

Matric Rage - well-earned vac or commercial chaos?

The now traditional Matric Rage festivities have just kicked off, as 'privileged' matriculants descend on the coastal towns of Umhlanga, Ballito, Margate and Plettenberg Bay to celebrate the end of their high school careers. The question is: are coastal communities up to the frenzied influx? And is it worth the headache?

"The locals see it as two weeks of absolute chaos," says Lara Hall, a coordinator at Plettenberg Bay-based Lucky Student Packages. "We're trying to grow Matric Rage so that it becomes something that people want in the town."

Lucky Student Packages specialises in promoting a safe student rage. It provides matriculants with a selection of hot deals to choose from that include student-friendly accommodation and safe transport at night. "We have to treat them as future customers," says Hall, who believes the coastal community will benefit in the long-term by playing host to successful Matric Rages. The estimated spend in these towns over the Matric Rage period exceeds R100 million.

Dire

Further up the coast, in Umhlanga, the community considers the two-week period so dire that it has FESMAC - a council management committee - to manage and police the matric fortnight. "We've tightened up security greatly with good effect so far," says Peter Rose, chairman of Umhlanga Tourism. "[Events organisers] have to motivate their request to host an event and make sure the appropriate insurances are in place," he says.

"It's pretty hard at this time of year, to get many coastal town 'officials' to say anything good about the commercial prospects of Rage," says Jason Levin, MD of youth market specialists HDI Youth Marketeers.

Rose does, however, say that business could be benefiting more from the influx by moving the nature of the activities towards the good-clean-fun end of the spectrum: "They're missing out on a huge opportunity - instead of shunting teens from one club to another, they should be organising some serious prizes... and extend the events onto the beach rather than pumping them into the night clubs to keep them busy. There are miles of beach that the community is very happy for them to use, but instead [the matriculants] are sleeping all day and coming out at night like vampires."

"Going out at night is key. We wake up at about 11am, and then go out for a late breakfast because we're only getting home at 5.30am and then we'll chill for a few hours before we get ready to go out all together again," says Kiara, an 18 year-old currently renting a house on the beach in Ballito with nine other students. "There aren't any beach parties during the day... We're spending some of our money on food - but most of it goes to clubs," she says.

"Very focused income"

"It's [currently] a very focused income that they bring in," points out Rose of the fast-food, bottle-stores and clubs in the area that are largely the beneficiaries of the money spent. Lucky Student Packages offers discounts to students to places such as Wimpy, Spur and Mugg & Bean. "Ten retail outlets came on board this year - it's advertising for them," says Hall, "and we plan to partner with more companies for next year's event. From when [the matrices] leave on the 12 December, we start planning for the next year," she says.

"Matrics just want to have fun. And, of course, all that hyped-up, pent-up energy can find negative outlets. We know no 18 year-old wants to do yoga on the beach and sing Kum Ba Ya on matric vac, but they could be having more 'constructive' fun. A good forum of 18 year-olds, key coastal town officials and regional businesses could easily work that out, and it's completely possible to do before 2010," says Levin.

"There is a very positive business upside to channelling Matric Rage spend into other channels like beach massage, volleyball tournaments, town festivals, surfing and body-boarding contests, open-air concerts and other performances: a whole bunch of activities that give matrices something to look forward to other than their seventeenth drink in a club," he concludes.

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