

The Development of Vieux Fort's Tourism Product

by Anderson Reynolds and Julius James



Introduction

The Vieux Fort Tourism Development Group was formed in response to a call from the Ministry of Tourism, Heritage and Creative Industries to discuss strategies to develop the tourism product in Vieux Fort. The group includes representatives from Southern Tourism Development Corporation (STDC), Vyé-Fo Mouvman Ansanm, Eco South Tours Inc., Jako Productions, and Vieux Fort South Constituency Council. This paper presents a summary of the discussions of The Vieux Fort Tourism Development Group on the development of a viable and sustainable tourism product in Vieux Fort.

In comparison to Soufriere and the Castries-Gros Islet corridor, the tourism industry in Vieux Fort can be considered underdeveloped. However, it is not clear that this underdevelopment is due to a lack of potential, or a lack of awareness of potential, or a lack of proposals and initiatives. The government's Southern Quadrant Vision Plan, the 2010 National Trust Opal Study of the economic viability of livelihood pursuits within the Point Sable Environmental Protection Area, the mandate and past initiatives of the Southern Tourism Development Corporation, the activities and initiatives of the National Trust, and government development and land use plans for Vieux Fort (almost as many plans as administrations), all speak to awareness of Vieux Fort's touristic potential and efforts to develop the tourism sector.

Possible causes of the dearth of tourism activity in Vieux Fort may include inadequate tourism infrastructure; inattention to the conservation and preservation of the region's historical, architectural, and natural heritage; inattention to cultivating and maintaining an aesthetically pleasing envi-

ronment; neglecting to develop and maintain a calendar of cultural, sports, and entertainment events to compliment the region's natural and historical attractions; insufficient focus on the packaging, promotion and marketing of the tourism product to both domestic, regional and international visitors; and inadequate management, oversight, coordination and the nurturing of tourism activity.

The Uniqueness of Vieux Fort

To assess Vieux Fort's potential as a tourist destination and to formulate strategies to develop its tourism product, it may be useful to ask what about Vieux Fort that would lure visitors, say from other parts of the island or even from other Caribbean destinations? In other words, what is unique about Vieux Fort, what sets Vieux Fort apart from the rest of the island, what are the selling (bragging) points of Vieux Fort from a touristic perspective? The answer to this question is that Vieux Fort has a unique set of natural, historical and cultural attributes that makes it stand out from the rest of the island.

Vieux Fort is home to the island's longest stretch of sandy beach, sea-grass forest, mangrove forest, and live coral reef. It is home to one of St. Lucia's best snorkeling and scuba diving waters; home to the Maria Islands Nature Reserve, a nesting ground for many migratory birds and a sanctuary for a specie of whiptail lizard found nowhere else in St. Lucia (except Praslin Island where it was translocated) and the Caribbean; home to the Moule A Chique peninsula which offers a panoramic view of the Vieux Fort landscape and seascape and upon which sits the world's second highest lighthouse; home to the best kite and windsurfing beach



in St. Lucia and one of the best in the Caribbean; home also to the Point Sable Environmental Protection Park (PSEPA) which among other things offers a crab watching beach, and a bird watching post where rare bird species such as the red beak pigeon can be viewed.

In fact, established in 2007, the PSEPA has been described as comprising of a unique set of natural, ecological, cultural and historical assets, and as such it has acquired national, regional and international recognition. Because of these unique set of assets, the government's 2007 Southern Quadrant Development Plan suggests the PSEPA as an area that can facilitate a range of activities that can provide direct social and economic livelihoods to the immediate and surrounding communities.

Vieux Fort's history presents as much uniqueness as its natural setting. It is believed to be the site of Amerindian first occupation of the island and home to possibly the island's greatest concentration of Amerindian archeological sites and artifacts. It is believed to be the site of European first entrance and settlement on the island, and also the site of their first encounter/confrontation with the island's Amerindian population. Vieux Fort was the initial center of the island's sugar industry, and its Central Sugar Factory built in 1882 was one of the first such factories in St. Lucia and the Caribbean (Bush Talk, A History of St. Lucia, 2012).



Today the island's African and East Indian descendants and remnants of sugar factories and sugar windmills serve as signpost of that era. Vieux Fort's history also speaks of World War II, when the Americans transformed the Vieux Fort landscape and seascape into a military base, leaving behind many vestiges of their military adventure. Indeed, it appears that Vieux Fort has served as the gateway to St. Lucia since time immemorial, the present proving no exception considering its airport and seaport.

Vieux Fort's culture also has its uniqueness. It is home to the island's highest concentration of East Indian heritage and culture, and Vieux Fort North (Belvue) is home to some of the island's richest folk culture. The African population and heritage lying side by side the island's largest East Indian population and heritage has given rise to an interesting blend of people and culture, probably nowhere else as pronounced as in Vieux Fort.

Vieux Fort's uniqueness doesn't stop with its natural setting and its history and culture. As home to the island's international airport, Vieux Fort serves as the gateway to St.



Lucia, which suggests advantages of accessibility and convenience. Its international airport combined with its proximity to Soufriere and the town's many spell-binding natural attractions, and also its proximity to some of the island's riches rainforest, suggest that it is ideally situated to serve as a tour hub.

As alluded to above, with this unique draw of nature, history and culture, the challenge at hand to propel the Vieux Fort tourism sector forward is how to create a touristic enabling environment, how to conserve and preserve this heritage, how to package this heritage into a sustainable tourism product that would serve as an engine of economic growth while safe-guarding and even improving on the wholesomeness of the heritage, and how to promote and market this tourism product to ensure viability, sustainability, longevity, and the flow of benefits to entrepreneurs and to surrounding communities.

Conceptualizing the Vieux Fort Tourism Product

A logical first step towards developing a tourism product in Vieux Fort would be to define the type of tourism that should be pursued: mass tourism or niche tourism? In that regard, considering that unlike the Castries-Gros Islet corridor, Vieux Fort lacks the critical mass of restaurants, nightlife, and shopping required for mass tourism, and also it isn't endowed with the spectacular natural sights of Soufriere to draw visitors amass, it can be reasoned that Vieux Fort's mix of attractions lend themselves best to niche tourist, examples of which may include nature lovers, water sports enthusiasts, visitors intrigued by American World War II occupation of the island and other historical events, persons fascinated with new and different cultural experiences, and St. Lucian residents seeking less crowded spaces and beaches for camping, weekend excursions, recreation, vacations, and even for such special events as weddings, and family and business retreats.

One can envision a Vieux Fort tourism product centered



around the district's core of distinct natural, cultural, and historical attributes, developed and packaged in a manner that provides visitors with opportunities to engage in demonstrative and participatory activities arising from these unique set of attractions. The goal being to provide visitors a rich, intimate and memorable vacation experience.

However, at this juncture there is a need to fully research what currently obtains as the tourism industry in Vieux Fort, to iron out the details of a feasible tourism product based on the earlier mentioned attributes as well as current activities, to properly package the product and to develop a promotion and marketing plan. Nonetheless, this is not the first attempt at developing a tourism product in Vieux Fort, therefore this current undertaken is not starting from scratch. In fact, many of the elements that would come together to fashion a tourism product for Vieux Fort have been offered in the past or are currently being offered.

A&E Tourism Services used to or still provides kayaking services in and about Savannes Bay area and Scorpion Island; ATV Paradise is providing ATV tours of different ter-



rains in the south of the island; Atlantic Shores Riding Stables and Savanne Stables are providing beach horse-riding tours; Bayside Marine Tours and Services provides (by appointment only) marine tours of Vieux Fort waters and tours between Vieux Fort and Soufriere; the Reef Restaurant and Bar is providing kite and wind surfing equipment rental and training; Coconut Bay is providing kite and wind surfing training and services to its guest. The hotel also provides its guests kayaking services and, through tour agencies mostly stationed in Castries and Gros Islet, arranges for its guests to have access to all tours on offer on the island.

Coconut Bay and other Vieux Fort hotels have to book tours through tour agencies in the north of the island because apparently there are no comparable tour agencies in Vieux Fort. Not only are there no comparable tour agencies, but cursory research revealed that a properly packaged historical and cultural tour of Vieux Fort has not been on the offer. Consequently, visitors wishing to go on a Vieux Fort





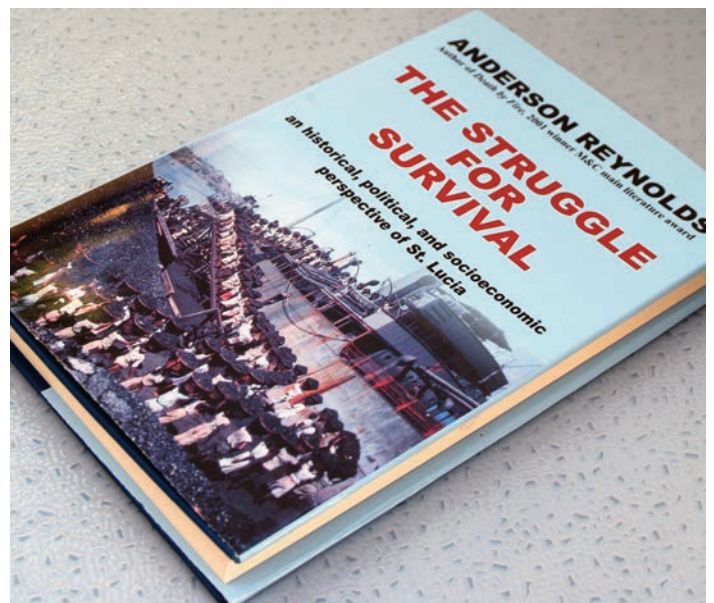
expedition have to rely on hiring a taxi with no guarantee that the taxi driver is knowledgeable of the history of the area and of the attractions on offer. The absence of structured tour packages have also meant that the potential of Vieux Fort for such activities as snorkeling, scuba diving, and bird and crab watching has not been highlighted or promoted. Yet indications are that the mangrove forest of Mankôtè and Bwa Chadon are fertile areas for crab and bird watching. Further research, however, is required to identify the best snorkeling and scuba diving spots.

Established in 2001 under the Companies Act, Cap 13.01 revised Laws of Saint Lucia, Eco South Tours envisioned a heritage eco-tourism package of hiking trails, horseback riding, native fishing tours, Maria Islands Nature Reserve tours, and also of demonstrations of arts and craft, charcoal technology and sea moss farming. If fully functioning, Eco South Tours may represent the only entity on island that attempts to provide structured tours of Vieux Fort. Maybe one outcome of the Vieux Fort Tourism Development Group's deliberation on strategies to develop the tourism product in Vieux Fort will be that Eco South Tours develop into a full fledged tour agency providing tours that fully encompass all what Vieux Fort has to offer the visitor and serving as a tour hub agency for the southern half of the island.

Another important consideration in developing a tourism product for Vieux Fort is the linking of activities and sites on offer in Vieux Fort with those of neighboring communities, or, in other words, regarding the attractions of other communities as extensions of Vieux Fort's tourism product. This way the product on offer will provide visitors with a richer and more diverse experience. For example, as tourist attractions, Micoud offers Mamiku Botanical Garden and its attendant history, and rainforest tours that provide sightings of the rare St. Lucian parrot. Laborie (Piaye) offers a rich folk culture and both Laborie (Sugar Park and Sapphire Estate) and Choiseul (Balembouche) present remnants of sugar estates and sugar mills which would help augment a Vieux Fort sugar cultivation historical theme tour.

On display at Balembouche Estate are Amerindian artifacts of stone hatchets, pottery, and tools, and along the Balembouche river one can view Amerindian carved rock basins and petroglyphs. These Amerindian finds along with the Choiseul Arts and Craft Center, which presents displays and demonstrations of Amerindian technology in the form of clay pot making and basket and mat weaving, would help enrich a Vieux Fort Amerindian historical theme tour.

Besides its natural, historical and cultural attractions, Vieux Fort is blessed with relatively dry weather, wide open spaces, and uncongested roads. This combined with its international airport makes the town ideal for hosting international conventions, cultural festivals, and sporting events. One of the findings of a 2010 study by Sylvester Clauzel to determine the potential of the PSEPA to sustain livelihoods, was that the viability of the tourist product may hinge on augmenting the natural, historical and cultural attractions with cultural and entertainment events such as theatre and music festivals; and to this list we can add conventions and sporting events. Therefore, regarding the Vieux Fort tourism product, there may be value in developing a calendar of sporting and cultural events to enhance the attractiveness of Vieux Fort as a tourist destination and to enrich the visitor experience. Some of the cultural events Vieux Fort has hosted include Jounen Kweyol Day Festivals, Creole and Folk Music Festivals, Creole Pageant Shows, Emancipation Day Concerts, Jazz Concerts, Musician Feast Concerts, and Assou Square Concerts. Vieux Fort has also hosted international football matches, Carifesta games, and horse and car racing events. However, these cultural and sporting events have occurred in a sporadic fashion, thus the challenge would be to establish a calendar of recurrent events. In summary we envision a niche market tourism product that hinges on Vieux Fort's natural, historical and cultural uniqueness, augmented by the attractions of neighboring communities and by a calendar of cultural and sporting events. The tourism product would need to be sustainable





and complimentary to the island’s tourism industry, and engender community participation in its management and flow of benefits.

On Creating a Tourism Enabling Environment

Critical to the development of a viable and sustainable tourism product in Vieux Fort is the existence of a tourism enabling environment and the conservation, preservation and enhancement of the region’s natural, historical and cultural heritage.

First, there is a need to maintain an esthetically pleasing and alluring environment. Therefore, as part of gaining a touristic competitive edge, it would help to make Vieux Fort and its environs the cleanest and most presentable part of the island, where landscaping, tree planting, and the establishment and maintenance of recreation parks would be part of that process.

Second, greater effort should be devoted to conserving Vieux Fort’s sandy beaches and preserving the health of its coastal waters. This is an urgent matter because at the present several ongoing activities may be undermining the integrity’ of Vieux Fort’s beaches and coastal waters. The flow of industrial refuse into the Atlantic Ocean, and river silt deposited into the Caribbean Sea, seemingly after every downpour, which then spreads into the Atlantic Ocean, are likely killing our coral reef system. The sand mining activities of poachers and the used of motorized equipment to clear the beach of seaweed are denuding the beach of sand. Vehicular traffic at Pointe Sable Beach is also undermining the integrity of the beach and its plant life. Debris generated from port activities are polluting the waters of the Caribbean Sea thus reducing its appeal for swimming and other water sports.

The quality, viability and efficacy of the tourist product

(its very likelihood, for that matter) will also depend on the tourism infrastructure. Consideration needs to be given to the development and cultivation of the sites of attraction, the establishment of edifices (e.g. museums, interpretation centers, aquaria, and demonstration sites) to optimally exploit what nature and the process of history and culture have gifted, and also the establishment of management and oversight structures (see footnote for elaboration).

The tourism product as being envisioned for Vieux Fort is not a stand-alone endeavor, it cannot or doesn’t exist in isolation of community and industry, hence there are several institutions (government or otherwise) with a non-tourism mandate that nonetheless can have a significant influence on the quality and success of the tourism product, and thus should be included as part of the tourism enabling environment.

A partial list of such institutions should include SLASPA, Invest St. Lucia, Vieux Fort South Constituency Council, Solid Waste Management, National Conservation Authority, St. Lucia National Trust, Creative Industries, St. Lucia Heritage Tourism Program, and Southern Taxi Association. Organizations set up to spearhead tourism development in Vieux Fort should regard these organizations as partners in delivering a viable and sustainable tourism product and as such should ensure that they fully understand the nature of the tourism product and their role in ensuring its success.

What are some of these roles? To begin with, SLASPA has jurisdiction over the island’s seaport and airport, the very first settings that visitors to the island lay their eyes on, and on the basis of which they form their first impression. Seaport activities invariably pollute beaches and coastal waters, the very elements that represent the strongest pull of visitors to our shores. Therefore a SLASPA who is aware and is appreciative of the negative or positive influence its activities can have on the touristic product is more likely to conduct business in a more tourism friendly manner. A further consideration is that a percentage of port fees collected by SLASPA at Vieux Fort ports should go towards the development of Vieux Fort’s tourism sector. This is by no means



Leatherback Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*)



an outrageous suggestion because Vieux Fort is paying a heavy price for housing the nation's international airport. Instead of hugging the Atlantic coast or running parallel to it, Hewanorra is perpendicular to the coast and as such cuts across the plains of Vieux Fort, occupying a large junk of the very land that would allow Vieux Fort town to spread outwards in unbroken fashion across its plains. To make matters worse, Vieux Fort can't enjoy the full benefits of shouldering this high cost for the good of the country as a whole because the incidence of two airports has meant that Hewanorra is underutilized. However, loss of real estate is not the only cost to Vieux Fort of the airport. Research have found that the toxic emissions of airports increases the risk of cancer, asthma, liver damage, lung disease, lymphoma, myeloid leukemia, and even depression; and airport noise pollution increases the risk of high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and stroke.

Solid Waste Management, National Conservation Authority, Vieux Fort South Constituency Council, St. Lucia National Trust, are all involved in either proper garbage disposal and maintenance of a garbage free environment and or the conservation and protection of our natural and/or historical heritages. One cannot overstate the importance to the tourism industry of preserving the island's natural setting and maintaining an esthetically pleasing environment, as these are the very elements that give our tourism product a competitive edge.

Invest St. Lucia, OPSR, Heritage Tourism Program, Tourist Board, Creative Industries are concerned with export expansion, growing the economy, enlarging the tourism base. All of which are in step with developing a

tourism product in Vieux Fort, an export product that invariably creates economic growth. In other words, the presence of a viable tourism product in Vieux Fort can be viewed as part of the end goal of these institutions.

It is important also to recognize that Vieux Fort's development and land use pattern will have an impact on the tourism product. For example, factory refuse flowing unto a beach would make the area unattractive for recreation and hotel development. Likewise, buildup on a particular parcel of land precludes other developments such as tourism projects even if this would have represented the best use of the land. On the other hand, ill planned touristic development projects could undermine the overall development of the region. This suggests that the process of developing a tourism product for Vieux Fort should include an updated land use and development plan that would ensure an orderly and optimal pattern of land use and economic development.

The quality and availability of ancillary services such as banking, shopping, restaurants, other food and beverage facilities, entertainment establishments, telecommunication and other public utilities (such as water, sewerage, and electricity), and information and computing services speak to the capacity of the region to support a tourism industry. Thus for best results these services would need to develop along with the tourism product. Among the ancillary services listed, quality restaurants and night entertainment seem to be among the most glaring deficiencies. But this brings up the classical dilemma of the chicken and the egg. A strong and steady demand for quality dining will induce entrepreneurs to provide the service, but then the presence of quality dining is what would help draw visitors. In fact, this notion can be broaden to the question of a viable tourism sector in Vieux Fort. A strong flow of visitors would motivate businesses to establish all the elements that make for a strong tourism sector, but then there will not be a strong flow of visitors if there isn't much in place to attract them.



The Longevity of the Tourism Product

As the preceding discussions suggest, the underdevelopment of Vieux Fort's tourism sector is not likely due to a lack of potential, or a lack of awareness of potential, or a lack of proposals and initiatives. What is apparent is that there are some challenges to overcome and there has not been a systematic, comprehensive and sustained approach to the development of Vieux Fort's tourism product.

On that point it may be instructive to take a closer look at the operations of Coconut Bay who, situated in Vieux Fort, appears to be relatively successful. As an all-inclusive hotel Coconut Bay solves the problem of dining, entertainment and night-life in-house. Fronting a long stretch of beach its guest can enjoy most of what we have listed as Vieux Fort's nature related selling points. It overcomes Vieux Fort's lack of organized tours or tour agencies by organizing its own tours or employing the services of tour agencies in the north of the island. Another innovation Coconut Bay



has adopted is that it has stay-over packages tailored to attract St. Lucian and Caribbean residents and, partly as a result, the number of St. Lucian and Caribbean guests has increased significantly.

The Coconut Bay example suggests that the advent of another large but non-all-inclusive hotel in the Vieux Fort area with dining and entertainment open to non-resident guests, may help alleviate the lack of quality dining and entertainment in Vieux Fort.

The Coconut Bay example also brings up several other points of discussion. First, once a hotel has a pleasing beachfront and can source its own clientele, apparently it can find ways to overcome the deficiencies of its immediate surroundings. Second, given the large number of guests that Coconut Bay hosts, can't the hotel be a major source of clients for various tours and isn't there a way to partner with the hotel to develop Vieux Fort's tourism product? Third, are we underestimating the potential of St. Lucian and

Caribbean residents as tourists to Vieux Fort shores? Shouldn't we take a page from St. Lucia Jazz where Caribbean nationals form a large part of the clientele? Fourth, legally speaking, isn't the right to conduct tours to attractions and amenities within the Vieux Fort area belong to the political constituency? If so shouldn't the constituency be collecting a percentage of all tour revenues?

An even more fundamental question regarding the longevity of the tourism product is why quasi-governmental institutions, initiatives, operations, does start with bluster then sputter. Is it because of inadequate managing structures? Is it because once the persons with passion and commitment exit the picture things begin to fall apart? Does it have to do with politics of expedience or convenience and the resulting tendency of square pegs in round holes? Is it through lack of public participation? As part of the process to revamp the tourism sector in Vieux Fort and to ensure its longevity this time around, won't it be useful to research the issue of the longevity and viability of such organizations as STDC?

The Way Forward

Vieux-Fort can boast of having a set of unique natural and cultural resources that offer opportunities for development – as yet unrealized. The coast is Vieux-Fort's present magnet but are there opportunities for tourism development further inland and neighbouring districts. The major challenge is to create the conditions that will help convert this enormous potential to reality, safeguard the wholesomeness or integrity of the heritage and bring benefits to the local population and business community.

Currently, there is no overall guidance for systematic tourism product planning, nor any system of assistance provided to local tourism entrepreneurs. Poor presentation, too, has been a major contributory factor to the absence of sufficient critical mass of tourism products to attract visitors. In addition, the absence of a National Tourism Development Plan has resulted in the establishment of non-tourism market-related developments in areas suited or even ideal for tourism development. In the absence of an integrated enterprise policy or programme in Vieux-Fort, it is understandable that private investments in this area would be low.

Thus the current initiative of the Ministry of Tourism, Heritage and Creative Industries is providing some light at the end of the tunnel for Vieux-Fort Tourism Development Group to push ahead with that burning desire to bring some form of meaningful tourism to the District of Vieux Fort. In the way forward the Group proposes the following actions for both the short and long-term vision:

- (1) Establish a Vieux-Fort Tourism Development Organization that will have full stakeholder representation and serve



as a single, cohesive and cogent management and oversight structure for policy formulation, strategic planning matters, product development, programme implementation and evaluation and community education, among other principal roles and functions;

(2) Agitate, demand and ensure that the Vieux-Fort Tourism Development Organization is adequately represented on the Saint Lucia Tourist Board and other national organizations engaged in shaping tourism policy and strategy decisions and developing the island's tourism product;

(3) Undertake a fact finding mission to ascertain what now constitutes the tourism industry in Vieux Fort, identify organizations or businesses currently offering touristic services, assess the level of promotion and marketing being conducted, categorize services and activities that visitors are requesting, quantify the contribution of tourism to the local economy and determine what are the bottlenecks to the growth of tourism in Vieux-Fort;

(4) With the understanding that the unique attractions of Vieux-Fort will be developed and maintained, and with the information derived from the fact finding mission, efforts will then be concentrated on crafting and refining (or defining) a full range of tourism product opportunities across the district in order that participation in and benefits of tourism will be widespread. Of course, the tour formula would need to include quality standards as to the qualification, training, experience, and equipment safety of service providers, and the safety and security of touristic sites and gathering places;

(5) Develop and conduct a tourist-oriented marketing program comprising familiarization trips, trade shows/fairs, tour operator/travel agent workshops, tour operator support, trade advertising, and etc. for promoting greater awareness of Vieux-Fort's tourism product and the inclusion of features of that product in the island's tourism programs;

(6) Identify and communicate to Government areas where it can provide immediate tangible support towards the development of tourism in Vieux-Fort;

(7) Recognize that tourism development cannot succeed without public and private sector support, involvement, collaboration and or coordination. Therefore, serious discussions must take place with Government and relevant agencies managing public-owned resources in Vieux-Fort (lands, beaches, ports, forests, rivers, historic sites, etc.) and the business sector for the purpose of establishing an integrated, comprehensive, environmentally friendly and approved tourism development plan. In that regard the developmental plans proposed for the Southern Quadrant in the National Vision Plan of St. Lucia must be revisited and incorporated where possible into that tourism plan.

(8) Conceptualize and implement a program designed to generate and or build upon community awareness of the potential of tourism as a means to stimulating economic and other related developments.

In conclusion, the State and Government must be reminded that it has a crucial stake in the tourism development plan for Vieux-Fort. The direct economic benefits and multiplier effects of tourism are too well known to merit any justification here. Suffice it to say that tourism development as a main pillar for promoting economic development in Vieux-Fort and the South generally, can spread its benefits and offer real opportunities for local investment and employment. Vieux-Fort has been bruised and battered from a long history of broken promises, neglect, disrespect, marginalization, political bluffing and negative stereotyping. The silent majority from the district continues to clamour for economic and sustained development and tourism might well provide that engine for economic growth. The State and Government MUST recognize this and provide the financial, material and other forms of support to a community willing to play a greater, if not leading, role in harnessing and developing its tourism potential. It just cannot be business as usual.

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