

Low rand boosts tourism rebound

CAPE TOWN: Tourist numbers have started to climb dramatically as travellers to SA take advantage of the low value of the rand and feel freed of the Ebola threat, Tourism Minister Derek Hanekom said.



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Tourism is booming

And while the new visa regime agreed to by the Cabinet has not yet been implemented, he believed the concessions had improved the climate for tourism and would boost the number of tourists especially from China, where the onerous visa requirements had resulted in a sharp decline.

Southern Africa Tourism Services Association CE David Frost agreed. "I totally concur with the minister's statement, we are seeing an upturn (in tourist numbers) and it's been long awaited."

However, Frost said the visa requirements had left the industry "battered and bruised" and the industry was not out of the woods yet. "Reports indicate that tourism at the moment is booming. We know that the numbers are increasing quite dramatically" the minister said in an interview on Friday.

The turnaround had begun in October. Fears about Ebola on the continent were no longer a factor. The disease had had a negative effect on the sector, especially on Chinese and American tourists in the last few months of last year.

The new visa regime

Hanekom expected that the first phase of implementation of the new visa regime would be concluded by the end of next month. This would allow accredited travel agents in countries that require visas to come to SA - in particular China, India and Russia - to accept visa applications instead of the prospective travellers being obliged to travel long distances to present themselves in person at SA's diplomatic missions.

The unpopular regulations required biometric identification of prospective travellers and unabridged birth certificates for children accompanying them. Hanekom said priority had been given to China, which was an important source of tourists for SA and which had suffered the sharpest decline in numbers as a result of the visa regime. A list of travel agents had been selected for accreditation by the Department of Home Affairs.

The Cabinet approved concessions to the visa rules in October to address their effect on tourism and to make it easier for people to get visas. The concessions recommended by an interministerial committee were also made to the requirement that unabridged birth certificates be carried for child travellers.

Hanekom said he had visited provinces over the past few months to engage industry players on the problems they faced. Common among them, he said, were access to markets and finance, the ability to link up with major players and the need for transformation of the industry.

With Penelope Mashego

Source: Business Day

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