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MINISTER OF TOURISM & AVIATION
ADDRESS TO THE NATION
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In this nation's short but determined history, moments of triumph, and moments of tragedy, tell the story of who we are as Bahamians. We are a proud people, a ***strong*** people, a united people.

Nonetheless, this year has undoubtedly been marred by moments of tragedy—the wounds of Hurricane Dorian have yet to heal, COVID-19 has brought tourism to a standstill, and tens of thousands of Bahamians have been tragically left without jobs.

But still, we march.

For Bahamians are no strangers to making history under challenging, seemingly impossible circumstances.

After Hurricane Dorian, when the world showed The Bahamas as a nation ripped to pieces, blown away by an unthinkable force, The Bahamas showed the world a people united in a shared spirit of struggle, stewardship, and service.

My Ministry went to great lengths to share with media, travel sites, and consumers the world over that we are indeed a “family of islands,” urging travelers to visit our shores as the most valuable form of help in rebuilding our nation.

The strategy worked.....and so they came! In 2019, under challenging, seemingly impossible circumstances, The Bahamas recorded our strongest tourism numbers ever.....with 7.2 million visitor arrivals!

Today, we face a storm of a much different kind. This one we cannot predict, but this time, we can do our very best to take care of Bahamians. I have every confidence that this Bahamas will once again persevere and emerge prouder, *stronger*, and more united than before.

I am indeed grateful for the opportunity this afternoon to speak, along with the Director General of Tourism, about the plans for the reopening our tourism sector.

Few can argue with the fact that, since the 1950s, tourism has accelerated the growth of the Bahamian economy to a scale unrivaled across the Caribbean – facilitating the expansion of our middle class, the education of our children, and the socioeconomic means to earn an honest living.

As we all know, Tourism has been the #1 provider of employment for the Bahamas, the #1 provider of foreign exchange for the Bahamas, and the #1 source of revenue for the Treasury of the Bahamas. Any other economic sector was a distant second.

I suspect also that, in the short term, there is no other economic sector, existing or currently contemplated, that can deliver, with immediacy and magnitude, foreign exchange, employment levels and tax revenues, like Tourism.

Time and time again, this industry has demonstrated its resilience – recovering and rebounding after hurricanes, previous pandemics, and global economic downturns.

Over the last three years, no one can question that tourism has generated record visitor arrivals and ever-increasing tax receipts and ever-increasing employment.

The peculiarity of tourism is the need for social gathering between travelers.....and between travelers and service providers. That is why this pandemic has affected tourism globally so substantially. It is impossible to overstate the destabilizing impact of COVID-19 on not only the global industry, but our local tourism product.

Moreover, this downturn has emboldened cynics on Bahamian social media, whose false narratives have clouded our collective understanding of tourism.

It is critical in these uncertain times that we separate fact from fiction, and remind Bahamians why the tourism industry has and will always remain an integral component of our economy.

There are three local and universal truths which bear greater emphasis, ones which should silence this disinformation campaign the vocal minority are working hard to spread.

1. Tourism's economic potential is unparalleled – travel and tourism remains the world's second-fastest growing sector, an increasingly resilient industry, and the world's largest employer of both skilled and unskilled workers. Every economy in the world is involved in the tourism trade.

2. Tourism's impact on trade and investment is HUGE – few industries bring in more foreign currency and boost foreign reserves. Many developing countries, including The Bahamas, rely on tax receipts from their tourism industries to facilitate food and construction imports.

3. Tourism has done more to facilitate human and capital development throughout The Bahamas than any other industry. Tax receipts have for years funded essential investments in housing, education, health, government services, and infrastructural development. More than 50 percent of the government's direct and indirect tax revenue comes from the over seven (7) million visitors who flock to our shores each year.

Quite simply, no industry takes better care of Bahamians than

TOURISM.

When you consider tourism as a marketplace—an enabler of economic activity and trade—it is much easier to see the immense benefit the industry brings to Bahamians.

Think about the boaters, the taxi drivers, the divers, the fisherman, the craftsmen, the artisans, the tour guides—those authentically Bahamian entrepreneurs—alongside realtors, lawyers, accountants, grocers, insurers, and a host of other service providers. These livelihoods represent so much of what the Bahamian economy has to offer, and each relies extensively on the tourism industry.

Tourism is a *collective economic force* – one in which every citizen and resident is involved whether we or they like it or not.

That is especially true of our model of tourism where we want our visitors to roam freely across the length and breadth of our communities and our archipelago. As far as possible, we want our visitors to avoid tourism zones so that we can ensure the broadest possible distribution of income and benefits of tourism. That is why we were so heartened by the rapid growth of such phenomena as Airbnb where visitors are ending up in parts of The Bahamas never before able to directly benefit from Tourism.

But it is hardly a secret that this spirit has slowly started to fade.

While tourism has indeed served us well over the years—increasing foreign currency reserves and investment inflows—the industry has seen very little local growth, Bahamian growth, for almost two decades.

These pillars of tourism—foreign currency, investment, and air access—were stronger in The Bahamas than any other nation in the Caribbean, but we did not reinvest more of our hard-earned dollars in building and developing the local tourism marketplace.

In many countries, including the U.S., 80 percent of that marketplace is defined by small businesses, mom and pop shops and small entrepreneurs who were willing to take risks to achieve success. And that marketplace, which has greatly expanded the U.S. economy, is the most diversified in the world.

And so, when we talk about diversification *from* tourism, it suggests a misunderstanding of trade, of markets, and how economies function.

Instead, we must talk about diversification *within* tourism. It means we have to incorporate more *local content* from manufacturing, culture and heritage, arts and entertainment, accommodations, restaurants, authentically Bahamian products and transportation to build a dynamic market, and to ensure that every dollar spent by the visitor on those goods and services stays in country and in the hands of Bahamians.

Indeed, Bahamians have the most to benefit. When operating with proper oversight and transparent governance, tourism is an equal opportunity provider – an equitable, honest means of making a living. That means that anyone with skills and resources, no matter how meagre, can access the industry for trade purposes. Can we improve on this tourism model to increase trade and economic opportunity? Absolutely!

I say it again. Tourism does not operate in a vacuum. It does not produce anything but instead relies on local assets in nature, culture and heritage, value-added chains and sectoral linkages to agriculture, maritime, construction, transport, arts and entertainment, marine activities and real estate and retail. Everything comes together to create a dynamic marketplace for the production and sale of goods and services.

The Ministry of Tourism then steps in and determines the natural and unique attributes of this marketplace to promote **Brand Bahamas** on the global stage, which attracts international buyers trading in all manner of goods and services that fall under the umbrella of leisure and hospitality.

However, we must be mindful of the challenges and circumstances facing The Bahamas. Our marketplace is more vulnerable than many in our region, and indeed around the world. It is neither as robust, nor as competitive as it could be. It lacks diversity, and has been starved of significant increases in new, locally owned businesses and market innovation for many years. That is why...the recent announcement of the development of Jack's Bay in Eleuthera by Bahamian entrepreneurs is so in line with the untapped opportunities for the Bahamas.

Other jurisdictions have taken advantage of digital platforms to make doing business easier and more convenient for the customer, and to enable someone in Asia, the U.K. or the U.S. to find their marketplace of products and services online and to plan and purchase products from wherever they are in the world.

These digital platforms have transformed the leisure and hospitality marketplaces in Europe, the U.S., Canada and Asia from localized markets to globalized markets, but the digital era has still not firmly taken root in the Bahamian tourism economy. So many of our small and medium enterprises are finding that business growth and continuity is increasingly challenged, rendering them invisible and uncompetitive in the global tourism marketplace.

I say to you that, like all industries, tourism has its challenges and COVID-19 has proven to be a formidable opponent; but, if we bind together as a nation, if we can adhere to the Health protocols and govern ourselves with discipline and accountability, we can and will overcome this affliction.

We will get back to work, adapt to a new normal, and build a better and safer tourism marketplace.

This is what we are preparing to do in the Ministry of Tourism, helping make the industry *better for Bahamians* – no small task, especially under a new array of challenging, seemingly impossible circumstances.

The Bahamas has seen a significant fall-off in visitor arrivals during the first six months of the year – from a record 3.9 million arrivals in 2019, to 1.7 million in 2020. This 56 percent reduction in our tourism business could not be avoided, owing to the shutdown of both the cruise and airline industries in late March alongside a recent resurgence of COVID-19 in many of our key markets (Florida, Texas, California and Georgia).

With our tourism marketplace at an effective standstill, my Ministry was tasked with developing robust protocols for the safe, eventual reopening of the tourism industry. When we first closed our borders on March 20, the Ministry of Tourism quickly established, through public/private partnerships, a committee tasked with creating National Tourism Readiness and Recovery Guidelines.

These incorporated the strictest health protocols, sanitation standards, and best practice operational models from both regional and international health agencies to ensure as comprehensive a plan as possible.

The TRRP, as it is known, has been praised extensively by international tourism agencies and has been accepted as the Standard Operational Plan for all Bahamian-based tourism enterprises moving forward. To date, over 15,000 Bahamians have been trained in this protocol for re-opening the tourism industry with further training resuming later this month.

The Tourism Readiness & Recovery Plan is an incredibly comprehensive doctrine – encompassing the entire guest experience from their arrival through departure.

Protocols for sanitization, the wearing of masks, and social distancing ensure that both tourists *and* Bahamians are taken care of.

With today's travelers demanding rigorous hygiene standards, cleanliness, and overall safety – we feel that our Tourism Readiness & Recovery Plan addresses—if not exceeds—these expectations. And, to its credit, as often stated by Public Health officials, contact tracing has revealed that there has been near zero transmission of COVID-19 from a visitor to The Bahamas to any of our citizens, residents and, for that matter, any fellow traveler.

In record time, the Digital Technology Unit of the government's Department of Information Technology has rolled out a Travel Health Visa electronic platform.

For those of you that are not familiar with this new requirement, any person who is overseas.....out of the country.....and who wants to come into or enter The Bahamas.....he or she must now apply for a Travel Health Visa at [**travel.gov.bs**](https://travel.gov.bs).

Before you apply, however, you must be in possession of a RT PCR COVID-19 test which can only be five (5) days old when you arrive at the border. It was ten (10) days! Now, it is five (5) days! Obviously, the shorter the period between the taking of the test and presenting at the border, the greater the accuracy of the test. Once you upload your test, a newly formed Travel Compliance Unit in the Ministry of Tourism will review the test to make sure it is negative, within the required time period and from an accredited lab. If all is order, your travel visa is approved via email.

Despite some initial hiccups, this system is working well.....probably because visitor levels are extremely light! Once visitor arrivals start to ramp back up, however, we will need added features to speed up processing time to ensure travelers are not inconvenienced by long wait times for a Travel Health Visa.....so we are actively looking at private sector solutions to allow for an almost instantaneous approval using AI.....artificial intelligence. This situation is very fluid but we are actively seeking to get ahead of it.

Indeed, this Ministry of Tourism is committed to engaging with as many stakeholders as possible to develop our own reopening strategy. We have been guided chiefly by the Ministry of Health in establishing the appropriate protocols and timelines with respect to the RT-PCR testing in advance of travel.

It bears repeating that *all international travelers are required to take the test five days in advance of travel and to quarantine for 14 days upon arrival.*

These measures are not overly punitive, but are rather designed to promote the health and safety of both Bahamians and our visitors. **[SLIDE 1]** As the attached slide reveals, they are also consistent with other notable destinations within the Caribbean. In fact, our safety measures are—from a practical standpoint—the most robust in the region!

And – travelers applaud these strict protocols and are actively looking for destinations that prioritize safety. **[SLIDE 2]** A survey conducted by the Bahamas Out Island Promotion Board, taken in July 2020, revealed that 82 percent of travelers were willing to take a COVID-19 test prior to their arrival.

To further limit the spread of COVID-19 in our communities, all hotels will be deemed an approved quarantine facility, and visitors will be required to remain on site for the duration of their stay, in what we have designated as a “tourism safe bubble.”

Moreover, because this Ministry of Tourism recognizes that messaging is critical to instilling confidence both from our local population and our international tourism markets, we have carefully chosen language that communicates the act of quarantining.....a rather harsh word that conjures up, in the minds of the prospective travelers, something most unpleasant.....especially when you state that persons entering the country have to “quarantine for 14 days” and some may have to do that “in a government mandated facility.” Not very Tourism friendly!

Therefore, I have instructed the Ministry of Tourism to stop using that word.....quarantine....and start promoting to the visiting public.....the *full VIP experience.*

VIP – vacation in place!

Now, let me repeat that before the WhatsApps start flying. Instead of designating the act of remaining on a hotel property as quarantining, we are instead referring to it as “vacationing in place.” The two procedures are exactly the same, and the VIP experience remains governed extensively by the protocols outlined in the Emergency Orders and the Tourism Readiness & Recovery Plan. You see – industry research has proven travelers are less willing to quarantine, **[SLIDE 3]** and so by shifting perspectives, our destination becomes much more attractive to prospective visitors.

It is also important to note that you can “Vacation in Place” for 14 days OR the length of your stay, whichever is shorter! You are NOT required, because of the quarantining regulation, to come to the Bahamas for a minimum stay of 14 days. You can

come to visit for say....5 days.....but, for those 5 days, you can only Vacation in Place in your hotel or engage in activities operated by hotel staff.

Given that visitors to a hotel will have been tested prior to their arrival, it only makes sense that the staff is tested also to maintain the requisite environment to safely Vacation in Place.

As such, after consultation with Public Health, the Competent Authority, and the hotel industry, the Ministry of Tourism is **strongly recommending/actively encouraging** that all hotel staff be tested prior to their resuming work and, on as needed basis, thereafter.

Now, I recognize that testing all of a hotel's staff, using the PCR test, can be extremely costly.....over \$200 per person.....so Public Health Officials see no problem with hotel properties (and any other businesses for that matter) using, if they wish, far less expensive CDC (Center for Disease Control) approved tests that have proven accuracy levels that are in striking range of the PCR gold standard test. These tests will be used for primary screening and the PCR test will be used for secondary screening, if the need arises.

We are pleased that the Public Health Officials have agreed that some form of *testing, other than PCR testing*, can be used for this purpose. In fact, they have indicated that they view this as another layer of protection for our workers, together with the wearing of face masks and other PPE's that will be obligatory.

Our goal is to ultimately promote the health and safety of **ALL** hotel staff through this robust, holistic approach. To be clear, however, these non PCR tests will not be included in any COVID-19 statistics released by the Ministry of Health and should only be used as a primary screening technique.

[SLIDE 4] With the most recent Emergency Orders, we are already mid-stream in our **phased** Tourism Reopening. It is important that Bahamians temper their expectations of what they expect their tourism product to look like in the short/medium term.

Our recommendation to the Government will be the implementation of a **15 October 2020** re-opening for hotels on all islands to resume full operations and the full use of the beach – a critical component of our tourism product and, as will be shown in the Director General’s presentation, the number one reason why persons come on vacation to The Bahamas.

This will allow our land-based tourism industry enough time to slowly ramp up to benefit from the traditional Thanksgiving travel period leading into the Christmas and New Year season.

I noted the general feeling of euphoria among Bahamians after the Prime Minister announced the lessening of restrictions in his remarks on Monday, 24th August, and as we look to re-open, we must understand that each of us has an innate responsibility to ensure that we re-open safely and in a sustainable way.

We cannot afford to open and then close right back down again. That was too traumatic for the tourism sector and significantly impacted our relationship with our travel partners. We need a period of calm, a period of certainty and a period for those in the tourism sector to methodically plan the measured reopening of their businesses.

Of utmost importance will be adherence to health and safety protocols for our communities so that we stand a much better chance of a successful recovery and eventual return to full employment in our industry.

With regard to airlift, obviously you cannot have a tourism industry without sufficient flights bringing passengers to your country.

The private aviation sector has done well over the last couple of months catering to the very high end tourism market but the reinstatement of commercial flights is an absolute must to restart our tourism sector.

Commercial airlines will always say that.....they will fly where there is demand and, early indications are, they are eager to come back to The Bahamas. JetBlue is already coming, Air Canada is already coming, American Airlines starts this week and Delta and Southwest are poised to restart in early October.....once they learn that the Tourism sector is back up and running. Understand that the schedules are extremely limited given that current demand levels are not as robust as they once were.

With regard to Bahamasair and other domestic carriers, it is expected that they will be allowed to commence domestic operations in the latter part of this week while international operations should recommence closer to the date when the tourism sector reopens.

I have been in a number of discussions with the CEOs of Atlantis and Bahamar to ascertain what their current thinking is about reopening and I am hoping they will make some announcements, very soon, with concrete opening dates.

Naturally, given the enormous amount of resources required to re-launch properties of their respective sizes, they want to be assured of an economically sustainable customer base when they re-open. As such, they are assessing a myriad of issues, mostly relating to state of the pandemic in their core market, the United States, before they commit to an opening announcement.

I want to assure the Bahamian people and the workers in those two anchor properties, that we, in the Ministry of Tourism, are doing everything that we can to make their opening a reality as soon as possible.

With relation to the cruise market, unfortunately, there is no good news to report. I have been in discussions with all of the major cruise lines and none of them have received any indication from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) when their no sail orders will be lifted. Right now, all of the cruise companies have voluntarily agreed that they will not be sailing until 31 October 2020 but sadly, it seems very likely that cruising out of the United States will not recommence until possibly late November or early December.

There is good news, however! The cruise industry has actually started back up with a very very limited number of cruises in Europe.....so there are signs of a rebirth taking place.....and, according to the cruise companies, the demand for cruises remains extremely robust. People want to cruise.....they just need the ships to get permission to do so.

Of course, when cruises resumes, The Bahamas is in a wonderful position to take full advantage of this industry. Travelers will want to start on short cruises.....not venture far from home.....and there is no country better positioned than The Bahamas to fulfill this demand. Cruising will probably start out with quick stops to the respective private islands but the Ministry of Tourism will be, shortly thereafter, urging the cruise companies to make stops in our economic centers like Nassau and Freeport.

And, upon arrival, the cruise companies will only allow their guests to go on excursions that demonstrate very high health and safety protocols. So, businesses.....get ready and start preparing yourself for that eventuality.

I want to assure the Bahamian people that this Ministry of Tourism is leaving no stone unturned to help bring the industry back online. During the first wave, we implemented numerous components of the Tourism Readiness & Recovery Plan, but we will be advancing the full scope of training to ensure that our people are primed for Re-opening.

However, we need your help! I implore each and every Bahamian to adhere to the Ministry of Health's protocols so that when our source markets of Florida, New York, Texas and California rebound, our labour force will be healthy and in high gear – poised to benefit from travel inflows.

I am optimistic about this future, and with the support and participation of every Bahamian, believe that we can achieve a full re-opening of our tourism sector by early November. Thanksgiving and the holiday period can be a much-needed boon for international arrivals – *if we get this right.*

Please, Bahamas, do your part so that we can realize this goal – and make the industry better for Bahamians.

Wash your hands frequently, wear face masks properly fitted over your nose and mouth, and abide by social distancing requirements. Business owners, please enforce proper protocols.

As we work towards this phased reopening of tourism, we know that it is important to strategically inspire and increase consumer desire for travel to The Bahamas, especially owing to the confusion of openings, closures, and constant changes in our travel protocols.

We have worked on ensuring our messaging is clear, comprehensive, and most importantly, consistently available to the travelling public.

Our current dashboard **[SLIDE 5]** serves as an easy-to-understand resource for those interested in visiting our country, complete with a pre-departure checklist, on-island expectations, and penalties for visitors who choose not to comply.

Additionally , we continue to work strategically with our airline partners to secure direct airlift from key markets where the curve has been flattened. Continued engagement with airline partners and the strengthening of our relationships has ensured we are top of the list when schedules are brought back online.

We realize, however, there is much uncertainty as COVID-19 spikes and fluctuations can happen at any time.

Much like we did in the weeks post Hurricane Dorian, we are prepared to commence a flexible marketing campaign, complete with authentic storytelling, aggressive PR, and proven sales strategies. Consistent and frequent messaging will be key. Our advertising spend will be concentrated on the identified airlift markets to deliver direct, impactful messaging where it matters most.

Through PR and media stories we will lean into current travel trends, such as the preference for vacations closer to home, as well as options that afford seclusion and outdoor pursuits.

And we have some advantages in that regard.

You will have seen recent reports in the news about research that shows that The Bahamas is among the top destinations desired by North Americans wishing to take an international trip. The Director General will speak more to that in her presentation.

Our proximity to North America makes The Bahamas a very easy trip for those persons who feel that they need that quick getaway after being under lockdown and curfews for such long periods but do NOT want to travel far from home.

That said, we will focus on The Bahamas' close proximity to the U.S. which has long been an important advantage, and promote our secluded Family Islands, with their rich selection of eco-adventures and beautiful beaches, all naturally designed for social distancing.

In the short term, we know that our niche markets of diving, fishing, boating, and eco-tourism are going to be important in helping us to rebound, and we will be devising campaigns in concert with those sector stakeholders to ensure we can maximize impact from the Ministry's targeted marketing efforts.

In the medium term, we will also focus on digital marketing and curating outdoor activities around national parks and soft adventure tourism to expand the suite of products available to guests in this post-COVID environment.

How successful we will be in reviving and sustaining our industry will depend on your commitment to work with us in ensuring the health and safety of our labour force—and ultimately, our tourism industry—so that we can continue to live the lifestyles which we have become accustomed to and provide quality service and unparalleled hospitality to our visitors.

The maxim “the health of a nation is the wealth of a nation” has never been truer. Our health will be directly rewarded with increasing wealth. And we can only succeed in this endeavour as a community.

As such, even in the face of these challenging, seemingly impossible circumstances, *let this be a moment of triumph to tell the story of how proud, how strong, how united we are as Bahamians.*

Today, I am accompanied by:

Parliamentary Secretary Travis Robinson

Director General of Tourism, Joy Jibrilu

Permanent Secretary Charles Albury

Director of Aviation Algernon Cargill

Chairman of Bahamasair, The Hon. Tommy Turnquest.

I would like to thank Team Tourism for their incredible work in these challenging times and, of course, I would like to thank all of our hotel partners and other industry partners for all the hard work and perseverance as we seek to reopen our ever important tourism sector. A lot of hard work goes on behind the scenes to make things happen and I want to ensure that that is publicly acknowledged.

Thank You. Good Afternoon and may God continue to bless the
Commonwealth of The Bahamas.