

Tourism development in the wider Vieux Fort area

Position paper



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This position paper maintains, first, that the present state of tourism in the larger Vieux Fort area is misconceptualized and, as a result, has been hugely underestimated.

Secondly, we argue that the development of tourism in the south of the island must target finely-tuned niche-markets and seek to attract tourists directly from overseas, rather than merely add to the stock of tourism products for sale to visitors already on island.

Thirdly, we maintain that smart, diversified niche market tourism is beneficial not only to the local economy but also strengthens social cohesion and supports the conservation and sustainable use of precious and unique natural resources.

The paper ends by giving several examples of potential niche markets for tourism development in the south of St Lucia which can be exploited immediately, without the need for much capital investment.

The present state of tourism

Since 1997, the Government of Saint Lucia has actively promoted tourism, resulting in the industry becoming the island's number one foreign income-earner, replacing the production of bananas for the export market.

As a result, in the north of the island, large all-inclusive resorts and a few smaller EP hotels have occupied most of the available beach front. Their target market is the conventional mass tourist looking for sun, sand, sea and sex. The wedding, honeymoon and family markets are especially big in the north of the island, as is the number of cruise ship arrivals. More recently, the yachting industry has come into its own as well with marine facilities in Rodney Bay, Castries and Marigot Bay.

In the Soufriere area, the tourism industry consists of high-end boutique resorts (which now occupy almost all of the naturally limited amount of beachfront land) along with dozens of luxury private holiday villas. In addition, Soufriere attracts hundreds of day tourists, both by road and by sea, who come to take in the Pitons, the Sulphur Springs, the Botanical Gardens etc. To some extent, Soufriere benefits from the yachting industry as well.

The wider Vieux Fort area can be defined as all that area 20 minutes' drive east and west of the town - that is, from Choiseul in the south-west to Praslin/Mamiku/Mon Repos in the east. Vieux Fort is the second-largest town of St Lucia and boasts the longest easily accessible sandy beach on the island. It also houses the international airport, a hospital, a decent range of shopping facilities, and there is still ample government-owned vacant land waiting to be developed. Over the years, there has been no shortage of official plans for the development of the Vieux Fort area.

The south has only one all-inclusive resort, Coconut Bay Resort & Spa. In the minds of Government officials and the general public alike, this resort is the main thrust behind tourism in the south of the island. After all, it brings the largest number of foreign visitors into the area. As a result, small-scale tourism operators vie around the hotel to try and sell their specific products: taxi trips, boat tours, horse back riding, ATV-trips, kayaking, arts & crafts, and so on.

The only other tourism operator in the Vieux Fort area who consistently brings in guests directly from overseas - albeit on a smaller scale - is The Reef Kite + Surf. Wind- and kite surfers from North America, Europe and elsewhere choose St Lucia for the exceptionally good wind and beach conditions at Sandy Beach - and choose their hotel or guesthouse as a secondary matter. Over the years, The Reef has built extensive linkages with hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs and private villas in the south. Nevertheless, a lack of good-quality accommodation on and near Sandy Beach has consistently hampered the growth of this niche market.

In or around 2008, Coconut Bay opened its own kite surfing centre at Bwa Chadon for hotel guests-only. While enhancing the resort's overall product, this water sports centre does not extend the economic benefits of the sport beyond the gates of the resort. This in contrast to The Reef's business model, which considers its extensive network of backward linkages into the local community an integral part of its set-up. (*More on this later*).

Interestingly, the fact that water-based sports tourism has successfully existed on Sandy Beach for two decades (The Reef opened its doors in 1994 as a windsurfing centre and introduced kite surfing in 2001) seems to have escaped the attention of Castries-based tourism officials to the extent that not long ago, a Minister for Tourism during a site visit admitted that he had been unaware of The Reef's existence. All the same, he felt perfectly at liberty to declare: *"Anyway, we have plans to knock all of this down and put a large resort in its place. But don't worry - not yet"*.

Besides Coconut Bay and The Reef, the south of the island is also known to some extent for its *village or heritage tourism*, e.g. Balenbouche Estate, Latille Waterfall, the *Papel Arts & Craft Centre* in Laborie, Mamiku Gardens and the Fish Fry in Dennery.

Yachting is currently a minor part of tourism business in the south and recent criminal events have done nothing to enhance its reputation. Luxury yachts do anchor in Vieux Fort from time to time but almost exclusively to drop off or pick up guests at Hewanorra International Airport and their impact on the local economy is probably negligible.

The new phenomenon of *kitesurfaris* does bring some benefits to the local economy. Kite surfers from North America and Europe fly into Hewanorra Airport to join a yacht to cruise and kite around the Grenadines, and they almost always spend a few days kite surfing at Sandy Beach before and after their cruise as well.

So much for the present state of tourism in the wider Vieux Fort area.

Or is it..?

Reconceptualizing tourism in the south

We started off this paper by saying that the present state of tourism in the wider Vieux Fort area has been misconceptualized and underestimated. What do we mean by this?

Misconceptualized because conventional wisdom holds that 'tourists' are foreign visitors who come to the island for a few days' or weeks' stay in a hotel or a holiday villa to enjoy the sun, the beach and the sights and people of St Lucia.

Underestimated because in actual fact, a form of tourism has been thriving in Vieux Fort for several decades. Strangely, the impact of what we may term *residential tourism* (or better still, *inclusive tourism*) - that is, the students and staff connected to the medical schools based in Vieux Fort - has been entirely absent from the discussion about tourism and tourism development in the south of the island.

Quantitative data are non-existent and urgently needed. But even without the benefit of solid figures, it may well be argued that the value of residential tourism in Vieux Fort far outweighs the impact of conventional, short-term tourism brought in by Coconut Bay - or even by Coconut Bay and The Reef combined. Not only dollar-for-dollar but (much more importantly still) also in terms of the *impact* that each dollar has.

After all, the money spent by students and staff on accommodation, food, transportation and recreation all funnels directly into the local economy, with no leakage to overseas shareholders or tour operators. Medical students live in the community, rent apartments from private individuals, ride the local bus, hire taxis, buy their vehicles, electronics and household goods locally, use local craftsmen for repairs, mix and mingle with local people in shops, bars, restaurants, gyms and in the street and pay Lucelec, WASCO and their telecom providers just like everyone else.

While the medical schools themselves may perhaps benefit from fiscal or other incentives, the day-to-day needs of students do not require tax holidays, duty-free concessions or the importation of 40-foot containers of meat and vegetables from Miami. And the direct revenue they generate does not disappear into the coffers of anonymous shareholders in the USA or elsewhere.

By contrast, intrinsically, the all-inclusive resort concept encourages guests to remain at the resort since their food and drinks are already paid for. Sandals' infamous "*Leave Your Wallet At Home*" advertisement typifies the concept. Really and truly, all-inclusive resorts are all-inclusive only from the point of view of the resorts' shareholders, but **all-exclusive** as far as the country in which they operate is concerned. It is the medical schools which are truly all-inclusive from the point of view which matters first and foremost: the interest of St Lucia and St Lucians.

Apart from its direct impact on St Lucia's economy, the social, cultural and environmental impact of residential tourism, too, merits our attention.

For security reasons, resort tourists are generally not encouraged to leave the hotel's property on foot, except in the company of local 'minders' (as seen, for instance, on Saturday mornings when guests from Coconut Bay visit the Vieux Fort market on foot, led by a staff member like school children on a class outing). Medical students, on the other hand, do not shy away from local society but actively live and participate in it, facing the same challenges St Lucians do when it comes to safety and security at home and on the road, and sharing in the same blessings the island has to offer in terms of beaches, hills and valleys. In addition, medical students tend to have diverse ethnic backgrounds and they come in all shapes, colours and accents. This greatly narrows the cultural gap and to some extent, the presence and ethnic diversity of medical students even enriches the variety and quality of goods available in the local supermarket and restaurants.

Last but not least, the medical schools do not occupy a single yard of beach front land, nor do they reserve a square inch of beach for their own specific use. The schools do not put any undue additional pressure on the island's mangroves, rivers, coral reefs, dunes, agricultural land or the native flora and fauna - in stark contrast to the various large-scale hotel developments (both successful and unsuccessful) which the island has attracted over the past few decades. St Lucia's *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* as far as Direct Foreign Investment in tourism is concerned includes failed or struggling developments at Praslin (*Le Paradis*), Cap Estate (*Raffles*), Marquis (*Harlequin*), Sapphire Bay, Black Bay (*Ritz Carlton*) and Honeymoon Beach. Together, in one way or another, these developments have wreaked havoc on precious mangroves and beaches, archaeological sites, nature trails and St Lucia's stock of prime agricultural land - not to mention the nation's coffers!

Obviously, the economic, social and cultural climate in which medical schools can survive and thrive in Vieux Fort must be sustained and supported by Government. A thorough study should be commissioned to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within this sector of the economy. A key focal point in this must be a clear understanding of the way in which the medical schools are *articulated* within the broader society.

For instance, the fact that currently, medical students rent homes and apartments from private individuals means that the foreign exchange they bring into St Lucia reaches directly into the pockets of St Lucians. If, on the other hand, the medical schools were allowed to build their own student accommodation, this would undermine one of the most important ways in which medical students benefit the economy of the south. Lessons may be learned from other locations. For instance, the economy of Saba (Dutch West Indies) relies heavily on the presence of overseas medical students. While students are allowed to live in one of three dormitories during their first semester - giving them a chance to settle into island life - after that, they are obliged to rent private apartments or houses. What is more, even the dormitories are owned by Sabans, "*Consistent with the university's commitment to supporting the broader community*", as the school's web site proudly - and rightly - explains.

In order for Government to make well-informed policy decisions, comparative data on the real economic impacts of medical schools *vis-a-vis* all-inclusive resorts and small-scale tourism operators respectively are urgently required. Backward linkages between the respective operators and the agricultural sector also need to be qualified and quantified. The same applies to the impact each operator has on public access to the beach, as well as on the environmental health of beach, sea, reefs, mangroves and the flora and fauna within the habitat they occupy. A triple-bottom line study is needed, incorporating economic, social/cultural and environmental impacts, treating them all as equally import.

Good policy decisions require quantitative and qualitative data - but more importantly still, they require that all the relevant factors are conceptualized and brought to bear on the discussion. As it stands, overseas medical schools are not even *thought of* as forming part of St Lucia's tourism product. That is an odd and, frankly, glaring oversight.

The future of tourism in the south: niche marketing

Besides building on the existing strength of medical schools, what other ways forward are there for tourism in the south?

The large (all-inclusive) resorts make it possible for the airline companies to fill their seats and, as such, they are a necessary component of the tourism equation in St Lucia. However, because they are the ones *bringing in* the tourists, hotel desks and large (cruise ship) tour operators have almost unlimited power in determining what activities their guests will (or will not) undertake, and in setting the prices and commissions to be paid to small independent operators. Whether it is selling taxi trips, tours, trinkets, food and drinks, water sports or sights and attractions: small independent business people are very much at the mercy of the hotels and large tour operators. What is more, resorts and tour operators often aim to provide the most profitable or successful services in-house (taxi transfers being a case in point) in order to keep the money 'close to home'.

As we recognize this gross imbalance of power, the next logical step in liberating our economic strategy as small, independent entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry is to aim to fill the remaining seats on those planes with our *own* guests. Instead of hustling around the hotels, fighting with each other for a crumb of the tourist pie, we must identify and exploit the various niche markets the south of St Lucia can tap into.

The power of the internet has made it possible to gain a level of independence from large resorts and tour operators that was unimaginable just a decade ago. Nowadays, it is perfectly feasible for small local businesses to do away completely with costly and inflexible middle-men (in particular overseas tour operators) and access their target market through web sites, email, specialist user groups, social media, online networking, direct booking sites, and so on. The explosive growth of Airbnb, the online service which enables people to rent out their homes or spare bedrooms, is a case in point. The success of AirBnB *"highlights how much of a threat the startup has become to the traditional hotel companies, which are now trying to figure out ways to compete in the sharing economy. At the current rate of expansion, Airbnb, which boasts 550,000 listings in 192 countries, will soon surpass the InterContinental Hotels Group and Hilton Worldwide as the world's largest hotel chain. ... What makes Airbnb especially appealing to investors is its low overhead. In the sharing economy, where any person can list his or her own property for rent online, Airbnb can lay claim to being the world's largest hotel chain--without owning a single hotel."* (<http://www.fastcompany.com/3027976/what-hotel-operators-really-think-of-airbnb>)

Just as the internet is democratizing the realm of hotel accommodation, so does it impact on the realm of tourist activities and attractions. At the Reef Kite + Surf, we did away with all twelve of our overseas water sports tour operators around 2005. Instead of losing business, we found that it actually made us more competitive, more flexible and more focussed within our target market - which resulted, amongst other things, in increased numbers of return customers.

The crux lies in being able to recognize and focus on what we have that sets us apart from other tourist destinations, package it, market it, see it through, earn our accolades

online and build and expand our businesses from there. The Reef's twenty years of experience with wind- and kite surfing tourism is an excellent example of this, and there are several other potentially profitable niche markets just waiting to be exploited in the south of St Lucia.

Well-chosen niche markets are not only great because they allow small entrepreneurs to operate on the global stage with relatively little initial capital input: they are also particularly resilient. In 2011, The Reef organized the *Kite Fiesta*: a 3-day international kite surfing event on Sandy Beach. In her opening speech, founder of The Reef, Cecile Wiltshire, made a passionate case for the role niche markets can play in the development of tourism in the south of the island. Here is part of that speech.

"Our tourism industry in Vieux Fort is resilient. It bounces back. It is small and flexible and quick on its feet, and it can respond swiftly to changed circumstances and adversities. Why? We are resilient because we do not depend on one big hotel, or one big cruise ship, to bring us our customers. The Vieux Fort tourism industry is community-based and operated by small, independent business people working towards a common goal. The Reef targets a niche market: wind- and kite surfers worldwide. We bring more than 2,500 bed nights to Vieux Fort every season: that's the equivalent of one tourist arriving every day of the year, for a one-week stay.

In many ways, we run a mini-Tourist Board for Vieux Fort at The Reef. We answer dozens of email questions every day, and refer potential visitors to guesthouses, hotels, car rental companies, taxi drivers, dive centers, the zip lines, fishing trips, sunset cruises, the golf course, the Animal Protection Society, the Children's Society, even to AA meetings! Once these visitors hit the ground at Hewanorra Airport, dozens of small independent operators kick into action. You, Vieux Fortians, transport them, you provide them with vehicles and mountain bikes, you clean their rooms, do their laundry, clean the beach and the road sides, you operate your guesthouses, hotels, apartments and cottages, you provide them with food, drinks and entertainment, you keep them safe both on the water and off, and you are the ones who provide them with an experience that makes them want to come back year after year after year. We have now reached the stage where several wind- and kite surfers are buying or building holiday homes in the south of the island.

*The Vieux Fort tourism industry is not about cruise ship passengers who are on-island for 8 hours to be whizzed past the volcano and poured a glass of rum punch.. What we have achieved in Vieux Fort together is Village Tourism in action. It is Sports Tourism in action. **It is vertically integrated, community-based, truly grassroots social and economic development based on successful niche marketing.** We have taken ownership of the power to shape our own future instead of waiting for yet another powerful outsider to come in and tell us what to do; how to do it; and how much we will get paid for doing it. And because we **own** the industry, that industry is resilient. It does not depend on the whims or desires of the shareholder of a large resort who, if he came to St Lucia, couldn't find his way to the post office. We make more than just a living for ourselves: we make a LIFE for ourselves.*

*Our industry is also strong and resilient because it maintains **a triple bottom line.** Triple, that means three things: making money, building our community, and protecting*

our natural environment. Of course: what we do has to make money. We have to pay our bills same as anybody else. But if we alienate our young people, do not help our school children, take care of the sick and the elderly, support our local farmers and fishermen, the charcoal makers, the sea moss farmers, the horse stables, our musicians and artists, our craftsmen, artisans, shopkeepers, mechanics, taxi drivers, restaurants and guesthouses, in the long run, the money we earn will not be worth one scrap. Crime will kill it, and external disasters will cause it to collapse. If your tourism sector is not tied in with other independent sectors in the local economy, or if it dominates those other sectors completely, your whole economy will crash as soon as a volcano starts spitting out ashes, a New York banking firm goes under, a terrorist blows up a bomb on board of an airplane, or a hurricane lashes the island.

Maintaining a triple bottom line also means that your business has to protect and sustain the natural environment. The wind is free, the sea belongs to everybody and the beaches are public - at least for now. We do not take anything away from the wind by flying our sails and kites. We do not pollute the sea by floating a windsurfing board on it. We do not drown out the sound of crashing waves on the beach with roaring engines or loud music.

We do not run over kids playing in the water with jet skis or speed boats. We do not spill oil in the water, destroy the reefs, poison the fish, slaughter turtles and dolphins, or litter Maria Islands.

Vieux Fort is home to the OECS Protected Areas and Associated Livelihoods Project. OPAAL understands, as we do, that for sustainable development, we need to 1) make money, 2) involve the community, and 3) protect the environment.

As long as we do that our hospitality industry will be resilient, flexible, profitable and sustainable. Vieux Fort offers endless scope for more development, in ways that are sustainable economically, socially and environmentally. As we grow, and grow together, we create room for new small business owners to come in. Joining hands keeps us connected, keeps us safe, and keeps the tourist dollars flowing from one small operator to the next, and from one Vieux Fort household to the next, until we've all had that dollar in our hand for a while to buy the drinks we need for our bars, the food for our restaurant kitchens, the petrol for our taxis and boats, the salaries for our staff, the soap powder for our laundries, the raw materials for our arts and crafts, the wood and cement to build and maintain our sites and attractions, the school books for our kids.

Big as we are - inventive as we are - hard-working as we are - creative as we are: we have barely begun to scratch the surface of showing the world what we can do with community-based niche market tourism in Vieux Fort."

Based on twenty years of hands-on experience at The Reef, here are some other ideas we think can work well for niche market tourism development in the south of St Lucia.

POTENTIAL NICHE MARKETS IN THE SOUTH

1. Creation of a *Moule-a-Chique/Maria Islands National Landmark*

Last year, the Prime Minister suggested to the Saint Lucia National Trust that the south of St Lucia ought to have its own national landmark, along the lines of Pigeon Island. We must jump at this opportunity and request that Government donate the southern-most tip of Moule a Chique along with the two Maria Islands to the National Trust. A **Moule a Chique/Maria Islands National Landmark** will showcase this area's pre-eminent importance in matters geological, historical, ecological, technological/cultural and recreational. Allow us to make the case:

Geological, because Moule a Chique offers the perfect viewing point from which to appreciate the geological formation of St Lucia. Moule a Chique is the oldest part of St Lucia. It was created by tectonic movement: two of the earth's crusts pushing against each other. The north-east of the island was formed much later, in volcanic explosions. From the viewing point on Moule a Chique, it can be seen that these north-eastern mountains have eroded a lot since then - in contrast to the west of the island, which was created much more recently still. The sharp, steep volcanic peaks of Mount Gimie and the Pitons are clearly visible from Moule a Chique. The most recent phase of geological formation which gave St Lucia its current shape consisted of a huge mud flow which filled up the valleys and inundated the hills around Vieux Fort. As a result, today, the island's oldest hill, Moule a Chique, lies side-by-side with its youngest plains, home to Hewanorra International Airport and the town and suburbs of Vieux Fort.

Historical, because Moule a Chique is the ideal site from which to bring to life the story of the ship *Oliphe Blossom* which landed on these shores in 1605. The harrowing adventures of the 67 men who decided to remain behind in *Sainte Lucie* constitutes **the first attempted settlement by Englishmen anywhere in the Caribbean**. What is more, the story written by one of its survivors is **one of the most detailed surviving records of early Carib-European contact in the history of the Caribbean**. *An Heure Glasse of Indian Newes* brims with detailed descriptions of the south of St Lucia at a time when the island firmly belonged to the Caribs. Several important archaeological sites can be pointed out from Moule a Chique and researchers from the Universities of Vienna, Leiden and Gainesville have all performed digs here. From Moule a Chique, one can retrace the landscape as it was when the Caribs ruled. Carib settlements at Point the Caille, Bwa Chadon, La Retraite and the mouth of the Vieux Fort River are all easily discerned from Moule a Chique and the battle between the Caribs and the Englishmen on the shores of Sandy Beach can be visualized blow-by-blow. There is a myriad of ways in which this important and exciting history can be brought to life: from comic books drawn by school children to open-air theatre productions and movies (as demonstrated by Dale Elliott in his '*Untold Stories: the History of St Lucia*').

Ecological, because Maria Island Major is home to the rarest species of animal on the planet (the *Kouwes* or *Saint Lucia Racer*) and sustained efforts are underway by the Forestry Department, Saint Lucia National Trust, Durrel Wildlife Foundation and Flora & Fauna International to save this (harmless!) snake from extinction. Barbados and Martinique both recently lost their own subspecies of *Racer* snakes, but Antigua has managed to save the *Antigua Racer*.

In the 1970s, St Lucia gained a sterling international record with the preservation of the *Amazona Versicolor* (the Jacquot parrot) - a conservation success story that still guides similar conservation efforts world-wide to this day. With the *St Lucia Racer* project, St Lucia has the opportunity to build on this reputation in ecological conservation and bio-diversity. The possible establishment of a 'Mainland Island' at La Rochelle (near Marquis Estate in the north-east of St Lucia) where endangered species can be reintroduced into the wild is an exciting prospect, that would have further economic benefits: in tourism potential, in terms of capacity building for local wildlife experts and in being able to attract overseas conservation grants.

We are not aware of any dedicated studies on the bio-diversity of Moule a Chique but the peninsula has obvious interest from this point of view. Cacti, frangipani and other plants adapted to the very dry and rocky conditions flourish here. The invasive alien species *Leucaena* has invaded the lower end of Moule a Chique and is just beginning to appear on the southern-most tip of the peninsula. It might still be prevented from gaining a foothold if the involvement of NCA, STEP or Town Council workers can be harnessed. The existing sea grape tree project on Sandy Beach could act as an example of how to involve Government (-sponsored) workers in smart, ecologically friendly projects.

The same people who will be attracted to a *Moule a Chique/Maria Islands National Landmark* will also be keen to hike the rain forest, go bird-watching and so on. Already, groups of 'Ramblers' regularly visit St Lucia and dozens of independent travelers take guided hikes along the plantations and into the rainforest along the Mamiku River.

In Vieux Fort, Eco South Tours is gearing up to sell a range of tours within the Pointe Sable Environmental Protection Area: on foot, on horseback and on the water. Maria Islands can be admired from a safe distance from the Moule a Chique headland, and the addition of a coin-operated public telescope on the headland might be a good idea.

Cultural and technological: Moule a Chique is home to the second-highest lighthouse in the world. It was originally intended for the province of St Lucia in South Africa but was misdirected to St Lucia in the West Indies in 1912, where it was put to good use all the same. The lighthouse is very scenic and can be observed from a little distance so that the active duties it performs for SLASPA need not be disrupted. Having said that, the lighthouse site itself would also be a beautiful setting for weddings and other special events - provided that the original structure is restored to its former glory.

In addition, Moule a Chique is home to a former military missile tracking station and this presents us with a clear opportunity for niche market tourism with **Amateur Radio Operators**.

Twice, during the Second World War and again during the Cold War, Vieux Fort was selected as a site for military installations. In 1956, with most of Central and South America to choose from, the USA (fearing an attack on the Panama Canal) chose little old Vieux Fort to build one of its ten missile tracking stations ... Should that not make us pause and think for a moment?

Atmospheric conditions on Moule a Chique (and also at Morne le Blanc in Laborie) are exceptionally good for long-wave radio contact. Amateur radio operators worldwide are fascinated by locations like this and will spend good money visiting them, provided there is some level of support in terms of local counterpart knowledge and Government support to facilitate the issuing of temporary radio licenses.

Already, *radio hams*, as they are colloquially known, come to St Lucia in small numbers to operate from Morne Pavilion in Cap Estate and to roam the island in search of remote beaches and mountain tops to operate mobile radio units ('*DX-ing*'). A large part of the excitement stems from the fact that *other* radio hams, in everyday locations in the Western world, are queuing up to speak with operators in exotic locations such as St Lucia. Check out this link on DX-ing from the top of Petit Piton:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwIJBXo67OQ>

It is exactly St Lucia's relative remoteness and small size that make the island so attractive to radio amateurs. With its exceptionally good natural atmospheric conditions, its rich history in radio operations, and the presence of two original missile tracking stations on Moule a Chique and Morne le Blanc (in somewhat decayed glory - but glory nonetheless) on Government-owned lands, the promotion of amateur radio operations as a niche market for the south of the island is an absolute no-brainer.

We must renovate the old missile tracking station, incorporating a few studios with amateur radio equipment for rent, along with a *grand cafe* and a museum/interpretation centre run by the National Trust to narrate the rich history and ecology of Moule a Chique and the Maria Islands. Radio amateurs tend to be return customers who prefer to stay in private villas or small hotels/guesthouses, so they can operate their mobile radio sets undisturbed. They are also a good target market for a range of other activities such as trips and sight-seeing tours, water sports, arts & crafts and local cuisine, as they usually travel with family and friends.

Finally: **recreation**. At present, Moule a Chique plays an important role in the recreation of Vieux Fort townfolk: dozens of people use the Lighthouse Road to exercise in the early morning and late afternoon. Considering the amount of pedestrian traffic every day, the area is kept surprisingly clean and remains safe to this day. When transformed into a National Landmark, it is important that Moule a Chique continues to play this role for the local community, free of charge. Viewing points along the Lighthouse Road and at the very top of Moule a Chique are currently visited regularly by locals and tourists alike to enjoy the stunning sea and sunset views. Taxi buses, large coaches, off-road buggies and rental vehicles can be seen going up and down the road daily. Unfortunately, the vehicular viewing points contain disgraceful amounts of litter - but this can easily be remedied.

2. Nutritional healing / non-GMO & organic agriculture

Building on the strength of the medical schools and the existence of St Jude's Hospital in Vieux Fort, medical tourism has been mentioned by Government as a possible future avenue for economic development in the south. In addition to conventional medicine, we should seriously look at alternative forms of medicine for overseas patients as well. Clinics that provide natural detoxification, natural forms of pain relief, nutritional healing for cancer and other systemic diseases (e.g. Gerson Therapy Clinics) and others can cater to a large and growing segment of people in Western society who are disillusioned by the excessive power wielded by medical and pharmaceutical companies in mainstream health care, and who are searching out alternative, natural remedies.

The increasingly unavoidable penetration of genetically modified foods in almost all spheres of life, but especially in the United States, is similarly creating a niche market of (often quite affluent) people anxious to return to a more natural lifestyle - if only for the duration of a holiday. The '*Ital*' approach to food production and cuisine as propagated by Rastafarians naturally links into this.

A phenomenon now gaining traction in the UK and North America is that of *eco-therapy* which aims to improve people's mental and physical well-being by encouraging them to be active outdoors: gardening, growing food and getting involved in environmental conservation projects.

In his way, natural herbal medicine can be tied in with St Lucian traditions of herbal medicine and modern-day organic farming. It is not coincidental that several high-end boutique resorts, including Jade Mountain, nowadays offer organic produce on their menus! This is a very direct link between niche tourism and agriculture, which could result in specialist small retreats/B&Bs/boutique hotels. Picture a small-scale version of 'The Body Holiday' but in a setting such as Balenbouche Estate ... Picture a jungle gym instead of an air-conditioned room full of shiny chrome exercise gear ... Picture Brazilian Capoeira classes accompanied by local drummers, instead of aerobics to tinned disco music ... (Capoeira is a mixture of martial arts and dance, created by African slaves in Brazil: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct2ZoehKv4U> - there is serious interest amongst St Lucians overseas to start this sort of business at home).

Added to this are all sorts of other niche market activities such as wellness retreats featuring yoga, meditation, vegetarian/vegan cooking classes, Stand-Up Paddle Boarding, massage, fitness, and so on. It simply comes down to identifying your niche target population group, your niche activity, and the location to make it happen.

The potential of combining natural medicine, health and wellness tourism and organic farming crosses over into our next niche market: 'Reggae Holidays'.

3. Reggae Holidays: off-grid tourism

Vieux Fort has a lively local culture with respect to reggae music and Rastafarian lifestyles. While this is often associated with negative stereotypes (ghettoes, crime, drugs, etc.) this could actually very well be turned into an asset. 'Reggae Holidays' will appeal to a target group of people able and keen to travel to St Lucia to participate in

Master Classes and Jam Sessions with, for instance, the musicians of *Fourth World* (branded the best reggae band in the Eastern Caribbean) and other local reggae musicians. Provision of a proper sound studio and video equipment can create a buzz for guests to create their own video clip ready to share online via their personal social media networks. Think of it as a modern-day version of Peter Tosh & Mick Jagger singing *Keep on Walk & Don't Look Back*:

<http://www.reggaeville.com/nc/artist-details/artist/peter-tosh/vid/peter-tosh-feat-mick-jagger-dont-look-back/ac/artistVideos.html>

The same can of course be done with local chak-chak musicians - for a slightly different target market: that of folk music *afficionados*.

Besides great musicians, St Lucia also boasts a number of renowned visual artists and craftsmen who could give master classes. A good, marketable product in this niche market for instance is the art of painting on silk as developed by St Lucian-Canadian artist Daniel Jn Baptiste, who owns a beautifully restored two-story wooden plantation house in Reunion (near Choiseul) which could be used for master classes and artist retreats. In similar vein, there could be master classes in wood carving, mask making (e.g., Zaka in Soufriere), master joinery (Choiseul and Soufriere), stone masonry, drum making, pottery, basketry and weaving, local fishing techniques and crab hunting.

Village tourism then also comes into play, as these are the kinds of visitors who will want to stay locally, spend time with families in the countryside, hike the rain forest, visit water falls and do all those things adult St Lucians loved to do as children: cook a *one-pot* on three stones somewhere in the countryside, swim in a river, roam the beaches, fish and barbecue in the wild, play cricket or kick a ball on the beach. Accompanied by their new-found reggae friends, who have an immediate stake in their guests' safety and enjoyment, this niche market crosses into new territory as far as tourism in St Lucia is concerned.

Instead of thinking of Vieux Fort's youth and their subculture as part of the problem, we can come alongside them and develop forms of tourism in which these youngsters are recognized as **carriers of knowledge** - be it in music, lifestyle, cooking and recreational activities - not as a threat to the development of tourism. What they have to offer may not suit the conventional honeymoon visitor, but there are plenty potential visitors out there who would love to feel a part of 'the *Original Caribbean*': reggae music, river-side cooking and *reasoning sessions* included.

We need to start recognizing the value of what we have in the south of the island and have the self-confidence to believe that it IS valuable and that we CAN develop and sell it as a profitable tourism product/brand.

The time is right for this kind of tourism: not just because this is the raw material we have on supply in Vieux Fort, but also because an active demand for it is emerging right now in rich countries. The internet is bringing people from different parts of the globe into much closer proximity than ever before in history, and there is a growing consciousness amongst travelers from the developed world that they want to contribute actively and positively to the welfare and well-being of poorer countries and communities they visit. Just as fair-trade bananas captured the imagination of

consumers overseas and supported St Lucia's banana industry, so too can **off-grid tourism** provide a robust, stable, profitable and sustainable source of income for St Lucia. Off-grid tourism is fast gaining traction in Africa and Europe and has begun to earn accolades from Conde Naste and other powerbrokers in the industry. For more on this, take a look at: <http://www.thincats.org> and <http://www.tribewanted.com>

Like 'Reggae holidays', off-grid tourism affords a range of possible linkages into organic farming, traditional healing, local fishing, crab hunting, drumming, folk music, story telling etc. Some of these arts and forms of Creole culture are under threat and may well disappear. They could well benefit from an injection of genuine outside interest.

4. Marijuana tourism

While the following may go too far for some, we may as well mention here the massive potential future niche market of **marijuana tourism**. Amsterdam's success as a tourism destination in Europe since the 1980s was built, in part, on the intelligent condoning of soft drugs. In June 2014, the Government of Jamaica announced that it will decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use, smoking of marijuana in private places, and the use of ganja for medical and religious purposes. Jamaica's more lenient stance towards marijuana fits a wider global trend and more likely than not, will trigger an increase in tourist arrivals. Is St Lucia going to lead in this niche market from the front, or spoil for leftovers in the rear? The choice will be upon us soon, whether we like it or not.

What cannot be disputed is that the cultivation and use of marijuana are topics of intense interest to literally **millions** of potential visitors in North America, Europe and elsewhere - and no place on earth is more naturally associated with the consumption of marijuana than the Caribbean: the cradle of the weed. What whiskey distilleries are to Scotland, and vineyards to Italy and California, so marijuana plantations could be huge tourist attractions and sources of revenue for St Lucia.

Just as it is considered perfectly acceptable that one of the main attractions of all-inclusive resorts is the unlimited access they afford guests to alcoholic beverages, so too should we begin to think about the potential economic, social and environmental power of marijuana in the domain of tourism. As North America is slowly but surely nudging its way towards legalization - with Jamaica following fast in its wake - St Lucia may soon find itself on the wrong side of history. Before long, foreign visitors may well be questioning why on earth marijuana is not freely available to them during their holiday in St Lucia, just as it is at home.

Legalizing marijuana has the added advantage of making the soft drug trade visible, manageable and taxable. Just as alcohol and cigarettes, marijuana consumption unavoidably carries certain public health risks. But legalizing the substance takes away the need for criminal activity, the need to police and imprison that criminal activity, and the drugs' 'bad boy' image - which for so many young people lies at the root of its attraction. The 15% VAT and additional excise duties to be levied on marijuana will go a long way towards paying for the public health and policing needs required *post-*

legalization - whereas right now the trade in marijuana contributes the net sum of zero to the costs of public health care, policing and imprisoning which it currently engenders.

Last but certainly not least: as soon as the issue of legalizing marijuana can be laid to rest in St Lucia, the road will be wide open to the introduction of hemp as a cash crop - as has been advocated by Andre Decaires and Randall Bain for some decades now. Hemp is a crop that reportedly prevents soil erosion rather than causing it, can be grown on steep land as well as flat, on small as well as large parcels, and provides a year-round harvest - very much like bananas, once St Lucia's *Green Gold*.

5. Turtle watching

The Pointe Sable Environmental Protection Area is an important nesting site for leatherbacks and hawksbill turtles. Being an easily accessible site, its potential for sea turtle watching tourism is tremendous. Only recently, following the slaughter of turtles at Grande Anse, Coconut Bay Resort expressed its concerns in the media and pointed out the importance of turtle conservation to tourism development.

Turtle watching is an activity which appeals to all types of tourists, from those at large resorts to those preferring a more community-based type of vacation. Either way, turtle watching tends to involve community members at a grass roots level and offers real opportunities for small business development.

As part of its efforts for the Pointe Sable Environmental Protected Area, the Saint Lucia National Trust, along with various national and international counterparts, is working towards establishing a policy of 'best practices' when it comes to sea turtle protection and conservation. This includes organizing volunteer turtle watches during the nesting season; involving the authorities to prosecute those who kill nesting turtles or poach turtle eggs; limiting the use of heavy equipment on the beach (for construction and seaweed-clearing purposes); and developing a zoning policy for Sandy Beach, with delineated areas for vehicular recreation, pedestrian recreation and nature conservation. This last effort has become especially urgent after the damage done to Sandy Beach in the 2013 Christmas Eve Trough. While one stretch of beach has now been re-nourished with sand, re-vegetation and blocking off future access to vehicles in certain areas still needs to be undertaken.

6. Yachting and cruising

Facilities for yachting are an obvious lack in the south of the island. Nothing as large as Rodney Bay is required but Vieux Fort should be developed with a small marina that offers basic facilities such as safe and secure moorings, an immigration desk, fuel and water, laundry facilities, Bed & Breakfast and restaurant facilities, wi-fi, mail forwarding services and basic technical assistance for engine and electronics repairs. The main infrastructural costs - reclaiming land and dredging the sea bed - have already been done.

Yachting is well-known to benefit local communities in very direct ways and has a significant spin-off effect in other sectors also, including real estate. As said before, safety and security are of paramount importance. Visitor harassment and unsightly

sanitary practices in and around the Vieux Fort fishing port are real problems and need to be addressed. The boat boys and fishermen in Vieux Fort are part of the hospitality industry and need to be drawn in and shown the long-term benefits. It has been done successfully in Dominica (with the Portsmouth Area Yacht Security: PAYS) where yachties pay US\$10/night to moor - money which subsequently goes to pay the local fishermen and boat boys who act as security guards and tour guides - and we need to learn from and emulate such projects.

The absence of cruise ships in Vieux Fort is another obvious gap in the market. However, the development of a cruise ship industry will require significant capital expenditure on the part of the Government and a complete reorientation of Vieux Fort town (where all buildings currently face *away from* the waterfront) and this may be too large a leap to make at the present time.

7. Seamoss farming and organic fertilizer production

Seamoss farming has a long history in the south of the island: at Praslin, Savannes Bay and Laborie. Thanks to the work of the Caribbean Natural Environment and Resources Institute (CANARI) in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s, over the years, seamoss farming has been executed in sustainable and technologically sound ways. Traditionally, seamoss is grown on lines in shallow sea water, harvested when mature, dried, cleaned and then sold dry, as a gel, or as a bottled drink. While sustaining a few dozen operators (mostly women and youngsters at low to medium income levels) limited market demand has consistently capped the expansion of the industry. But new technology is now creating an exciting situation where the market demand for seamoss is almost limitless, with a big added potential benefit for the wider agricultural sector as well.

What has changed?

Instead of letting the mature strands of seamoss dry after harvesting, they should be *juiced*. Seamoss juice forms a potent organic fertilizer which makes all sorts of common agricultural crops grow better and faster and renders them more resilient to drought and pests. The remaining dry seamoss can be used in exactly the same manner as before. So instead of selling the end product once, seamoss can now yield a **primary** crop in the form of organic fertilizer and a **secondary** crop as seamoss gel for drinks and desserts.

A relatively small capital investment is required to set up a plant to juice the seamoss crops grown by farmers from Praslin, Savannes and Laborie and process it into a fertilizer that can be used easily, widely and safely by local farmers. The capital required can probably be raised locally, as there already exists a fair amount of excitement amongst local businesspeople for the idea. Government support however is required in helping to sort out the implications of significantly larger seamoss farming areas, including issues to do with leases of the sea bed, and other legal matters. Help from the Ministry of Agriculture would also be required in having extension officers to familiarize farmers with the new fertilizer and its best operating practices although basically, the seamoss juice is mixed with ten parts of water, poured into a normal backpack sprayer and applied directly to the crop. There are no health risks to its use.

The overall benefits of this industry can be tremendous: economically (reducing the import bill for chemical fertilizer whilst gaining an export product), socially (seamoss farming particularly absorbs economically vulnerable women and youngsters, does not require land ownership and very little capital investment) and ecologically (seamoss production actually helps to clean silt off the coral reefs and the sea bed; and the ready availability of good, cheap organic fertilizer will greatly reduce the application of harmful chemical into the eco-system, where it travels 'from ridge to reef'). Crucially important natural habitats such as Praslin Bay and Savannes Bay can be put to great social-economic use, in a way that is completely environmentally sustainable.

From a tourism point-of-view, while seamoss farming in itself may not draw in great crowds, it is a rare and interesting activity on a par with cocoa and chocolate production (*Hotel Chocolat* in Soufriere) and spice production (Grenada's claim to fame). It also ties in with organic agriculture which, as we have seen, is an important part of the niche markets of medical, health-conscious and eco-conscious tourism. Furthermore, organic fertilizer from seamoss can become a valuable export product: certainly regionally and possibly also internationally.

8. Bee-keeping

Another agricultural niche industry that may well become of crucial importance in the next few years is bee-keeping. Mankote Mangrove, Moule a Chique and other natural habitats in the south of the island offer ample opportunity to establish and extend bee hives and teach people how to keep bees. Not only can we harvest and sell honey as a wonderful St Lucian souvenir ('*Myel Mankote*' and '*Myel Moule a Chique*') but with bee populations dying off in North America at the rate of 30 per cent of all hives every year, the production of queen-bees must also be explored as a viable business enterprise. As with seamoss farming, bee-keeping hits the triple bottom line: it can make money, it provides new income-generating avenues and employment opportunities for youngsters and low-income households without the need for large capital investment, and it supports sustainable environmental practices.

Other Caribbean and Pacific nations are already recognizing this niche market. The web site of Jamaica's Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries notes , for instance, that: "*The decline in bee population in North America and the revived awareness of local beekeepers to replace queens every two years have stimulated production of high quality queen bees on a large scale.*"

http://www.moa.gov.jm/Beekeeping/supply_queen_bee.php

And in Tahiti, too: "BEEKEEPERS EYE QUEEN BEE EXPORTS":

<http://pidp.org/archive/2010/February/02-23-13.htm>

Bee-keeping fares best in a diversified eco-system, with a good variety of flowering plants and trees, and little or no use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. It fits seamlessly with the other strategies for niche market tourism development outlined above.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, St Lucia's economic development has been built on a paradigm of tourism which has left the Government and people of St Lucia very much beholden to the demands and wishes of large (foreign) hotel investors and cruise ship tour operators. But flaunting hotel rooms and stay-over figures alone is no longer relevant in 2014 and the tourism paradigm is shifting - as well it should.

There obviously exists a clear correlation between Direct Foreign Investment (DFI) and the growth of the Gross Domestic Product in St Lucia. But more resorts, more hotel rooms, more bed nights and more visitor arrivals do not automatically generate more wealth and welfare for the country and its people. The price St Lucia is paying for bending over backwards to accommodate large foreign investment in (beachfront) tourism projects is high. The 2008 financial crisis has shown in harsh reality the fickleness of several of these large-scale resort developments, with failed projects scarring the landscape and adding tens of millions of dollars to the nation's already massive burden of debt.

We must start to distinguish between the various impacts that various *types* of DFI have on the economy, society and the environment. Obviously, the impact of DFI generated by an all-inclusive resort is very different from that generated by medical schools - which have been *so inclusive* that we have even failed to recognize them as a form of tourism.

Stable, sustainable development is not primarily about chasing the foreign dollar: it is about smart articulation, prudence, community involvement, backward linkages and ecological sustainability. Foreign investment with the promise of wage labour, a community project or two and some lip service to environmental sustainability should no longer induce the kind of knee-jerk reaction which, in the past, has led to the handing over of hundreds of acres of prime agricultural land, not to mention effective access to long stretches of public beach and coastline at the expense of environmental diversity and public recreation. A new metric or indicator such as '**economic impact per foot-length of beach front**' may have an unfamiliar ring to it but may paint a surprising and enlightening picture of the state of tourism in St Lucia - and be a useful indicator to help assess future investments.

As part of our re-conceptualization exercise, we elaborated on the importance of developing niche markets that bring in tourists *directly from overseas*. We identified several niche markets that can be opened up almost immediately and with a minimum of capital investment: the establishment of a National Landmark at Moule a Chique and the Maria Islands; amateur radio operators; medical and wellness tourism; *off-grid tourism* with reggae holidays, organic farming, *Ital* cooking and marijuana tourism; yachting; turtle watching; bee-keeping and the production of organic fertilizer from sea moss.

The common denominator in all these niche markets is that they attract tourists directly from overseas. Also, the foreign exchange earned is spread amongst a large number of small, independent local operators and feeds directly into the local economy;

the product being developed is attractive to locals as well as foreigners and thereby improves, strengthens and diversifies the local community; and, finally, environmental sustainability is married with immediate economic benefits, thus relieving the pressure on natural resources, instead of adding to it.

It's time to get to work!