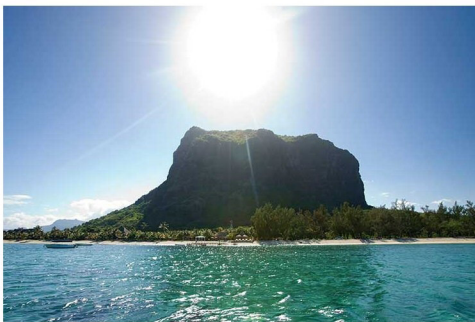


Mauritius reaps the rewards of a well-sown strategy

Mauritius is experiencing tourism growth not seen for 20 years, as it enjoys the success of a tourism strategy launched two years ago.



The island is heading towards an increase in arrivals of 11% for 2016, off the back of a year of 10% growth in 2015 according to Arnaud Martin, chairman of Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA), who added that the country had not seen double-digit growth in arrivals since 1996.

"For several years, growth was flat, which was worrying, as hotels were always increasing in number, which caused a disequilibrium in supply and demand and the mood wasn't particularly good, with hotels were heavily indebted," said Martin. "We have since been working off very clear objectives as to where we need the country to go in terms of tourism; we have been focusing on re-establishing equilibrium. We have also seen an increase in tourism receipts of 14%, which is very reassuring. We have to ensure we are focused on sustained growth."

He said increased above the line marketing focused on the attractiveness of the island had been a key contributor to the growth.

"Firstly, we had to acknowledge that it is the consumer who runs the show," said Martin. "We had to make sure they knew exactly what Mauritius had to offer in terms of attractiveness and let them choose us based on that."

Accessibility has also been vastly ramped up, Martin said, including Turkish Airlines, which launched service from Istanbul in December 2015 then increased that to a four-weekly service to the island in February this year.

Lufthansa also returned to the destination in December 2015 and Eurowings followed with service to the island.

"In addition, the arrival of these two airlines [Turkish Airlines and Lufthansa] has made it easier for New Europe countries to access Mauritius," he said. "We are seeing very positive numbers from Romania, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, which were simply not there a couple of years ago, but those countries are in consistent GDP growth and have an emerging middle class so are very interesting destinations for us to focus on. They have also made up for a dip in Russian visitors. It's good for us to have a diversified market."



He said one of the key strategic moves to grow tourism had been the implementation of more Bilateral Air Services Agreement (BASA); Australia and Finland are among the more recent countries agreements have been signed with.

AirAsia X launched nonstop thrice-weekly flights between Kuala Lumpur to Mauritius last month.

"We also now see flights from India and China and of course we have also seen Emirates increase service with their two A380s - and they would like even more frequency," Martin said. "Air Mauritius is also investing in its product, including two new Airbus A350 next autumn which will add to the quality of the experience."

The government issued a moratorium on any new hotel development to ease overcapacity, a move which ended in June this year, but Martin said any new projects would be carefully analysed before being greenlit.

"What has been encouraging is the investment in existing product by owners," said the chairman.

Lux Resorts and Hotels is to completely transform its Merville Beach hotel into the five-star Lux Grand Bay, while One&Only Le Saint Geran is to undergo an extensive renovation, closing in February for the work to take place for several months. [Heritage Le Telfair](#) will undergo a refurbishment next year between May and August, re-opening in September.

"In the long-run, our strategy is to transition from being hotel-focused as an industry to attraction-based tourism," said Martin, using the example of the island's eight golf courses and growing number of activities, such as kite surfing, and trekking.

Launched last year, Porlwi by Light, a festival of contemporary culture in Port Louis, is also a positive move to events-tourism, Martin said. The event takes place this year December 2-4.

While Martin said the tourism prospects were overwhelmingly positive for the island, he sounded a cautionary note for 2017, a year for presidential election in France, Mauritius' number one market. "The outbound market tends to dip when that is taking place," he said. "But we have plenty of other countries on our radar, including Japan and Korea."