

# And then everything changed

 By Eugene Yiga

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It started out as an amazing year.

In January, I published a new book and was planning to give a dozen talks at conferences around the world. In February, Travel Massive named me as one of the top podcasters to listen to, even though Cape Town Travel Guide was only around eight months old at the time.

And then everything changed.

When I first heard about something called the 'novel coronavirus' I didn't think much of it. Sure, it was disappointing that the European press trip I was invited on was postponed and a bit of a shock when WTM Africa was cancelled, but life in South Africa carried on as normal. It was only when local events such as the annual Two Oceans Marathon and Cape Town International Jazz Festival (the largest of its kind in Africa, attracting some 40,000 attendees) were called off that people began to worry.

The government was quick to act, declaring a national 'state of disaster' on 15 March. Even though South Africa only had 61 confirmed cases at the time, the fact that some of these were local transmissions (and not just those of people who'd travelled overseas) made it clear the numbers would rise.

The law prohibited gatherings of more than 100 people. That meant schools were closed (albeit three days later) while the abundance of late summer events, both in theatres across the country and in public spaces outdoors, had to be cancelled too. (Despite increasing pressure from the public, some gyms stayed opened, comfortable with their bizarre decision to allow in one member at a time whenever another member left, never mind that the crowds of people waiting to gain access defeated the point of social distancing.)

## Everything would be okay

Travel restrictions, to the extent that they existed, were light. Foreign nationals travelling from or through 'high-risk' countries were banned and had their visas revoked, while those who were already in the country were required to present themselves

for testing. Likewise, South African citizens who'd returned from these destinations were also subject to testing and self-isolation or quarantine, and those planning to travel abroad were sternly (but politely) discouraged from doing so.

Still, everything seemed under control. Locals were advised to avoid all non-essential domestic trips, particularly by rail, taxis, and bus. And while we did have our own bit of panic buying – why is it always the toilet paper? – grocery stores were able to replenish stocks or else put restrictions on the number of items a person could buy. All in all, it felt like everything would be okay.

And then everything changed again.

On the night Monday 23 March, the government announced that the country would go into full lockdown for three weeks beginning on Friday 27 March. (This was later extended by another two weeks, leading to a flood of memes such as the ironic realisation that we'd be spending Freedom Day – a celebration of South Africa's first democratic election on 27 April 1994 – indoors.)

This denied entry to all foreign visitors, leaving some tourists stuck in their hotels (at their own expense) until they could make arrangements to leave on repatriation flights, while other international travellers were unable to get off their planes when they arrived. South Africans, too, were banned from travelling except under 'strictly controlled circumstances'.

Since I wasn't up for spending a month alone in an apartment, I made plans to fly to Johannesburg to stay with family. So I bought a ticket, packed my bags, and left Cape Town on one of the last few flights before the lockdown came into effect. The experience was surreal. I saw social media influencers taking endless selfies in their surgical masks and a woman sobbing hysterically at the departure gate after missing her flight. Apparently she'd been so confused by all the chaos that

she'd been standing in the wrong line.

## **Flattening the curve**

The lockdown, more or less like those around the world, only allows movement outside the home to acquire essential goods or services (food, medicine, etc.) but the regulations seem to change every day with some of them enforced too harshly and others not enforced at all. (So far, thousands of people have been arrested and there have even been reports of excessive violence by the army and the police.)

For example, transport providers, including e-hailing companies like Uber and Bolt, were limited to 50% capacity but this later increased to 70% for public taxis. And while locals aren't allowed to purchase or move alcohol, the government (eventually) allowed the export of wine from the country's estates, much to what I imagine is the comfort and relief of buyers around the world.

Despite this, the consensus seems to be that the government did the right thing. Indeed, given how slow bureaucracy tends to be, many are impressed by how quickly it's rolled out several initiatives, from the WhatsApp line to provide up-to-date information to the free testing of thousands of people a day (conducted by 30 000 recruited community health workers), with the goal of reaching 10,000 tests per day by the end of April.

There's also evidence that the lockdown has made a difference in 'flattening the curve', the failure of which would have been devastating in an immunocompromised country with the world's highest number of people infected with HIV (the prevalence rate for adults aged 15 to 49 stands at 19%) and where tuberculosis remains the leading cause of death. Still, like many African countries, it's been a challenge for those living in informal settlements where social distancing is all but impossible and a lack of running water makes good hygiene hard.

## **An economic crisis**

While the focus has been on the health crisis, many are rightly worried about the economic one too. South Africa was already in a recession for the last half of 2019 (the second in two years), with unemployment approaching 30%. Then came the decision from Moody's to downgrade the country's credit rating to junk status, a week after which Fitch downgraded the national debt too.

The Reserve Bank has since cut interest rates by 2% to make it easier to access credit while the South African Revenue Service has announced that certain businesses can delay paying specific taxes without penalties for the next few months. Various government departments, corporations, and other entities have also set up funds and trusts to provide support. The

president also announced R500bn (\$28bn) economic package, equivalent to around 10% of the country's GDP.

But will it be enough?

It's a question those in the tourism and hospitality sector are asking every day. The travel industry contributed R425bn to the economy in 2018 and employs one in every 22 working South Africans today (around one in 10 if you count the indirect jobs too). It was also just starting to recover after the end of the recent drought in Cape Town as well as the reversal of misguided visa rules a few years ago, one of which required adults travelling with children to do so with unabridged birth certificates.

Given that a survey by SafariBookings.com found that 93% of tour operators were experiencing at least a 75% fall in new bookings, Covid-19 could undo all that progress in a matter of months. Unfortunately, the government's interventions seem to be having the wrong effect. For example, a Tourism Relief Fund offering R200m for SMMEs in distress has come under attack for insisting that grants (capped at R50,000 each) will be based on the government's broad-based black economic empowerment (affirmative action) rules.

## **Time to adapt**

Still, even in these unprecedented times, it's been inspiring to see businesses and individuals doing whatever they can to adapt. Some hotels put themselves forward as quarantine facilities while restaurants, which are not deemed an essential service, offered home delivery before the lockdown hit. Likewise, artists across the country are performing virtual concerts and the National Arts Festival, an annual event that dates back over four decades, plans to go fully 'virtual' for eleven days at the end of June.

There's also been innovation in travel, with virtual tours of top Cape Town attractions including Boulders Beach, Groot Constantia, the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, Robben Island, Table Mountain, and the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa. Travellers can even join a safari game drive from the likes of Shamwari, Tintswalo, and WildEarth.

On the whole, I feel optimistic. (What's the alternative?) I've made peace with the situation for what it is and have done my best to keep productive with a daily routine that sets aside time for the things that matter most to me (reading, writing, yoga) while limiting my exposure to endless news updates and social media rants. I've also continued to be grateful that I have my health and my work, which I know is a lot more than many others who are struggling to put food on the table or keep a roof over their head. Yes, I miss Cape Town – this is the longest I've been away from the city since I graduated from university there in 2008 – but I know that things will bounce back.

Indeed, even though experts might debate on whether the recovery will be shaped like a U, a V, a W, or any other letter of the alphabet, it's clear that life won't be this way forever. It's only a matter of time before people, hungry for leisure travel after too much time at home, start getting on planes again, even if it's for local and regional getaways at first. (Business travellers might prefer to stick to using Zoom, as soon as they can figure out how it works.) Those who are preparing for brighter days are those who will weather the storm best.

## **Timeless beauty**

As a travel writer, that means this could be the perfect opportunity to promote new destinations that will be eager to welcome visitors when the lockdowns lift. For example, South African Tourism's latest campaign encourages people to stay home now so that they can travel later (something that should be attractive to foreign travellers given that the currency has fallen to record lows) while Cape Town, regularly voted as one of the best cities in the world, has pointed out that it's a destination worth waiting for.

All in all, I'm eager to continue promoting South Africa in my writing, much like I'm eager to promote Cape Town on my podcast, which I put on hold after over forty consecutive weeks, publishing the final episode on what turned out to be a bittersweet birthday at the end of March. But, like I said in that final episode, our country was beautiful before the coronavirus and that beauty isn't going away anytime soon.

[This article](#) was first published on [Africa Travel Week](#)

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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