwide these industries have been forced to cut back due to travel restrictions and health concerns and we, like all other destinations, are currently feeling the impact of that. However, we still offer convenient flights via Miami and Charlotte on American Airlines, Seaborne is flying out of San Juan, Puerto Rico at this time, Delta is scheduled to resume service out of Atlanta and New York in June, and British Airways intends to resume airlift in May once their lockdown lifts. With vaccination efforts underway in our source markets, which include the U.S., U.K. and Canada, we anticipate that there will be a significant pickup in Q4 by which time we hope to have even more flights arriving to the Federation.

For the spring and summer for the U.S., we are currently targeting travelers that are planning for future travel in 2021 from the Midwest, Southwest, Southeast and Northeast. The Northeast and Southeast remain strong markets for us and we'd like to maintain our presence in these regions while drawing more visitors from the Midwest and Southwest. We are continuing to monitor the travel restrictions in Canada and the U.K. and work closely with our travel agent and advisor partners in each market.

What interested you in public service and serving in government?

Working in the Government is rewarding because it allows me to give back to the country that has given me and my family so much. Tourism, in particular, allows and empowers the citizens of St. Kitts & Nevis to open new businesses, achieve financial independence and, in turn, makes for a more vibrant economy. Every decision is made with the needs of our stakeholders in mind and in addition to thinking about the hoteliers and tour operators, there are other local, small, independent ventures that have flourished due to tourism including aloe rub vendors, hair braiders and our renowned primate petting vendors.

Through the unprecedented challenges caused by the pandemic, we've seen our stakeholders rise to the challenge and innovate and that has been uplifting. We love seeing the entrepreneurial spirit of our people and we strive to do our best to help and encourage innovation through various channels such as workshops that teach social media skills.

COVID slowed the pace, but it has not stopped St. Kitts & Nevis from growing and being the authentic travel destination it is. ●