

Domestic tourism to the rescue

 By Jenna Berndt

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With Covid-19 travel restrictions still in place and countries going in and out of various lockdown levels, the spotlight is firmly on domestic tourism. Domestic and regional tourism is the light at the end of the tunnel, that holy grail that governments, tourism industries and stakeholders hope will ensure the sector's survival until international travel resumes.



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WTM Africa 2021's Africa Travel Week (ATW) is taking place virtually now, from 7 to 9 April 2021. A session held on the virtual conference's first day unpacked how African tourism stakeholders can work together to grow domestic and regional tourism.

It's domestic or die

"It's domestic or die," were the no-minced words of Muthuri Kinyamu, co-founder of Turnup.Travel in Kenya. "It's going to be a long ride before you get back to those 2019 [international arrivals] numbers. Domestic has to be your focus."

Sue Garrett, GM marketing and product at the Flight Centre Travel Group South Africa, agreed, saying that they pivoted to focus on domestic tourism three weeks into South Africa's hard lockdown last year.

"Our aim was: how do we get people moving locally? We launched several campaigns with specific products around exploring your backyard, which didn't require people to fly. We promoted self-drive, motor homes, road trips and worked closely with South African tourism to bring these campaigns to life. The best thing about it is that South Africans are now travelling locally."

Garrett adds that the reaction has been positive, with domestic room nights for February 2021 on par with February 2020.

Muthuri agrees that in the Kenyan space, domestic was already a focus area. "Thankfully, the domestic market has been gradually increasing."

Travellers are looking for longer stays and luxury

The way South Africans travel has fundamentally changed.

"South Africans are now spending a lot of money exploring our country," says Garrett. "Pre-Covid, domestic tourism was often only for a weekend away or special occasions. But now we're seeing longer stays and travellers looking at luxury lodges that they wouldn't have considered or been able to stay at before – this is so fantastic to see. Adventure travel is also on the rise.

"We hope that when borders open, travel will spread to the Sadac regions – it's close to home, safe and accessible."

Domestic tourism needs to stay

"There were organisations within the South African space that were already focusing on domestic," said Evelyn Mahlaba, SA Tourism's regional general manager for Africa.

"We started working together with Flight Centre as far back as three years ago. We looked at the majority of the South African population and started working on people that weren't travelling," citing the launch of Flight Centre's Stokvel initiative. "Having a diverse offering that Flight Centre has, has managed to push a whole lot of numbers through, and I'd like to see us continue on that trajectory."

"International travellers want to engage with the locals. If we do not market to domestic markets, then when they [international travellers] arrive, there will be no one for them to engage with. It's imperative that we continue and do better for the domestic market."

Year-round marketing and value for money

Organisations can change travel behaviour by forgoing seasonality and marketing destinations as all-year round.

"Seasons will disappear," said Muthuri. "We don't only have to travel around Easter and Christmas." Muthuri added that travel deals and staggered payment plans with mobile money could unlock domestic demand. "Coupled with social media and campaigns that show that safety is your priority and that you are open."

"People don't have to travel over specific periods," agreed Mahlaba. "They are willing to trade-off if the price is right. We are doing a lot of campaigns that drive special deals."

"It has become very important that your offering itself is value for money," said Mahlaba. "Focus on activities around your place – what's happening in and around your destination or property. People are looking at the beach, bush and berg. Don't just promote a hotel – it's about the area around the hotel and the activities."

Garrett added that consumers, in general, are looking for value for money rather than purely cheap deals.

Social proof is essential

Social proof is more important than ever.

"The bucket list is more real now," said Muthuri. "People are doing a lot of discovery. Social media has been key in terms of inspiration and discovery – this is the social proof people need. People are documenting their travels and sharing that - they make good brand advocates."

Speak your market's language – forget the prim and proper

Can you have one marketing message that resonates across a diverse market?

"What is unique for us in South Africa and the continent is the use of local slang in advertising," said Mahlaba. "Travel used to be so prim and proper but to appeal to the people, speak in their language. Use the everyday terms for them to find your advertising."

Muthuri added that in Kenya, home to about 44 different tribes, marketing to diverse markets in their language is critical.

"This is where I see influencers and key personalities coming in – they are able to speak to audiences in the languages they understand. Muthuri expects marketing to specific segments to become more targeted in the years to come.

Trending types of travel

- Themed travel – in the absence of festivals and events, people will still travel for honeymoons, anniversaries, school holidays, etc.
- Personalised travel
- Solo travel
- Escapism – people are desperate to escape
- Lifestyle travel (e.g., around gastronomy)
- Active travel

Mahlaba advises that newfound interest in hiking, for example, presents an opportunity for tourism businesses. "There is an opportunity for people to travel for a day visit, then think how you can graduate these visitors to do an overnight visit and then consider these activities in other provinces."

Traveller confidence

"There was an information overload on what people needed to do to travel," said Muthuri. "Visual communication and assets are very important. They can improve [traveller] confidence, show compliance and bring that urgency that I can go now or start planning. This keeps people dreaming about better days."

Garrett adds that in a recent consumer survey run by the Flight Centre Travel Group, the fear of being stranded internationally was number one, more so than any fear around health and safety protocols.

"Domestic tourism will continue to evolve over the next two to three years. It's an opportunity and our duty to ensure that our industry and country survives."

ABOUT JENNA BERNDT

With a curious mind and a love for travel and tourism, Jenna Berndt has over nine years' marketing experience in the travel industry. She is currently a brand owner for leisure travel brands at Big Ambitions, a specialist Cape Town-based travel content marketing consultancy.

Jenna has a journalism degree specialising in graphic design, a keen eye for visual and written communication and is focused on achieving brand goals through content creation and PR, marketing strategy, SEO copywriting and social media.

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