

# Hotels booked solid

**Dec 29 election has not affected tourism, officials say**

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THE upcoming general election, which will be held two weeks into the official start of the winter tourism season, has not had an adverse effect on hotel bookings.

In fact, according to tourism officials, hotels are fully booked for Christmas, and the winter season is shaping up to be even better than last year.

“I have not had any reports to indicate there has been any cancellation because of the election,” Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association (JHTA) President Evelyn Smith told the Observer yesterday, adding that some of the larger hotels are showing even more bookings than last year at this time.

While noting that it is still not the ideal time of year to have an election, Smith said if the campaign remains this peaceful, it will have no impact whatsoever on the sector.

In the distant past, Jamaican elections were marred by violence. However, general elections since the late 1980s have been marked by fewer incidents of violence and this year’s campaign has so far proven fairly peaceful.

“Our hope is, and has been, that the party leaders, candidates and supporters exercise the maturity and understanding of the importance of having a peaceful election, because any sort of incident can have a negative impact on the industry and the country,” Smith said.

Director of Tourism and Jamaica Tourist Board Chairman John Lynch agreed.

“A lot of hotels are sold out and even high-end hotels are completely booked,” Lynch said. “I have been trying to get a villa in Montego Bay and there is none available over Christmas and into the new year.”

According to Lynch, the December 29 election will remain a local event if the campaign continues to be violence free.

Lynch said last December was the best ever with Jamaica welcoming some 200,000 visitors for that month.

“We are running against that, and we could pick up steam to be on track for even more than that this year,” he said.

With increased airlift to the island, Lynch said he will be heading to Miami next week to kick off public relations activities for the winter tourist season, which opens tomorrow and goes through to the end of April.

Meanwhile, although both Canada and the United States, Jamaica’s major markets, have issued notices to their citizens in or travelling to Jamaica, the JHTA head said this has not affected travel to the region.

Unlike a travel advisory, Smith said a notice was designed to inform citizens of both countries of the upcoming general election.

“Canada and the US had sent out a notice, which is different from an advisory, but was more an updating notice to make their citizens aware of what was taking place,” she said.

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Smith explained further that the notices made references to Jamaica's history where elections are concerned.

She said that while it might not be easy for persons to now cancel previously held bookings, without severe penalties, no one is opting for that at this time.

"We would have to have a very dramatic situation where people say it is just not safe, so whatever money I will lose I am better off cancelling," she said.

Smith, however, noted that what happens in the next two weeks would determine if visitors will cancel bookings.

The industry, she said, has always done its best to assure visitors of their safety and the wonderful time they can have in Jamaica.

Smith repeated an appeal to the leadership of the political parties, supporters and candidates to understand the significant impact tourism has on the wider economy.

"Anything negative can have serious ramifications to the country, but I believe we have shown ourselves that we have matured as a country and as a people," she said.

Smith believes the violence-free campaign can be attributed to the maturing of Jamaicans and the short campaign period leading up to the election.

She cautioned, though, there are still a lot of people who make last-minute bookings and who could be impacted if there is any violence associated with the election.