

Keynote speech by Hon Soodesh Satkam Callichurn, Minister of Labour, Human Resource Development and Training, Mauritius, on the occasion of the 2023 BILT Learning Forum on 25 October 2023, at UNESCO-UNEVOC, Bonn, Germany

Directors and officials of UNESCO/ UNEVOC

Directors and officials of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training

Directors of TVET institutions

Ladies and Gentlemen

Distinguished guests

I wish you all a very good morning and a warm digital welcome to those who are joining online. I am pleased to join you this morning for this BILT Learning Forum happening at the UN Campus in Bonn.

Allow me to extend my heartfelt thanks to the UNESCO-UNEVOC and the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) for having chosen the MITD as one of their privileged partners to pilot the co-development of the Self-Reflection Tool and today the opportunity given to me to address this great gathering of UNESCO-UNEVOC partners.

Introduction

Today, my intervention is to present a comprehensive perspective in the tourism industry in Mauritius, considering emerging trends, challenges, and

opportunities with a keen focus on sustainability and digitalization. Mauritius known for its hospitality, luxurious hotels, pristine beaches, lush green landscapes, and rich cultural heritage, has long been a favorite destination for travelers worldwide.

However, the global tourism landscape is constantly evolving. The demand for cheaper, faster, cleaner, safer, more sustainable and exhilarating experiences has grown exponentially. Moreover, the tourism industry in Mauritius employs more than 20% of the labour pool and contributes to 20% of the GDP. To remain a top-notch destination, and a strong pillar of the economy, Mauritius must adapt to these changes. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to the industry.

2.0 The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis hit the economy hard, with unprecedented effects on jobs and businesses and tourism activities in Mauritius neared-complete cessation and Travel remained locked down.

However, today as I stand in front of you, I can proudly say that our tourism industry is on a strong recovery path.

Between January to September 2023, the number of tourists who have visited our country has increased compared to previous post pandemic years. We have recorded around one million tourist arrivals. Tourists are today staying longer and spending more. Tourism earnings will reach Rs 80 billion in this fiscal year, 20 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels.

3.0 Challenges to the Mauritian Tourism Industry

The tourism sector in Mauritius faces various challenges that impact its growth and sustainability. Some of the key challenges to the Mauritius tourism sector are:

3.1 Human Resources

One of the big challenges is to sustain the skilled workforce in the tourism industry. With new avenues in the international job market to get employment in cruises, hotels or restaurants, the youngsters are more job mobile. Moreover, after the COVID -19 pandemic the youth didn't want to join such a fragile system and even the elders shifted their areas of activity.

This situation prevalent today has been curtailed by other advanced nations by giving a new outlook to the jobs in the tourism sector. By adopting smart digital applications, online booking, travelling requiring only a visa and passport, conveying information using QR codes, money is in their electronic wallet for online shopping, the smart phone translates Chinese to English and even speaks. I am sure you have come across a few of these already.

The boundless applications possible using smart technologies and AI can be a solution to the high demands of skilled labour in the tourism industry and in Mauritius there is a crying need to embrace smart technologies to solve the problem of labour shortage.

In Mauritius, various measures are being put in place for this labour shortage to make the jobs more attractive and these are as follows:

- The government has come up with a series of legislations such as minimum salary, portable pension, unjustified dismissal, better work-life balance to protect the employees in the tourism sector.
- Various financial budgetary measures have been put in place to attract the unemployed & stay at home women from the community and the disabled to get training and join the labour force.
- Media relations and public relations programs are designed to position Mauritian travel and tourism favorably in the local market to attract youngsters to join the industry.

3.2 Sustainability

The global shift towards sustainable tourism is undeniable. Travelers now seek authentic and eco-friendly experiences. They are more conscious of the environmental impact of their journeys. They seek experiences that are not only enjoyable but also environmentally responsible. This trend has led to a rise in eco-friendly accommodations, renewable energy sources, and conservation efforts. In this context, Mauritius has developed a roadmap towards a circular economy and various initiatives are being implemented both by the government and the tourism sector. Some of the measures are highlighted below.

3.2.1 Green-Certified Destination

The government has set an objective of transforming Mauritius into a Green-Certified Destination by GSTC-Global Sustainable Tourism Council by 2030.

3.2.2 Water Sources

Actions are put in place to deal with water shortages, such as reducing water waste by installing regulators, sensitising customers and staff to be responsible consumers, equipping with a water bottling plant, using a rain water harvesting system to irrigate Chefs' Gardens, 100% recycled wastewater for irrigation purposes amongst others

3.2.3 Energy Efficiency

We strongly believe that the reduction of our energy consumption will in turn lead to a reduction of our environmental footprint, while also lowering energy costs. In order to minimize energy consumption, we strive to reduce it by regulating it, promoting renewable energies and efficient equipment, etc. We have implemented the SCADA system in the engineering department for a better monitoring of energy consumption.

3.2.4 Manage Waste Responsibly

We apply the 9 R's of Waste Management: to limit the impact on the environment by promoting biodegradable raw materials, recycling, safely disposing of non-recyclable and environmentally harmful products. Sustainable practices by some hotel groups in Mauritius include segregating and recycling nearly 40% of waste, and eliminating single-use plastic with the objective of zero single-use plastic by end 2021.

3.2.5 Emissions

With the aim of minimising our carbon footprint, we have aligned our actions with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

and the Paris Agreement. We have integrated the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative (HCMI) methodology into our monthly reporting process to monitor and reduce our carbon emissions more effectively, while contributing to SDG13 on climate action. The hotels approach to sustainability is reflected in the following initiatives:

- focus on reducing the use of chemicals, with 95% of its bathroom and spa products being natural and 100% of its cleaning products being biodegradable
- encourage suppliers to consider a better environmental footprint by reducing packaging, banning single-use plastic, and studying product lifecycle
- zero single-use plastic in guest experience within all our nine hotels

3.2.6 FOSTERING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

There is also an increasing demand for authentic experiences. Travelers are increasingly looking to connect with local culture, traditions, and communities. This presents an opportunity for Mauritius to promote its unique heritage and foster meaningful interactions between tourists and locals. Some examples are highlighted below:

- EU-funded ECOFISH (Mauritius) Project, implemented by the UNDP, which integrated the artisanal fishing community to the local tourism value chain.
- The 'Otentik Bazar' experience, hotel promotes 'made in Mauritius' handicrafts, where producers are chosen based on sustainable practices such as use of recycled, local, natural products, and ethical business practices.

- Those interested in exploring the island can download the hotel's geolocation app, following its motto: "Go out and explore, and 'live like a local'."

4.0 Digital Nomads

Digital nomadism is an emerging trend in the global tourism industry. Digital nomads seek an independent lifestyle filled with adventure and reliable internet connection. Their style of travel is different to the traditional tourist. By default, digital nomads look for more than the 'sun, sea and sand' offer. Instead, digital nomads seek easy and accessible mobility options, good quality dining options, and a choice of outdoor and cultural activities.

Mauritius has recognized the potential of attracting this growing demographic of remote workers and digital nomads to its shores. This trend involves individuals who use technology to work remotely while traveling, allowing them to explore different destinations while maintaining their professional commitments.

Few ways in which Mauritius is embracing digital nomadism as an emerging trend in its tourism industry are:

I. Visa and Work Permits

- a. Mauritius introduced a Premium Travel Visa in 2021, which allows digital nomads and remote workers to stay in the country for up to one year

II. Attractive Workspaces

- a. Many hotels and co-working spaces in Mauritius now offer specialized amenities, including high-speed internet, ergonomic

workstations, and business services.

III. Work-Life Balance

- a. The laid-back lifestyle in Mauritius allows to balance work and leisure effectively. They can enjoy water sports, hiking, and other recreational activities when not working.

IV. Safety and Quality of Life

Mauritius is known for its safety, political stability, and high quality of life. These factors make it an attractive destination for remote workers looking for a secure and comfortable environment.

V. Cultural Experiences

Digital nomads can immerse themselves in the diverse culture of Mauritius, including its cuisine, music, and traditions, during their stay.

VI. Tax Benefits

Mauritius offers tax incentives for foreigners, which can be appealing to digital nomads who want to optimize their financial situation while working abroad.

VII. Connectivity

Our country is continuously improving its digital infrastructure, ensuring a reliable internet connection, which is vital for remote work.

VIII Marketing and Promotion

The government and tourism industry in Mauritius actively market the island as a digital nomad-friendly destination, leveraging its existing reputation as a tourist hotspot.

5.0 DIGITALIZATION

Digitalization has significantly transformed the tourism industry in recent years. This ongoing process has impacted various aspects of the industry, from how travellers plan and book their trips to how destinations manage their tourism infrastructure.

The Mauritian tourism industry is quickly adopting the digital culture to enhance customer experience for an ever-increasing number of travellers.

Hotels are equipping more and more front liners with digital tools (“à la carte” restaurant, buffet and bar waiters are seeing their daily tasks digitalised), with each initiative being another step towards paperless operations.

ICT champions in key departments are being empowered to help their peers on applications specific to their departments. The hotels are committed to further training its workforce to ensure the highest level of usage of the tools already deployed. The digital journey complements human interaction and will be tailored to the unique customer profiles visiting our hotels.

Many more initiatives are being adopted by the government and the tourism industry to enhance the visitor experience:

I. Mobile first

Increasingly, holidays are researched, planned, booked and purchased from a handheld device. Studies show that up to 70% of travellers with smartphones have done research for their trip on their phone. The Mauritian hospitality industry is responding by adopting a mobile-first strategy for its marketing and sales. An example is, The Sun Resorts Group of Hotels has developed the Sun mobile App where guests can now book

a room, event, restaurant table or a spa treatment at a Sun Resorts hotel anywhere, anytime.

II. Customize. Personalize. Start again.

The industry is alive to the fact that offering a personalized service to customers is the best way to secure a high retention rate. Hotels are offering free and secure Wi-Fi, high-definition television... and in the process, are relying on the Internet of Things to collect valuable data that would help them better understand and relate to the market, and design more meaningful consumer journeys. For instance, guest management systems can anticipate a guests' needs before they even arrive!

III Artificial Intelligence to optimise processes

As intimidating as the thought may be, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly, though discreetly, present in important areas of the hospitality industry. Key players in the industry are using AI to enhance their brand experience at the level of booking, room allocation and customer service, among others. The ultimate goal is to improve optimization and the guest experience.

IV Chatbot driven engagement

Chatbots are probably the best way to engage with conversational marketing on hotel websites. On par with AI, chatbots are low-cost, high-impact multi-functional tools that are gradually popping up on hotel websites. Used to assist guests and encourage bookings, chatbots fuel speed of information and encourage longer engagement with a brand.

VI Development of Smart Apps

Some Apps like **Tourist Guide, Chake, Myweather and NouMoris** have been devised to help the tourists during their stay.

6.0 Conclusion

The future of the tourism sector in Mauritius is bright and promising, but it requires a strategic, proactive, and sustainable approach. We must adapt to emerging trends, overcome challenges, and seize opportunities.

Sustainability and digitalization integration are not just buzzwords; they are the cornerstones of a resilient and thriving tourism industry. By safeguarding its natural beauty, promoting cultural richness, and embracing technology, we can ensure that Mauritius remains a sought-after destination for generations to come, offering unforgettable experiences that are both responsible and innovative in the evolving global tourism landscape.

Thank you for your attention.