GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Statement on Tourism and Prospect Reef Development by Premier Wheatley

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Madam Speaker, I am pleased to report that the Virgin Islands' tourism sector continues to demonstrate sustained recovery, renewed growth, and continued confidence in our destination. An analysis of tourism arrivals for 2025, when compared with both 2024 and the pre-hurricane disruption benchmark year of 2016, confirms that we have returned to pre-hurricane levels but now face a shift in the growth structure of the industry.

A closer examination of our tourism arrivals data reveals important distinctions between the performance of overnight visitors and cruise passengers, and what these trends tell us about the nature of our recovery and growth.

In 2025, total visitor arrivals stood at 1,202,008 visitors, reflecting a destination that has firmly re-established itself in the global tourism marketplace. Madam Speaker that is a new record for arrivals. When compared to 2016, total arrivals are 6.9 per cent higher. When compared to 2024 there has been a 10 per cent increase in total arrivals. Last year represents the highest total number of visitors frequenting the Virgin Islands.

Cruise passenger arrivals in 2025 were 875,127, representing an increase of 13.9 per cent above 2024 levels. This performance confirms the continued strength and competitiveness of the Territory within regional cruise itineraries, and demonstrates sustained confidence by cruise lines in our ports, services, and visitor experience. Madam Speaker, that too, is a record for cruise arrivals.

The more telling indicator, however, lies within the overnight visitor segment. In 2025, overnight arrivals totalled approximately 302,828 visitors. Importantly, year-on-year comparisons between 2025 and 2024 show relative stability in overnight arrivals, reflecting continued traveller confidence in the Virgin Islands as a destination for longer stays and deeper engagement.

Madam Speaker, this distinction matters. Overnight visitors are supporting our hotels, villas, marine services, restaurants, transportation providers, cultural practitioners, and small businesses across our islands. The strengthening of this segment between 2024 and 2025 signals that our recovery is increasingly anchored in quality, resilience, and value.

Madam Speaker, taken together, these trends demonstrate that the Virgin Islands' tourism recovery is both sustained and strategic. Cruise tourism continues to perform strongly, while overnight tourism—though still rebuilding relative to historic peaks—shows clear momentum and growing confidence in what the Virgin Islands offers as a premium, experience-based destination. This trajectory reinforces the soundness of our policy direction and provides a stable platform for continued investment, product enhancement, and strategic growth within the tourism sector.

Building on this momentum, Government is now advancing the formulation of the National Tourism Policy, which will shortly be released for public awareness and comments as a foundational framework to guide the sector's future development. In parallel, a robust response has been received to the call for proposals for the consultancy to develop the National Tourism Strategy, with submissions currently under assessment in accordance with established procurement processes to ensure the effective delivery of the plan.

Madam Speaker, the National Tourism Policy represents a significant milestone in Government's commitment to the tourism sector and provides a clear, modern framework to guide its growth and diversification. At its core, the policy articulates Government's long-term commitment to strengthening tourism as a central pillar of the Virgin Islands' economy—one that supports livelihoods, encourages investment, protects our natural and cultural assets, and ensures that the benefits of tourism are more widely and sustainably shared across our communities.

The policy sets out clear objectives focused on improving governance and coordination across Government, strengthening the overnight and marine tourism product, enhancing destination quality and resilience, and aligning tourism development with national sustainable-development goals. As part of an inclusive and transparent process, the draft National Tourism Policy will shortly be published on the Government's website for public awareness and comment, providing residents, stakeholders, and industry partners with the opportunity to review the draft policy and contribute meaningfully to shaping the future direction of the sector.

Importantly, the National Tourism Policy is intended not as an end, but as a practical framework to guide implementation, inform legislative reform, and direct public and private investment toward priority areas that will strengthen and modernise the tourism sector.

Madam Speaker, *w*hile the National Tourism Policy establishes the direction and intent of Government, the National Tourism Strategy will serve as the primary implementation and delivery instrument. The Strategy will translate policy objectives into clear, costed, and time-bound actions, setting out priorities for product development, enhancing the visitor experience, developing niche markets such as cultural tourism, market positioning, airlift, marine tourism, human capital development, destination management, and institutional strengthening.

I am pleased to report that Government has received a robust response of qualified bids to the call for proposals for the consultancy to develop the National Tourism Strategy. These submissions are currently under consideration in accordance with established procurement processes, reflecting strong market confidence in the Virgin Islands and broad interest in supporting the next phase of the sector’s development.

Once appointed, the consultant will work closely with Government, industry stakeholders, and communities to produce a practical and implementable strategy that aligns with the national budget cycle, guides public and private investment decisions, and establishes clear mechanisms for monitoring performance and outcomes.

Madam Speaker, the development of the National Tourism Strategy represents a decisive step in moving from recovery to structured growth—ensuring that tourism development in the Virgin Islands is coordinated, resilient, and capable of delivering long-term economic value and sustainable livelihoods for our people.

Madam Speaker, as Government advances the strategic framework for tourism development, it has also taken decisive Cabinet action on priority assets critical to the sector’s long-term growth.

I now turn to the steps taken by Cabinet to advance the re-development of Prospect Reef Resort, including the endorsement of the recommendations made by the Prospect Reef Management Company to proceed with the receipt of proposals from interested firms. The company will issue formal request for proposals to the interested firms in short order. Madam Speaker, the subject of Prospect Reef will be transferred to the Ministry of Financial Services, Economic Development and Digital Transformation to support effective delivery of this important national project under the investment mandate assigned to the Ministry.

Madam Speaker, taken together, these initiatives reflect a Government that is acting with purpose and intent—strengthening recovery, setting clear policy direction, and advancing implementation through concrete decisions and investment-ready actions. From improving airlift and rebuilding overnight tourism, to finalising a modern National Tourism Policy, advancing a delivery-focused National Tourism Strategy, and unlocking the potential of strategic national assets, the Virgin Islands is positioning its tourism sector for sustainable, inclusive, and long-term growth. This is about protecting livelihoods, building confidence, and ensuring that tourism continues to work for our people, our communities, and future generations.

I thank you, Madam Speaker.

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Additional Documents or Media

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