

SA inbound tourist arrivals down in 2019

According to StatsSA's latest figures, South Africa received 244,000 few inbound tourists in 2019. The number of foreign arrivals is more than 2% less than those recorded in 2018. "This is way off the 6% increase in arrivals we need to attract each year in order to reach the government's target of 21 million foreign visitors by 2030," explains Jabulani Debedu, senior consultant tourism specialist unit at BDO.



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"This is only the second time in nearly a decade that the country has experienced an annual decline in the number of foreign tourists to our shores," adds Debedu.

African tourism, on the whole, achieved 4.2% growth last year. "If we factor this continental growth into the local equation, it means an actual loss of 683.000 tourists to our shores in 2019. Based on an average spend of R8,715 per person per trip, this would add up to a whopping R6bn loss to the economy in direct spend alone," adds Debedu.



It's official: Foreign children no longer require an unabridged birth certificate
Domestic Flights South Africa 3 Dec 2019



He points out that the previous decline in 2015 (-6,8%) was driven by the Ebola pandemic as well as a national error of judgement on visa and childbirth certificate issues. On a positive note, the decision to scrap unabridged birth certificates will open up travel to families coming into the country. "Because the announcement was made in October last year it is too early to feel the ripple effect on tourism arrivals, but we look forward to the positive change it will bring," says Debedu.

The concern now, however, is that the inbound tourist decline in 2019 was the pre-coronavirus outbreak, leaving a question mark about how busy international passport control will be at major SA airports and ports of entry in 2020.

Highs and lows

On fuller inspection of the latest figures, by the professional services firm, BDO gave further insight into the statistics:

The uptick

South Africa's biggest overseas market was the UK with 436 000 visitors in 2019. Despite BREXIT woes, this market is marginally up on 2018 (+1,2%). Good growth was experienced in December 2019 (+5,2%), attributed to the start of the cricket tour at the end of the month and the summer holiday season. Arrivals from Saudi Arabia grew significantly at 34% and it is promising to see positive growth from India – a market that has experienced ups and downs over the years, primarily due to visa frustrations.

Growth in tourists arrivals

Brazil +9,5%

Uganda +8,1%

New Zealand +7,9% (primarily due to changes in visa requirements)

Mexico +7,5%

Kenya: +3,9%

The downturn

While our second-largest overseas market, the USA recorded only marginal declines (-0,8%) for the year, we recorded significant declines of 6% from the German overseas market, despite a small growth in demand in December of 1,4%.

"While this spike is likely due to the summer holiday season, the overall decline is of significant concern because this is our third largest overseas market," warns Debedu.

"Anecdotally, I would put this down to safety and security concerns and the general profile of our country internationally when it comes to corruption and other areas of instability." France is another major market that declined significantly in 2019, down 11,4%.

The number of tourists from China was down 3,9% for the year (reaching just over 93,000 tourists in 2019). "We just can't seem to get the number of tourists from this market back over the 100 000 mark again, which was last achieved in 2016, and before that in 2013," says Debedu. "With the outbreak of Coronavirus, 2020 is not going to be the year in which we achieve this magical number again."

He points out that fortunately, our country is such a small player in the Chinese outbound market that the impact on SA won't be too bad.

Africa

Although overall African tourist numbers are down 2,4%, African air arrivals were down nearly 7%. "This is a major worry

as African air arrivals are generally big spenders in our economy," cautions Debedu.

Major declines for the year were from the countries whose citizens were targets of xenophobic attack in late August last year onwards: DRC: -6,4%; Ghana: - 12,9% and Nigeria: - 27,4%.

"South Africans play a pivotal role in being good ambassadors for our country. We need to call on the nation to drive the beauty and versatility of this uniquely exciting destination that has so much to offer," concludes Debedu.

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