Towards a Happy Future for Tourism

The Case of Aruba’s Stakeholder Engagement Process for a More Innovative and Sustainable Destination Development Plan

Plan Produced by:
A PARADIGM SHIFT

“Aruba’s tourism development approach to the future cannot be based upon its past success, as it will not guarantee similar results in the future.”

Ronella Tjin Asjoe-Croes
CEO Aruba Tourism Authority

The tourism industry has reached a new frontier where globalization and technological advancements are driving an unprecedented shift in thinking and consumer needs. We are witnessing the birth of a new traveler who sees the world through a different lens and embraces different lifestyles compared to the traditional Aruba visitor of the past 30+ years. A traveler that not only looks for authentic experiences but also values sustainable destinations. We can expect significant changes as to how travelers select destinations, consume travel services and make purchasing decisions in the coming years. These transformations, coupled with the fact that Aruba’s tourism product has reached a state of maturity, means it was time to reflect on what it has achieved over the past decades and look ahead to where it wants to go in the future.

An island where the community is defined by, and proud of, their instinctive sense of curiosity, Aruba has again taken a pioneering approach towards destination development. To guide its destination into the future, Aruba together with its people, re-assessed its strategic priorities to continue a smart path for sustainable destination development. A small island destination greatly dependent on tourism requires a forward-thinking destination development plan. This will:

- Fortify its foundation to continue to thrive as a tourism destination for the years and generations to come.
- Help balance external factors and conserve its scarce and fragile natural resources.
- Safeguard the Aruba way of life and happiness of its people.
- Prioritize sustainable tourism practices and the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national level.
ABOUT ARUBA

To help understand the why behind the significance of a destination development plan for this small island nation, it is important to pause and reflect on the history of Aruba’s tourism sector.

History

The closure of Aruba’s oil refinery, Lago, in 1985 had a big impact on Aruba’s economy. The Government of Aruba immediately lost 50% of its income and Aruba was faced with a staggering unemployment of 35%. The government made a choice at that point in time to focus on the tourism industry to recover from this crisis. Aruba has since been exceptionally successful in spurring its economy through tourism.¹

Rapid expansion over the past 30+ years

- Hotel rooms expanded from 2,000 to more than 8,000 over the past 30+ years.
- Stay-over visitor arrivals grew from 200,000 back in 1985 to over 1.1 million in 2016.
- Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reached an amount of $2.7 billion US dollars in 2016 compared to $406mln in 1986.


THE CHALLENGE

Aruba’s tourism sector is known for its resilience. However, notwithstanding its government’s economic diversification efforts to minimize the burden on tourism’s contribution to GDP, it is expected that tourism will remain the main economic pillar for the medium to long term.

The total contribution of Aruba’s tourism industry represents 88% of Aruba’s GDP as of the end of 2016. This high dependence on tourism puts significant pressure on the islands’ natural and cultural assets, the fragile environment and social constituents. The pursuit of innovative pathways for sustainable tourism development is fundamental to achieve balanced growth and maintain economic stability.
THE WAY FORWARD

In reflecting on the challenges and external factors impacting the tourism industry, Aruba recognized the need to continue to evolve and rethink its destination strategy to:

- Maximize economic impact.
- Guard intangible elements of its nation’s development such as but not limited to cultural identity, happiness and wellbeing of the Aruban people.
- Protect the already fragile environment and natural assets.

The DDP offers a fresh approach for collaborative destination development. It allows Aruba and its stakeholders to go forward with a renewed sense of purpose and a refreshed perspective by challenging assumptions and eliminating dated habits.

THE ARUBA DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The DDP is a strategic framework for destination development that will be used to guide both strategic and policy decisions affecting destination Aruba.

The plan leverages the wealth of data and research conducted by A.T.A. and stakeholders over the past decades, whilst providing an innovative outlook on the future of the destination.
**DDP Big Picture Value Proposition**

- Provides a decision-making framework to support cohesive destination development
- Supports a common vision and direction for destination Aruba.
- Provides a proactive approach toward development and greater alignment in management of destination Aruba and the visitor experience.
- Fosters a collaborative approach for sustainable destination development.
- Helps maximize return on investment with respect to product development and marketing.
- Addresses fragmentation to help address better use and management of resources.
- Preserves Aruba’s core assets whilst stimulating progress.
- Leads to greater alignment between visitor experience and expectation.
- Supports alignment with the UNWTO sustainable tourism goals linked to the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly, goals 8, 12 and 14 on inclusive and sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption and production and the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources, respectively, and goal 17, partnerships for the goals.

**The 3 Phases of Destination Development Planning**

A phased approach:

**Discovery:** Planning, initial research to establish key questions, challenges and objectives

**Development:** Development of the plan in collaboration with stakeholders

**Document:** Drafting the final report, supporting documents and action plan and discussing the findings with stakeholders
Along with an extensive group of tourism stakeholders who contributed their knowledge and expertise during various sessions in September 2016 through April 2017, the Aruban community provided valuable insights and recommendations that shaped and informed the DDP.

1. **Planning**
The first step in development of the DDP was to create a destination development road map to guide the process. Key elements of the road map:

   - Timeline
   - Key milestones
   - Deliverables
   - Key stakeholders

2. **Desk Review**
A.T.A. and tourism stakeholders have conducted various studies and surveys over the past three decades. The data and research process included a review of existing data, national reports and international studies on destination development. Stakeholders were consulted throughout the research process as needed, for example, where there were data gaps and/or to clarify certain positions or policies.

3. **Identify Stakeholders**
The DDP was developed with stakeholders through a participatory and open process over the course of nine months.

**COMMITTEES AND INCUBATORS**
Most participants were convened into committees or incubator groups based on:

   - Background
   - Diversity in age and gender
   - Kind and level of expertise
   - By worldview and interests
   - Multi-disciplinary backgrounds and cross-sector balance (government, private sector, NGOs)

**Themes**
The committee and incubator sessions were divided by clusters that can be linked to a general theme. Sessions were held by cluster and/or a combination of clusters. This method ensured both focused and comprehensive cross-theme discussions for each session.

**Active Participation of 350+ Stakeholders**

- Academics
- Activists
- Business Owners & Leaders
- Change-Makers
- Creatives
- Disrupters
- Entrepreneurs
- Government
- Industry Experts
- Innovators
- Local Community
- Niche Connoisseurs
- Policy-Makers
4. **Set Project Objectives**

The following project objectives were identified with stakeholders at the outset and served as the guiding principles for development of the plan:

- Strengthen synergy and collaboration amongst stakeholders.
- Articulate a statement of purpose or common vision that is inspiring, concrete, and measurable (Aruba “to become THE destination in the Caribbean to [fill in the blank]”).
- Identify priority actions that lead to enhancement of the overall visitor experience and delivery on brand promise.
- Identify actions that promote synergy between destination enhancement and community needs, and actions that strengthen the connection between community and tourism.
- Identify opportunities to increase the economic value of tourism.

5. **Sustainable Tourism Diagnostic**

Integration of Sustainable Destinations Alliance for the Americas (SDAA) and the Aruba Sustainable Development Goals Committee (SDG Aruba)

In collaboration with Sustainable Destinations Alliance for the Americas (SDAA), and coordinated by Sustainable Travel International (STI), A.T.A. undertook a sustainable tourism diagnostic during the DDP discovery process. The timing of the diagnostic expediently coincided with the kick-off of the Aruba Sustainable Development Goals Committee (SDG Aruba) at national level. SDG Aruba is an ambitious government-led initiative, supported by the United Nations, to help coordinate and develop private-public and international relationships to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals on the island of Aruba.

SDG Aruba was integrated into the DDP process to maximize destination resources and to ensure sustainable tourism standards and monitoring systems are developed in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals that impact or are impacted by tourism.

Aruba’s current performance was benchmarked against 105 internationally recognized indicators for sustainable destination management covering the following four main themes:

- **SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION MANAGEMENT**
- **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND BENEFITS**
- **CULTURAL AND NATURAL MANAGEMENT**
- **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION**

This diagnostic was completed through a wide range of methods, including a desk-based research, documents review, and field visits in October 2016 and January 2017. Field visits included one-on-one meetings with key leaders and organizations involved in tourism, themed focus groups, and site visits to key
attractions. The aim of this assessment was to provide Aruba with a 360-degree profile of its status with respect to sustainable tourism. The diagnostic findings and STI recommendations are integrated in the DDP.

6. DNA Assessment

As part of the discovery phase, A.T.A. undertook a destination “DNA” assessment to uncover Aruba’s place DNA or ever-evolving destination identity. Aruba’s DNA is the spirit of all experiences and stories it generates.

The DNA assessment was based on a self-assessment and independent third-party desk review of the DDP incubator and town hall findings (collective stakeholder and community feedback), as well as an independent assessment of visitor surveys, online feedback, and what Aruba projects (communication with visitors or target visitors).

The DNA assessment is an integral part of the DDP as it establishes the foundation for a strategic communication direction and development of potential new niches and visitor markets.
Along with an extensive group of tourism stakeholders who contributed their knowledge and expertise during various sessions over the course of nine months, the Aruban community provided valuable insights and recommendations that shaped and informed the DDP.

The approach

Bottoms-up
Active stakeholder and community participation
Transparent process

An inclusive process that considered the needs of:

- Our Visitors
- Our Community
- Tourism Sector

A participatory process:

- 9 Months
- 50+ Sessions
- 3 Town Halls
- 350+ Participants
- 100+ Crowd-Sourced Recommendations
- 75+ Students
Findings from all sessions were reviewed at committee and sounding board level and validated with incubator participants in an open process. The following “360-validation loop” method was applied:

This approach encouraged development of consensus amongst stakeholders on key destination themes. Including the community and stakeholders at all levels of the process helped hone strategic priorities, identify synergies and deliberate on allocation of responsibilities with respect to recommended actions.
In developing this innovative framework for destination development, local participants were asked some fundamental questions throughout a series of interactive incubator sessions. These sessions utilized a combination of gamification, design thinking principles, user experience philosophies, and techniques in order to elicit valuable responses. The results from the incubator sessions were vetted through a series of committee and sounding board sessions. In addition, the plan also considers visitor feedback gathered through various studies and exit surveys to ensure a balance between community and visitor needs.
The extensive nine-month process described herein resulted in a cohesive destination plan for Aruba. The DDP’s guiding philosophy is to preserve Aruba’s core assets whilst stimulating progress.

The DDP identifies 5 Strategic Objectives and 22 Development Priorities, which are further broken down into 90+ actions and recommendations to be implemented (or advocated) in 2017 through 2021.

**Strategic Objectives**

- **Increase the Economic Value of Tourism**
  Enhancing the quality of the overall Aruba experience for the visitor by focusing on “value for money”, which drives visitor spending and tourism receipt (contribution to the Aruba Gross Domestic Product (GDP)).

- **Amplify Sense of Place:**
  Increasing the destination value by investing in product and programming that align with Aruba’s place DNA and cultivating cultural curiosity and pride through education and community engagement.

- **Develop an Innovation Mindset:**
  Fostering a culture of possibility and creativity amongst stakeholders and the younger generation and the application of an “innovation filter” to all new destination development projects and data collection.

- **Increase Community Engagement:**
  Enhancing the connection between people and place through increased awareness and education of the community and stakeholders.

- **Balanced Development:**
  Embracing a sensible approach toward destination development to safeguard quality of life of the community, protection of the environment, and preservation of natural and cultural assets.
The Development Priorities and corresponding actions are co-dependent and jointly lead destination Aruba toward a **common vision** that organically evolved through the process:

> “Jointly working towards being a sensible boutique destination that inspires curiosity”

**WHY CURIOSITY**

Aruba is a destination where the community is defined by, and proud of, their instinctive sense of curiosity. This is rooted in the island’s history of resilience and ability to turn resourcefulness into entrepreneurial thinking. To survive and to spur economic growth.

Curiosity will help preserve and enhance the Aruba sense of place and instill in the community, stakeholders, and entrepreneurs the creative confidence and cultural curiosity necessary to innovate, preserve the environment and tell the stories they want to share. By doing this, Aruba will stimulate experiential travel and unlock the untapped potential from its biggest asset: The Aruban People.

> “The very purpose of life is to seek happiness” - Dalai Lama

**COMMITMENT**

A highly integrated and synergized approach between A.T.A. and its destination development partners, is a fundamental factor for the success of the destination. This requires commitment of all stakeholders and the Aruban community. Stakeholder organizations who endorsed the DDP plan are expected to sign a destination pledge affirming their commitment to the plan’s execution.
The inclusive approach taken produced a wealth of insights. Key procedural learnings and noteworthy observations are highlighted below:

Do not lose track of who the ultimate beneficiaries are of the plan in developing the questions and assessments. In case of a DDP, the plan should benefit both the visitor and the community.

Involve key stakeholders from the onset to secure a participatory process and to ensure key objectives of the process are in alignment (needs and challenges differ per stakeholder groups).

Simplify written and digital communication with stakeholders. Keep emails and invites short. Meeting invitation emails or letters can be limited to logistical info and key objectives. A standard briefing on the project may be attached to emails or linked to.

Newspaper ads and social media is not sufficient to activate town hall meetings. Engage community leaders with a minimum of 2-week advanced notice. The best marketing is word-of-mouth.

Planning each round of stakeholder and community sessions require about a month lead time.

Create a communication kit with key deliverables, briefings, letterhead, template presentations, advertorials (including photos and videos of sessions), and invite letters that coordinating team members have access to. This can be accompanied with a one-page project communication guideline to ensure consistency in messaging.

Take a ‘listen’ and ‘guide’ approach during group sessions.

Meetings on Monday do not work as these are mostly reserved by stakeholders for internal meetings.

Short and interactive meetings are the most valuable, not longer than 4 hours.

Think of ways to present options that stakeholders need to prioritize.

Working in group sessions enables to share knowledge and opinions/view points.
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Photographs: Aruba Tourism Authority (A.T.A.)

ATA Contact Person: i.kock@aruba.com or P.melchiors@aruba.com