

The tourism dilemma

 By Di Brown

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South Africa is travel ready, there is no doubt about it. The sector bodies and service providers have been innovative, offered solutions to government and worked tirelessly to ensure the safety of future guests. Everyone in tourism is desperate to open. Businesses and livelihoods are on the brink of collapse as the pandemic has been particularly devastating for this sector, and the frustration, anger and despair is palpable.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

However, tourism has to be viewed in the context of the overall state of the country.

As the industry looks to the domestic market to save it in the short term, we have to view this market framed within the bigger picture.

The current Covid-19 situation in South Africa is dire, with infection rates increasing by more than 10,000 new cases a day. Our total infections places us in the top 10 out of 213 countries affected by the pandemic.

Since the start of lockdown over 3 million jobs have been lost in the country. Households facing food shortages has risen from 24% to 50%.

Our healthcare is in a crisis and we face a very real risk of a shortage of hospital beds. No-one wants South Africa doing a replay of the horrifying footage from Italy a few months ago.

The majority of local tourists come from Cape Town and Johannesburg, the two hotspots where infection rates are expected to peak by mid to late August.

Do we really want people with the highest possibility of being infected moving to the remote spots and small towns of the country?

Can we honestly encourage people from low infection areas to flock to these hotspots?

Opening domestic tourism before these two areas have peaked could be catastrophic.

While the industry needs to reopen asap, waiting another five weeks might be the best course of action. If leisure travel opens now and infections spread to the small towns and remote spots across the South Africa, tourism will be the last thing on anybody's mind. We will all be in a desperate fight to save the country from total collapse.

The industry may be travel ready, but the country is not.

The hotels, lodges and guest houses are safe and ready, but unfortunately, the visitors are the unknown quantity.

Can every guest be trusted to be obey all the safety protocols, to cancel if they might have been exposed, to be tested before they travel to ensure they are not asymptomatic?

Unfortunately, that answer is no. There is still noncompliance regarding masks and social distancing. We all saw what happened when the alcohol ban was lifted, and most of us know someone who is willing to take a chance and get Covid-19 because they are healthy and believe they can beat it.

As citizens, we have not covered ourselves in glory to date, and unfortunately, tourism is paying the price for this, unfair as it may be.

More questions than answers.

If the industry can't open yet, what can be done while it waits?

We must protect our source markets. Stand together and lobby government to provide a date for a cautious reopening of borders. Go harder than the taxi industry on this one. Government needs to commit to a plan, not only to reassure the international market, but to show real support to an industry that adds more than gold to the GDP. Will it happen, probably not. Is it worth fighting for, hell yes.

Consider every possible option.

Could inter provincial travel between provinces with low infections be allowed? This will not result in much business, but it is better than nothing, and can be closely monitored.

Can we welcome guests from countries that have minimal infections?

Should we be marketing hard to countries in Southern Africa?

Can we allow visitors to fly in to OR Tambo or Cape Town International, but not leave the airport? From there they can get a charter to one of our numerous remote lodges.

What more can be done from a safety perspective? Require proof of a negative test? Not allow staff with co-morbidities to have any contact with guests?

The effects of Covid-19 will be with us for a while, how do we change our marketing strategy:

- Can we find new markets to target?
- Do we need to look at dual and dynamic pricing?
- How can we support each other just to survive a bit longer?
- If government is not coming to the party, can we get assistance from big business?
- What can we learn from other countries who opened to soon?

Now is the time to vocalise the crazy ideas, ask for help and stand together.

South Africa is the perfect place for a safe vacation, endless remote spots of superb natural beauty, and service providers who can ensure a safe welcome back to visitors.

If any industry deserves a bail out from Government to see them through until after infections peak, it is tourism. While we wait for them to chop and change their minds, it is up to us to explore every avenue, throw those crazy ideas around and do whatever it takes to hold on until the country is ready.

ABOUT DI BROWN

Di Brown is a freelance travel writer based in Cape Town. Part of the tourism industry for the last 20 years, Di is a supporter of responsible tourism, advocates for animal rights in tourism and is a keen amateur photographer.

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