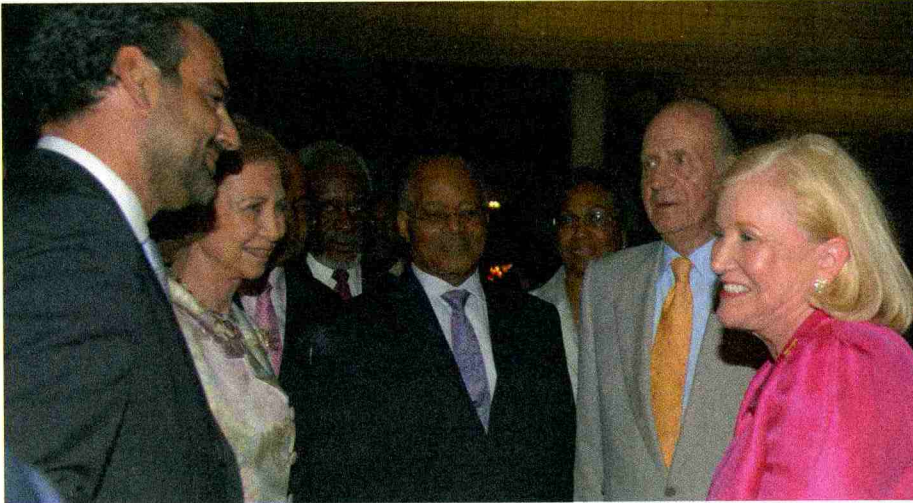


JESUS SILVA - THE BORN DIPLOMAT

While the Spanish influence on Jamaican identity has been extraordinary and colorful, starting with the arrival of Columbus in 1494 and a subsequent 160 years of Spanish rule, the modern incarnation of Spain's relationship with Jamaica has developed into one of the most important drivers of economic growth on the island. Since 2000, Spanish companies have invested more than US\$2 billion in the areas of tourism, transportation and telecom, most of which has taken place under the tenure of Spanish Ambassador Jesus Silva. Thus, the post as Ambassador has become one of tremendous diplomatic importance, and the general consensus is that Ambassador Silva was pretty much born for the role.



Reception at Grand Palladium Jamaica Resort & Spa, from left: Ambassador Silva, Queen Sofia, former Governor General Kenneth Hall, HRH King Carlos I and former US Ambassador to Jamaica Brenda LaGrange Johnson (Photo: Heidi Zech)

Named the most prominent foreign envoy in years, Silva, who studied law at the University of Madrid, left his career in the private sector to join the diplomatic corps as a career diplomat in 1989. "I had a very international education and was always interested in international affairs. It was the natural consequence," he states. In addition to several appointments at the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Prime Minister's office in Madrid, Silva served Spain both as a Consul to Argentina and Cultural Attaché to Germany. Prior to his Ambassadorship to Jamaica, Silva held the position as Director General for Cultural Affairs for all Spanish embassies worldwide.

Prior to his 2005 arrival on the island to take up his post, the only experience Silva had with Jamaica was his honeymoon 15 years earlier. Remembers the Spanish Ambassador, who hails from the Andalusian capital city of Seville, "I knew very little about Jamaica when I arrived, especially about its history. I was only familiar with the most important facts of the country and famous Jamaicans such as Bob Marley and Asafa Powell." Since then, Silva has gotten to know the country and its people very well. "It is a proud nation with extremely nice and friendly people. It is easy to make friends, the locals are very open to foreigners," he adds. A man of many passions, The Ambassador likes traveling, playing golf, contemporary art, meeting people, architecture, history, reading, opera, watching football or tennis. "I specially enjoyed watching Usain Bolt win!" he adds with a smile.

With 14 year old twin boys and a 12 year old daughter, Silva and his wife Sarah have adapted well to the island. Says Silva, "We are delighted to be here. We have made many friends and enjoy the good weather and the nice people." Asked about his favorite part of Jamaica, the Ambassador finds it hard to pick any one spot, "Every corner of the island has its own charm. The nature of Jamaica is probably the most impressive element

The Ambassador draws strong comparisons between Spain and Jamaica in the sector of tourism, "The economic situation on the island is similar to what we experienced in Spain some years ago. The country is expanding its tourist industry rapidly by opening it up to foreign investment, like Spain did in the early 60s."

Spanish companies have jumped on the extraordinary opportunity the island presents, investing almost US\$2B in Jamaica over the last seven years. According to Silva, the inflow of Spanish investment is due to a mixture of reasons. Says the Ambassador, "On one hand, they were invited by the Jamaican Government to come and invest in a country where tourism offered possibilities of expansion. On the other hand, the chosen companies were perfect partners because they were expanding worldwide, especially in the Caribbean, and had gained prior experience in countries like the Dominican Republic and Mexico. The powerful marketing attraction of Jamaica also led to an increased customer demand."

A total of nine major Spanish companies are currently investing on the island, primarily in the tourist sector. With a total of 10 new hotels and 5,500 rooms already completed by the six hotel groups RIU, Grupo Pinero (Bahía Príncipe Hotels), Iberostar, Fiesta Hotels (Grand Palladium), Excellence and the Fuerte Group (Secrets Resorts), an additional 2 hotels counting another 700 rooms are set to open by 2010. As of today, Spanish investments have created at least 7,000 direct and 10,000 indirect jobs in the form of construction and other peripheral work. Due to the many new Spanish hotels, the numbers of Spanish residents and visitors have also risen dramatically. Says Silva, "Approximately 200 Spanish nationals currently live in Jamaica and the expectations are that once all the new hotels have been built and opened, the island will receive approximately 100,000 Spanish tourists per year." Explains the Ambassador, "Spanish hotels are bringing dynamism and competition into the Jamaican tourism industry by applying international best practices and the latest standards of quality at a reasonable price. Today, the island offers the world tourism market one of the most modern and efficient destinations in the world."

Additionally, the Spanish Abertis Group (MBJ Airport Ltd.), has been instrumental in the modernization of the country's number one tourist gateway, Montego Bay's Sangster International Airport, a significant enhancement to the overall tourist product. Now, health industry specialists Hospiten is preparing to build a brand new private hospital in Rose Hall, Montego Bay, adding yet another, much needed key element to the north coast. Says the Spanish Ambassador, "Originally from the Spanish Canary Islands, Hospiten operates 12 private hospitals across Spain and the Caribbean, primarily located in tourist areas. The opening of their first hospital in Jamaica will be a very important contribution to the tourism industry of the island, and a first step into developing the critical health tourism sector."

Spain's increasingly important role has also encouraged a more active Embassy involvement in co-operation projects. Describes Silva, "For instance, we are involved in the launch of a hospitality school in Montego Bay and the teaching of Spanish at the University of the West Indies. Additionally, we are assisting in the development of agriculture, through the establishment of a training centre for farmers."



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Silva believes that Jamaica is unique due to the completeness of its offer, "Jamaica combines what other islands offer as their single attraction; nice beaches, mountains, forests, heritage, music, culture, and gastronomy; all in one space. I believe that Jamaica can become one of the major future players in the Caribbean tourist industry, at the same level as countries like Dominican Republic, Mexico or Cuba."

The Fiesta Hotel group has invested US\$180,000,000 in Jamaica, building 2 hotels and is currently employing 1,100 local Jamaicans. The hotel, which was officially opened by HRH's King Carlos I and Queen Sofia of Spain earlier this year, will receive an estimated 100,000 guests in 2009 (Photo: Courtesy of Fiesta Hotels)



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Through their immense creation of growth, Spanish companies have undoubtedly led the way for other international investors, and Silva sees tourism as the big future for the economic growth of the country, "It is important that a good investment friendly atmosphere is generated in order to attract more investments in this vital sector. Tourism is one of the sectors with the biggest multiplying effect in the economy." In the increasingly competitive market place, businesses in other sectors are expanding and adopting more efficient modus operandi to maintain



The refurbished wing at Spanish Town Hospital, a gift from the Spanish Government (Photo: Courtesy of the Jamaica Information Service)

their edge. As an example, Spanish supplier Calatel has entered the country's telecom sector, introducing new and innovative infrastructure solutions. Comments Silva, "Once the global crisis is over, I am hoping we will see a second wave of Spanish investments in all industries."

There is no doubt that "Jesus", as he is referred to among his countrymen on the island, has proved an invaluable ally to the many foreign investors from his native shores. From his office at the Spanish Embassy in New Kingston, the Ambassador and his small team of less than 20 people has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to build bridges between Spanish investors and government agencies, which may not have been totally prepared for such a sudden in-flow of large projects. "The increase of work over the last years has certainly forced us to do extra hours!" he adds.

Silva believes the many investments on the island will help the country develop through the creation of employment. "The most direct benefit in the social development of the Jamaican economy is certainly the massive creation of jobs. This is the solution to most of the social problems of the country, including crime, squatting and emigration."

Asked what he believes to be the most important part of his job, Silva reflects, "An Ambassador is mainly responsible for improving and maintaining good relations between his homeland and the country where he or she is posted. In Jamaica, the economic relationship between the Spanish investors and the Jamaican Government is an important part of the job. However, I particularly enjoy the cultural work and the projects we participate in that serve to help people in need."

In an event that can only be described as the culmination of any Ambassador's posting, Their Majesties King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sophia of Spain cemented the increasingly important relationship between Spain and Jamaica with the first ever State Visit in February 2009. Explains Silva, "Jamaica's longstanding, historical ties with Spain have experienced a very dynamic development in the last years, and the visit of the Spanish Monarchs was the natural consequence of the strengthened bond between the two countries."

Invited by the Governor General and the Jamaican Government, The King and Queen of Spain were welcomed with open arms and embarked on an intense two day program with stopovers in Kingston, Spanish Town and

the King and Queen of Spain. Additionally, we are encouraging the creation of a workshop school in the Spanish Town square to help start the restoration process of the Old Capital and we are helping also in the restoration of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Downtown Kingston." During their visit, the Royal couple also met with several Spanish investors and visited some of the new north coast hotels built by Spanish companies creating historic moments for many island residents.

States Silva, "The King and Queen left very impressed with Jamaica and with the friendliness and warmth with which its people treated them. I think the Royal visit certainly was a milestone with regard to the bond between our countries. The Spanish companies were very proud and honored to have the King and Queen of Spain in Jamaica, and I think it was a very important support to their endeavors."

In 2006, all the Spanish companies on the island came together to found the Spanish-Jamaican Foundation. Explains Silva, who is leading the project, "The Spanish companies are committed to help the country and its people. The purpose of the Foundation is to join forces to implement charitable and social projects in the fields of education, community development, heritage, health and culture, just to name a few."

It is easy to understand why, with his long list of on-the-go projects, this energetic Ambassador is unable to pick his proudest accomplishment. His passion for change and can-do attitude has unquestionably been of huge significance to both Jamaica and Spain, and his tenure, which has already been extended to mid-2010, simply can not last long enough.

A born diplomat who has made a difference as Spanish Ambassador to Jamaica since 2005
(Photo: Contributed)



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Although some cultural Spanish influence remains in the form of names like Ocho Rios, Oracabessa and St. Jago de la Vega, little heritage is left from the Spanish times and the Embassy is spearheading several projects to help to restore its legacy and place in the country's history. Befitting the occasion, the Spanish Monarchs honored the Institute of Jamaica in Kingston by opening an exhibition about the Spanish period.

Says Silva of the Royal visit to Spanish Town, "We built a new wing at the Spanish Town Hospital, which was officially opened by

