

# South Africans should work together to make the country a destination of choice



By [Jerry Mabena](#)

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In a recent open letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa, Getaway editor Justin Fox [expressed](#) his frustration with the challenges faced by the travel and tourism industry in South Africa. While only the most ignorant among us will deny that there are challenges, I want to take this opportunity to offer a different view of an industry that, on balance, is, if not flourishing, certainly performing fairly.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

The tourism sector is one that has managed to demonstrate great resilience despite a less than favourable economic climate. According to the [World Travel and Tourism Council's 2018 Economic Impact](#) report, South Africa is the largest tourism economy in Africa, contributing in excess of R420bn to the economy in 2018. The travel and tourism industry, directly and indirectly, supported 1.5 million jobs in total, which amounted to 9.5% of total employment.

What I will admit is frustrating about this is that these figures can (and should) be so much higher. The natural splendour, the moderate weather, the rich mix of culture, the friendliness of our people and a most favourable exchange rate are just some of the reasons South Africa should be one of the world's top tourist destinations.

With so much potential we can't afford to bemoan the negative, but need to set about elevating and building on the positive. Ultimately, actions speak louder than words, which is why it is useful to consider initiatives and policies that contribute to the growth, resilience and appeal of the travel and tourism sector in unlikely destinations, and to take from it what is useful to us too. It's also useful to bear in mind that President Ramaphosa is one of only a few leaders who has recognised tourism's potential contribution to meaningful economic growth.

I agree with Mr Fox that we require more boldness – perhaps to likes of our central African neighbour, Rwanda. A nation brought to its knees by the 1994 genocide that will be remembered as one of the most horrific human tragedies in modern history, the country has managed not to only stabilise, but to become one of the most popular tourist destinations on the continent.

The tourism sector in Rwanda is the largest foreign exchange earner in the country, and sees a steady increase in visitor numbers each year. The growth of the industry is widely attributed to the security, stability and infrastructure investment that has been a priority in the country for more than a decade now.

What's more, through the Rwanda Development Board, the Rwandan Government has set an ambitious, but not unrealistic, target of growing the country's tourism revenue to more than US\$800m annually by 2024. A number of strategies have been put in place to aid in achieving this goal, such as improving tourism infrastructure, helping to equip the private sector to improve service levels, and positioning the country as a foremost ecotourism destination.

South African has plans to double the number of incoming visitors by 2030. An ambitious goal by any account, but one that is certainly attainable if both the public and private sector work together and support the initiatives underway to realise this objective.

More than that, we need to recognise that we all work for SA INC under the stewardship of the President. As such, every government department, every business and every individual has a role of play - in whatever small or humble way. Often this role is simply acknowledging and communicating the challenges. In the tourism sector, we have seen a number of organisations expressing their anxiety about the risks to the industry created by security concerns, and there are initiatives among these players to address the concerns.

What Mr Fox does not speak to is the fact that we operate in a highly unequal country. How do we talk about a flourishing tourism economy when the villages tourists pass through en route to some of the country's postcard-pretty destination are home to people who do not know where their next meal will come from?

While we can never condone crime and/or violence, we need to understand that this is part of a systemic problem that needs to be structurally addressed at various levels. Let's talk about the need to engage communities better around the role tourism plays in South Africa. Through involving these communities in this dynamic industry, we can contribute to improving the lives of many South Africans, while at the same time attracting even more visitors to our shores.

One could argue that we have a communication problem and that we need to be more singular about what we communicate around the goals and objectives of the tourism industry at large. There are numerous campaigns and initiatives in place to address crime and violence in tourist areas in particular, but how often do we hear about them?

In addition to changing our approach to tourism and applying the lessons learned from the Rwandan example, Mr Fox mentioned that [at Getaway] "it's our job and privilege to celebrate South Africa". This is a sentiment that I believe should be echoed by all and not just those employed in the travel and tourism industry. I am strongly in alignment with Mr Fox's belief that it is our job and our privilege to celebrate South Africa. And when we choose to take a proactive stance, a solutions-focussed approach and adopt a positive, can-do attitude we can certainly address challenges in a sustainable way.

Yes, we must acknowledge the challenges. But let's choose to focus our energies on working together in finding new solutions and celebrating those already working.

South Africa is bursting with potential. As such, I invite South Africans to join me in making our beautiful country a travel

and tourism destination as lauded and popular as New York, London or Rome.

## ABOUT JERRY MABENA

Jerry Mabena is the CEO of Thebe Services. His extensive and highly successful business background is a testament to not only his strategic thinking, but also his passion for developing talented individuals and working as a team player.

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