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## Bermuda's back!

# 'Time to get serious about Canada!'

**MICHAEL BAGINSKI**

It's taken a near "perfect storm" – at the very least, a "dark and stormy night" one might say – but Bermuda is coming back to Canada in a big way after a decade or so of marketing ambivalence in this country.

Thanks to new WestJet flights (commencing May 3) from Toronto, the

ascendancy of the loonie, and lower prices on the island due to the recession, Canada is now being looked to as a viable market for a destination that has in recent years been considered too expensive for Canucks.

Since the days when Bermuda manned a particularly vibrant tourist board office in Canada,

the destination has largely fallen off the map.

But Bermuda's director of tourism Billy Griffith confirmed via e-mail to Canadian Travel Press: "[We] will be increasing the marketing and sales spend in a significant way to attract more Canadians to our island this year."

That will begin in April, preceding the new WestJet lift, with a major advertising and awareness campaign in Toronto and the appointment effective April 1 of a new tourist board representative for the country: Robin Danes, formerly of Almond Resorts.

Helping to lead the revitalized marketing efforts are the island's two prestige partners, the



**Toasting Bermuda's return to Canada: Norman Mastalir, managing director of The Fairmont Southampton and Andrew Holmes of Gosling's Export Ltd. Holmes recounted rum lore from the island and served Bermuda's iconic drink, a "Dark and Stormy" – dark rum and ginger beer – at a recent Toronto trade reception.**

Fairmont Southampton and Fairmont Princess, who made a presentation to the trade last week at sister property, the Royal York hotel in Toronto.

"We really had a dilem-

ma in Canada for the past few years," said Fairmont Southampton managing director Norman Mastalir, explaining that Bermuda's long affinity with Canada

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## Best Western Summit considers 'new normal'

**BOB MOWAT**

Cautious optimism was the theme of the recent 2010 Best Western Business Travel Summit in Toronto.

The annual event, moderated by Bryson Forbes, vice-president sales, North America for Continental Travel Group,

brought together a trio of top industry experts – Marcia Van Frederici, vice-president, client management for American Express Business Travel, Dorothy Dowling, senior vice-president, marketing and sales, Best Western International,

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## Best Western

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and Tony Pollard, president, Hotel Association of Canada (HAC) to offer their take on the state of business travel.

Naturally, the economy and its impact on the business travel market in the US and Canada was a high profile item on the agenda, with HAC's Pollard pointing out that in 2009 the hotel industry was hit hard, losing \$4 billion and 100,000 jobs. However, he also pointed out that the final quarter of last year saw renewed GDP growth and that growth has continued in the first quarter of 2010.

From where Best Western's Dowling sits, Canada has performed considerably better than the US on the revenue side. She pointed to the better economics and more stable environment; the fact that the demand curve has remained stable; and that consumer confidence has been sound as three key factors that account for Canada's solid performance in 2009.

As for Amex's Van Frederici, "new normal" is the buzz word for 2010, with corporate travellers trading down and being much more demanding. As Van Frederici sees it, the industry will be seeing a much more "traveler-centric" model dominating the market place

moving forward.

Dowling agreed with that assessment, pointing out that, while business is recovering, it has not returned to pre-2009 levels, with the 10% unemployment in the US being a major drag.

In fact, Best Western's Dowling made it clear that the "environment has permanently changed" and as a result, businesses need to understand consumer behaviour like never before. That change is leading more and more business travellers and consumers to consider the mid-market hotel product, a development that Dowling said works very well for Best Western.

"The upside of 2009 is travellers have come to Best Western and they like what they've seen. With us, you see what you get – there's no sticker shock," Dowling said.

Pollard points to HAC's annual travel intentions survey to reinforce Dowling's comments. The survey results confirm that people are continuing to travel and the mid-market has gained increasing popularity. But HAC's boss noted as well that all of those travellers are looking for deals.

In this kind of environment, Dowling said that success is all about relationships. "People do business with people they know and like."

And one of the things they like, Dowling told her audience are loyalty programs, describing Canadians as "point junkies." In fact, in 2009 Best Western saw double-digit growth in redemptions.

Van Frederici pointed out that corporate travellers believe they deserve to be rewarded and Dowling agreed. Pointing out that recognition is key, she said that Best Western has built in additional rewards for these travellers. Today, 50% of its rewards program members have elite status, adding that these are "high value" customers for her company.

As for where travel agents fit in, Dowling said that Best Western believes in agents because they offer value to their customers. In fact, she noted that Best Western has seen its chain and consortium bookings increase, while bookings from third party sources are down.

For companies, Van Frederici told her audience that customization is the key. Companies are building their travel programs on the needs of the cor-



**Pictured (l-r) are Continental Travel Group's Bryson Forbes, Best Western's Dorothy Dowling, Amex's Marcia Van Frederici and HAC's Tony Pollard.**

poration and the traveller, adding that a "cookie cutter" approach to corporate travel programs just doesn't work anymore.

Another hot topic at this year's Business Travel Summit was social media. Best Western's Dowling said that social media has become an important part of the marketing mix, letting her company listen to what its customers are saying.

Van Frederici noted that Amex believes in having a forum for its customers so that they can talk to each other; and adding that it provides a way to deal with issues and ideas much more quickly.

Looking ahead to 2011, Van Frederici said that the ROI (return on invest-

ment) of travel and meetings will become part of the DNA of both buyers and suppliers; the market will be dominated by the traveller-centric model; and consideration will be given to alternatives to travel and meetings.

HAC's Pollard said that he expects 2011 will be a flat year and will continue to see people demanding good service, which is something that never changes. On the whole, however, HAC's boss said that he is optimistic that things will improve.

Dowling said that she's "cautiously optimistic" about 2010 and beyond. The business will continue to face a sophisticated consumer, but the industry is resilient and "we will win the day."

## Bermuda

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was at odds with the unfavourable exchange rates and limited lift (only Air Canada served the island from this country).

"But now we think there's a perfect storm of wonderful things happening," he exclaimed.

Those include a dollar that has added close to 30% in value in recent years; the imminent arrival of WestJet with daily flights departing YYZ at 10:35 a.m., making for easy connections for eastern cities like Montreal and Ottawa; the competition WestJet will afford Air Canada, which should bring airfares down; and a challenging economy in Bermuda (much like the rest of the

world) that has brought prices down to "way less than they used to be."

All of which adds up to the conclusion that "It's time to get serious about Canada again," says Mastalir.

For Fairmont's part, its iconic Bermuda properties will introduce a number of "extraordinary leisure deals" into the marketplace, including a golf-around program that essentially equates to guests staying free, 50% off second rooms for families, and limited time resort credits of \$100 p.p.

Other hotels on the island are offering deals of their own, such as free nights.

"We're really making an effort to be affordable," says Mastalir, speaking on behalf of Bermuda tourism as a whole.

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