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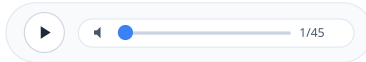
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Booming Barbados

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Connect Barbados 2026, which featured a record B2B event, offered an engaging and meaningful experience for participants while showcasing the destination's distinctive appeal, says Kim Thomson

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Last year, Barbados celebrated the successful return of Connect Barbados after a six-year hiatus. This year's event ended on a high note, delivering the strongest international buyer participation in the conference's history.

This year, Connect Barbados welcomed a record-breaking 92 global buyers representing 83 companies. They converged on the island alongside 111 local tourism partners and suppliers.

Delegates arrived from Barbados' traditional feeder markets, including The United States, The United Kingdom, Canada, Europe, Latin America and The Caribbean.

The event also welcomed delegates from key emerging tourism markets. These included representatives from Africa and six delegates from the Gulf region, including Kim Thomson representing **TTN Middle East**.

"The GCC represents an increasingly important emerging market for Barbados, with strong potential driven by its affluent, internationally minded travellers and growing demand for distinctive luxury, cultural and experiential holidays," Kyle Gittens, Director of Middle East & Africa, Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc., said. "By strengthening our relationships with the region's travel trade and increasing awareness of Barbados' diverse tourism offering, we are building a solid foundation for sustainable long-term growth and positioning the island as a compelling Caribbean destination for GCC travellers."

Speaking at the opening ceremony at the Hilton Barbados Resort, Andrea Franklin, CEO of Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc. (BTMI), praised the collaborative spirit of the industry.

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"Our team at Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc. worked tirelessly to create an experience that was engaging, meaningful, and reflective of this year's theme: *Rooted in Culture, Powered by Partnership*," Franklin said.

"This year's theme could not be more relevant as we met at a time when the global tourism industry continues to face significant challenges," Franklin continued. "Economic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, changing travel patterns, and shifting consumer confidence are affecting destinations around the world. Yet, despite these realities, Barbados continues to demonstrate resilience, relevance, and remarkable competitiveness."

Franklin emphasised that the event goes far beyond basic corporate networking. "I am sure that all experienced the warmth, hospitality, and genuine spirit of our people, and I am confident that you found that Connect Barbados is much more than a programme of business meetings. It is an opportunity to experience firsthand what makes Barbados such a distinctive destination. In today's environment, where travel decisions are influenced by economic pressures and changing consumer behaviour, strong partnerships have never been more important."

The strategic B2B outreach is already yielding massive dividends for the island's economy. Franklin shared monumental arrival numbers that highlight the destination's current upward trajectory. Some 727,000 long-stay visitors welcomed in 2025, marking the highest single-year total in Barbadian history and 817,000 cruise passengers arrived during the 2025/2026 winter cruise season.

"Even more encouraging is that this growth has been broad-based across our key source markets and has continued well into 2026, despite the challenges facing the global economy," Franklin noted. "These achievements did not happen by chance. They reflect the strength of the Barbados brand, the hard work of our tourism industry, the confidence of our airline and travel trade partners, and the dedication of thousands of people. Connect Barbados is an essential part of that success."

The Honourable G.P. Ian Gooding-Edghill, Minister of Tourism & International Transport, officially opened the conference by reinforcing the critical role of global partnerships.

Addressing delegates, Minister Gooding-Edghill highlighted Barbados' cultural heritage as one of the destination's most valuable tourism assets. He noted the deep significance of hosting Connect Barbados 2026 within a UNESCO World Heritage Site - Historic Bridgetown and Its Garrison - reinforcing the connection between tourism, history, and culture.

The Minister outlined the government's future tourism roadmap, which focuses on increasing visitor spending, expanding economic opportunities for locals, and ensuring community-wide benefit-sharing.

He highlighted several strategic initiatives currently underway, including the development of a Tourism Satellite Account and a National Tourism Strategy and Action Plan in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank.

A Tourism Value Chain Assessment is also being conducted to identify challenges, strengthen competitiveness, and maximise tourism's contribution to the national economy.

Furthermore, Minister Gooding-Edghill reaffirmed the government's aggressive push to expand air connectivity, maintain current flight routes, and enter emerging regions. He specifically encouraged local hospitality stakeholders to learn foreign languages, particularly Spanish, to cater to a rising wave of Latin American travellers who were well-represented at this year's conference.

The five-day event concluded with a grand finale at the Harbour Lights Beach Extravaganza Dinner Show in Carlisle Bay. Against a backdrop of cultural performances featuring fire breathers, stilt walkers, and masqueraders, BTMI presented 20 prestigious awards to leading travel agents, operators, and media houses.

Cheryl Carter, BTMI Chief Operations Officer, closed the evening with strong optimism for the future. "As we gathered for the final evening of Connect Barbados 2026, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude, pride and optimism. Over Connect Barbados, we trust that we created a space where relationships have been strengthened, new opportunities have emerged, and meaningful connections have been forged."

Carter concluded by noting that the event's theme was far more than a marketing slogan; it was actively reflected in every business meeting, conversation, and relationship built throughout the historic week.

2026 Connect Barbados Award Recipients include:

- **Damian Hall** – Best Festival/Event Story
- **Jelle De Bont** – Best Sports Story
- **Janiece Campbell** – Best Heritage Story



- **Clarissa Hyman** – Best Culinary Story
- **Corinne Pierre Louis** – Best Romance Story
- **Hakeem Thompson** – Best Destination Photo
- **Pearson Bowen & Mornin' Barbados Team (CBC TV 8)** – Contribution to Barbados' Tourism Sector
- **Ruel Forde & Mornin' Barbados Team (CBC TV 8)** – Contribution to Barbados' Tourism Sector
- **Classic Vacations** – Largest Increase in Room Nights
- **Sonnenklar** – Largest Increase in Bookings
- **Angela Prinssen** – Top Producing Agent by Value
- **Kemberly Maharaj** – Top Producing Agent by Bookings
- **TUI Marella** – Long-standing Homeporting Cruise Line
- **Travel Counsellors** – Top Performer Based on Engagement and Innovation 2025
- **Newton Bastiampillai** – Top Performer Based on Engagement and Innovation Winter 2025-2026
- **O2 Beach Club & Spa** – Local Partner Appreciation Award (Hotel)
- **UVA Barbados** – Local Partner Appreciation Award
- **Caribbean Airlines** – 202 Trade Award for Outstanding Organic Growth and Top Performance (Winter 2025-2026)
- **Air Canada** – 2026 Trade Award for Exceptional Growth and Performance (Winter 2025-2026)
- **British Airways** – 2026 Trade Award for Notable Growth and Performance (Winter 2025-2026)

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