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## **Destination Marketing in a Pandemic: How Bermuda Retained Its Relevance and Found Silver Linings**

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## Destination Marketing in a Pandemic: How Bermuda Retained Its Relevance and Found Silver Linings



Left to right: Glenn Jones, Interim CEO, Bermuda Tourism Authority, Dan Norton, England Men Sevens rugby player, and E. David Burt, Premier of Bermuda

### I. Introduction: The Impact

In 2020, tourism's boom hit a sudden, unanticipated, and dramatic pause. With the emergence of a global pandemic declared on March 11, global travel and tourism came to a painful halt with almost no movement of people worldwide. Countries that relied heavily on tourism as their primary GDP contributor – an economic lifeline for locals – suffered greatly as businesses closed and lodging accommodations, restaurants, and attractions shuttered.

Bermuda, the British island territory located in the North Atlantic Ocean, implemented (and effectively communicated) cutting-edge COVID-19 protocols to encourage travel during the pandemic and leveraged opportunities. Prior to March 2020, Bermuda's tourism industry was on a multi-year resurgence. In 2019, the island experienced its third consecutive year of record-breaking total visitor arrivals. Most of the 800,000 plus arrivals were tourists from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. A year earlier, Bermuda implemented a National Tourism Plan with a goal to “build a clear view of our aspirational future for tourism and its effect on the island as a whole.” And

according to the 2020 Visitor Arrivals Report, a consistently growing percentage of travelers to the country arrived via cruise ships, with 536,000 passengers in 2019, nearly a 10% increase over the year prior. Meantime, air arrival numbers grew more slowly but while generating significantly more spending per visitor.

But how did a destination promote itself, when travel was globally discouraged? The Bermuda Tourism Authority (BTA) adjusted its National Tourism Plan throughout 2020 and focused on important marketing communications principles.

## **II. The Importance of Clear (Digital) Communications:**

Bermuda's COVID response consisted of extensive testing and quarantine protocols that led to a Level 1 travel warning from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in the summer of 2020. This was a catalyst in Bermuda's efforts to maximize travel following the economic turmoil caused by COVID-19. Level 1 status categorized Bermuda as low risk for illness, and safe for travelers. Other destinations achieved Level 1 with the CDC, but almost none of them re-opened to tourism last summer. The Bermudian government chose to reopen and allow travelers to visit in July of 2020, achieving Level 1 status even as its borders remained open to visitors. According to then Interim-CEO of the Bermuda Tourism Authority (BTA) Glenn Jones, "The government of Bermuda determined it could balance public health (via rigorous testing regimes) and economic recovery by getting people back to work." So how did the BTA let the world know that the country was open to welcoming visitors?

Communicating comfort and compassion with clarity and consistency was essential when reaching out to individuals considering any type of international travel at this time (Lanz, Boston Hospitality Review, July 2020). Public information platforms for updates regarding COVID, such as the CDC's website, were heavily utilized by consumers during the pandemic when researching destinations to travel (Q3 2020 Quarterly Report, GoToBermuda.com). The BTA understood that its website was crucial in converting interest in traveling into booked business. According to Jones, "a regularly-updated website was the most useful tool" for inspiring consumers to choose Bermuda over other destinations. The website proved the most commonly used communication tool for consumers, and the BTA distributed bi-weekly emails to tourism industry stakeholders including hotels, restaurants, local experience providers, and transportation operators.

"Overcommunication was key at this time," explains Jones. "As with other crisis communication, like hurricanes, frequent communication is imperative. With this situation, there was a similar need, but for a much longer period of time than an approaching storm."

Messaging to consumers was consistent: “Clean. Safe. Close.” All messages on digital platforms emphasized these three points. BTA’s mission with this message: “If you’re ready to travel, we want to be on your consideration list.” Safe and responsible travel to Bermuda was highlighted prominently on GoToBermuda.com. The site’s navigation led directly to sections that detailed Travel Alerts & Protocols, Travel Authorization Process Forms, Pre-Arrival COVID testing options, Return Travel Testing, Work from Bermuda Certificate, and What’s Open in Bermuda. The BTA deliberately shared information in an easily understandable manner to enable travel with minimal confusion. As Jones shared, the website was “newly built, with continually updated content” to ensure relevant information for guests from the United States, Canada, and elsewhere as well as island stakeholders.

The BTA also utilized Instagram to communicate that the country was a safe place to travel. The regular use of infographics, promotional videos, and the hashtag #BermudaIsSafer, all worked in tandem to brand the country as a safe destination for work, business, school, and escape. The Instagram account featured updates on travel restrictions and new events and directly linked to the Bermuda website for people interested in more information.

The BTA Q3 2020 Report further explains how Bermuda effectively used programmatic video display advertising, paid social on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, to complement outreach via television and print publications. Digital outreach also included webinars for the travel trade explaining safety protocols and travel guidelines to promote inbound travel.

In fact, tourist exit surveys conducted between July and December 2020 revealed that 98% of Bermuda visitors “felt safe” or “very safe” from COVID while in the country (Jones).

### **III. Recovery Strategies: Digital Engagement and Cooperative Relationships**

Fortunately, with crisis comes opportunity. It was up to the BTA to continue to think creatively and find new connections. Activities resulted in identifying new target markets, new partnerships, and new air routes to spread Bermuda’s message as a COVID-safe travel destination, leaning heavily on digital platforms given how quickly things were apt to change.

It was understood that recovery would be “slow and gradual,” not an immediate return to normal (Jones). The organization continually enhanced and modified marketing opportunities, a daunting task as guidelines changed country-by-country, and as the

number of COVID cases fluctuated. As the world shut down, organizations around the globe adjusted work needs and travel requirements to a new normal. And as behavioral patterns changed, hospitality strategies evolved.

### **New Target Markets:**

The BTA implemented a revised action plan that consisted of four target markets in the United States: The “Jetsetter,” “Active Families,” the “Experience Enthusiast,” and the “Adventure Seeker.” The BTA marketing team, under Jones’ direction, further narrowed the effort to focus on the “Jetsetter” and “Adventure Seeker.”

- Jetsetters were defined as individuals over 30, with an income greater than \$250,000 who travel more than six times a year. They are “more resistant to economic downturns” and “high-spenders.”
- “Adventure Seekers” were defined as those between the ages of 18 and 34, who earn more than \$100,000, are single, and take four or more trips per year.

Jones and the BTA team determined that the most important desire of Jetsetters and Adventure Seekers was the need for new experiences whether by visiting historic locations, embarking on adventures, or interacting with different cultures. Bermuda aimed to meet these goals by creating “A trip full of culture and adventure; a rich and diverse history that offers unique, memorable experiences.” Additionally, to leverage the expanding digital nomad global trend, the Bermuda Government nimbly created the “Work from Home Bermuda Certificate,” which allowed citizens from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom who could work remotely to live in Bermuda for up to a year. Many of these new residents to Bermuda arrived as visitors and that helped to increase the average length of stay, according to Jones. Stays that typically ranged an average of five days pre-COVID, doubled in this new environment.

According to the Business Development Agency of Bermuda, by year-end 2020, there were 587 applications for the Certificate, of which 508 were approved. Approximately 56% of applicants ultimately moved to Bermuda ([bda.com](http://bda.com)).

Messaging: “Local involvement,” as one of the seven pillars of the Bermuda National Tourism Plan, and community involvement in message development, were critically important. The BTA firmly believes that its citizens, who represent the country’s heritage, distinguish Bermuda from other tourism destinations. Bermudian culture was an integral part of messaging. To bring this to life in an authentic way, Bermuda profiled individuals to highlight the contributions and culture of Bermudians. For example, Spencer Field, a beekeeper, works hard to restore the Island’s bee population and



promotes education about bees and the ecosystem. Weldon Wade, a scuba diver with a passion for ocean conservation was also featured. Wade is actively trying to reduce the lionfish population in Bermuda (an invasive species causing great damage to the environment) by hunting them for food.

The profiles comprise a series called “Harvest Heroes.” Such stories are featured on the BTA YouTube channel and aim to connect visitors more meaningfully. These stories tap into consumers’ desire to learn about the history and culture of the places they travel.

*Another Market of Significance? Sports Groups.* When the National Tourism Plan was created in 2018, the sports group market was of particular importance in the Teams & Groups pillar. The intended focus on growing this business proved worthwhile during the pandemic. BTA’s marketing team focused efforts on developing a unique selling proposition (USP) and positioning centered around the country’s rigorous and reliable COVID policies – a critical ingredient for sports looking to get restarted responsibly. Additionally, the BTA identified the sports it could best accommodate with current infrastructure including golf, rugby, and sailing events.

Bermuda hosted the World Tens Series, a new rugby league founded shortly before the pandemic. The league contacted the Bermuda Tourism Authority looking for a destination “equipped to handle ten rugby teams with spectator safely.” Jones admits that the Tens Series probably would not have looked at Bermuda “had it not been for the strict precautions and measures we took and proactively communicated.”

### **New Partnership Opportunities**

- **Government Partnerships:** While targeting sports audiences was an integral part of Bermuda’s economic recovery, it was Bermuda’s health safety track record that earned the attention of other governments. In 2019, the United Kingdom constituted approximately 8% of all air travelers to Bermuda, however marketing investments to this segment were significantly less than efforts toward East Coast-based U.S. travelers. However, during the pandemic, the United Kingdom named Bermuda a “travel corridor.” U.K. citizens who traveled back from Bermuda didn’t have to quarantine, and vice versa. The benefit of not having to quarantine added to Bermuda’s unique selling proposition, however, Bermuda did not have to aggressively promote this advantage because “advertisements took the form up public information” (Jones). Bermuda witnessed a spike in travelers from the U.K. because beach destinations in places like Spain and Greece simply were not options.

By 2020 year-end, 14% of all air visitors were from the U.K.; visitors from the U.K. market proved to be the most resilient of the island's source markets.

- **Collaborative Partnerships:** More recently, “Bermuda Tourism Authority and Visit Lauderdale paired their nautical strengths in a new partnership designed to elevate both destinations' desirable yachting lifestyle (PR Newswire, April 5, 2021). Fort Lauderdale, Florida is considered the yachting capital of North America and has an established reputation in the yachting community. The partnership between the two destinations was natural; oftentimes yachts sail between Bermuda and Fort Lauderdale. Research confirmed Fort Lauderdale and Bermuda were complementary destinations and not competitors because yachters settled at each place at different times of the year. Challenging economic times, created the opportunity for both organizations to work together to promote events, create video content, and design brochures to reach their target audience. If successful, the positive economic impact for both communities would be significant.

#### **New Air Routes:**

- In February 2021, the BTA announced that American Airlines' spring and summer direct service would shift from Miami to Charlotte and provide positive alternatives for leisure travelers. “Charlotte offers better U.S. domestic connections; Miami offers better international connections. And since 3/4's of our visitors come from the U.S., this could be a win for tourism,” (BerNews.com February 24, 2021).
- The all-important U.K. market presented a new air route opportunity as well. Direct air service to Bermuda now also originates from London Heathrow (as of March 2021). This latest service, operating a minimum of four times weekly, opened a wide range of flight connections. While current demand for flights to Bermuda emanates mainly from the U.K., Heathrow flights have the potential to stimulate significantly greater demand from the rest of the world, particularly European cities.

#### **IV. What's Next for Bermuda and Its Marketing?**

As pent-up demand for tourism continues to build for Summer 2021 (and the number of COVID-19 vaccinations increase), Bermuda, and the rest of the world, still face a long recovery. The BTA suspects marketing efforts toward the active family segment and multi-generational will quickly rise.



Crisis brought silver linings and continues to do so. Some cruise business that nearly disappeared has returned in new forms because of the pandemic. Viking Cruise Lines will base ships in Bermuda ports. Viking, an upscale, adult-only line, features five-day excursions that travel port to port around Bermuda which have proven immediately successful. This matches the BTA's post-pandemic expectations that Jetsetters would be more eager to travel first when compared to Active Families. "The upside here," shares Jones, "is that these cruise offerings help raise confidence for demand from airlines, which are putting on more flights. And residually, this also drives lodging demand as guests think about arriving early or staying longer at our hotels – similar to the patterns experienced in cruise markets such as Florida." All travelers seeking these cruises are required to be fully vaccinated, and as vaccination rollouts intensify worldwide, Bermuda is reworking its protocols to ensure immunized consumers know the country is ready to welcome them for that first international trip post-pandemic – a place that is safe, clean, and close.

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