

# **UP Museum Commentary Series I**

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### **South African Tourism Webinar – Tourism Recovery Plan I**

Below is a detailed commentary by the UP Museums on SA's Tourism Recovery Plan and the first in a three part series. On Thursday, 09 April 2020 from 12:00 to 13:30 Sisa Ntshona, CEO of South African Tourism, hosted the first of a three-part series of webinars to address the tourism sector in South Africa. Each session was scheduled to host a different cohort of industry experts as panellists. Each of the webinars, hosted by South African Tourism, was facilitated by Jon Howell, CEO of AviaDev Africa.

The webinars were well attended, with over 2500 registrations for the first session alone. This indicates the need for the webinars to be hosted and the large number of concerns faced by the South African tourism industry in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The series of webinars were aimed at understanding the pain and difficulties experienced by the South African tourism sector due to the lockdown. Essentially, the tourism industry had to stop trading - an unprecedented event. Due to the Corona Virus pandemic, it is unclear when the end of the lockdown would be in sight and how long the tourism sector was expected to hold out for.

The webinars are aimed at soliciting views from different vantage points by consulting the industry experts on the panel, as well as to judge the commentaries and questions from other participants. By offering an opportunity to voice opinions, expectations, difficulties and worries, the intention was to gather thoughts and contributions in a bottom-up approach to commence working on a Tourism Recovery Plan for the sector, which would be representative of the South African Tourism industry as a whole and to take a proactive stance. The implications of the pandemic occur on a global level – the actions to be taken need to ensure that a South African tourism industry exists once the restrictions are lifted.

In this first webinar, the panellists agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has a devastating impact on the tourism industry as a whole. It came about suddenly and the tourism sector was unprepared to react to the situation, resulting in confusion, tension, uncertainty and anxiety and dire socio-economic consequences.

During the lockdown period, the panellists maintained that the following actions should take priority:

1. Manage staff and maintain or protect your business in the light of a wave of cancellations and postponements. Therefore, the local tourism businesses would need to adapt their rules and terms and conditions under which they operate and be flexible as the situation changes to maintain liquidity.
  - A wave of postponements means that the statistics for 2021 will look great, but in 2020 businesses battle to survive. The priority is to limit the impact by offering postponements instead of reimbursements for cancellations to avoid a loss of revenue and to maintain liquidity in 2020.
  - With regard to postponements, businesses need to manage the short-term first (March, April, May, i.e. the next 60-90 days). If the situation continues, then only address the next two months and so on.
  - Right now, tourism businesses need to make hard decisions to survive. The future socio-economic impact is still unclear. You need to look after your own business and be realistic about what is viable, but it is also essential to look towards the greater industry and existing and future partnerships. Collaboration is essential to share the benefits and the burden, so that the tourism industry will survive and the industry is sustainable.
2. New opportunities emerge as a result of the crisis: Now is the time to rethink, reset, reinvent and reshape existing business models and learn from the process to be geared towards future situations

(have contingency plans in place). Rethink how you run your business, what works and what does not. Use this time to improve and to create a better, more sustainable tourism product.

3. During the lockdown the costs will not go away. Large overheads and fixed expenses will remain, despite lost revenue. Therefore, it is essential to lower costs and to analyse where money drains away. Tourism businesses need to survive next two to three months and not close down. Tourism recovery will be more difficult and longer, if many businesses do not survive. Therefore, better government support is required.
4. There is a need for a better platform to connect tourism businesses and to collaborate, to talk and to promote tourism products. This needs to be done not only from a trade association or government side, but communication and discussions need to be maintained. Therefore, it is essential that webinars should continue.

Based on observations at an international level and by examining how the situation in China developed, where the pandemic first broke out, the panellists also voiced their opinions on how/what the future of the tourism industry in South Africa would be/look like. This offered a sense of the way in which tourists would travel in future and new trends that would emerge post-pandemic:

- The pandemic will affect the decision-making processes of future tourists: They will be concerned about travelling internationally until the pandemic is under control or until a vaccine has been developed. Especially long-haul destinations, with different levels of medical care available, will become an issue.
- People will be reluctant to travel long distances. Therefore, domestic tourism is expected to recover first. This would be followed by regional/cross-border tourism into neighbouring countries and only then international and long-haul tourism is expected to pick up. Thus, the immediate focus needs to be on domestic tourism. However, the recovery of the domestic tourism sector will not be immediate either. The confidence of people to travel needs to be re-established.
- The lockdown also offers an opportunity: tourism businesses are faced with a 'captive audience', which can be influenced and inspired. These prospective travellers will continue to plan and to dream about places to travel to, people they have missed and experiences they would like to explore once the lockdown is over. Therefore, as the people of the world are locked in their homes, they cannot travel now, but they can travel in future. This gave rise to the slogan used by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) "stay home today, travel tomorrow". Therefore, tourism businesses need to be visible to their markets during the lockdown. They need to offer inspiration that travel is only delayed and that short-term pains will offer a bigger reward in the long-term.
- Post-Covid, South Africa as a long-haul destination will need to compete with other international destinations. All other destinations will also be chasing the recovery of their own tourism sector. Therefore, South Africa needs to differentiate itself to succeed. However, in this regard, there are some benefits:
  - South Africa as a destination is very diverse with many unique experiences and characteristics the country can offer to the source markets.
  - The disastrous Rand offers a unique selling proposition, now is the opportunity to sell 'cheap' trips. The weak currency offers an opportunity in the recovery of the tourism industry. Encourage international markets to buy flights and accommodation now, while it is "cheap" – they will receive brilliant value for money when they buy travel now, ahead of time.
- However, some obstacles to inbound tourism remain. As part of the Tourism Recovery Plan, it would be necessary to remove these existing fundamental barriers to allow for more inbound tourism in future. This includes the existing Visa restrictions, which hinder inbound travel and prevent South Africa from attracting more visitors into the country.
- Tourism businesses need to re-invent so that they are ready once the industry restarts. In this regard, they need to examine their source markets:

- Who are the new markets? How quickly is the rest of the world getting back on its feet and on top of the pandemic? The main source markets for South Africa, such as Europe and the USA, also need to recover.
- What is the new norm? How will the tourism industry be forced to operate differently? The Covid-19 pandemic is a watershed moment and pre- and post-pandemic will become a significant landmark.
- Due to grounded airplanes, and having supply when there is no demand, some industry experts expect air tickets to become incredibly cheap. Especially domestically for inland air travel, ticket prices are expected to fall. At the moment, there is too much supply and not enough demand, therefore domestic travel may become easier to afford. Pre-crisis, accommodation process was geared towards the international market, which meant it was incredibly expensive for South Africans to travel domestically.
- The crisis can also be used for South Africans to establish pride in their own country and natural and cultural heritage. A previously rather negative attitude needs to be used to transform locals into ambassadors for the country as they unite around a common cause.
- In future, tourism businesses need to be more dynamic and flexible to respond to the marketplace as a destination. Thus, they need to adjust their prices to encourage domestic travel and to offer value for money.
- In time, the demand from the major overseas source markets will return, depending on when people will feel safe to travel again, especially to long-haul destinations. Therefore, tourism businesses need to be ready to reconnect once the time is right. Here, tourism technology and digital media become important. Until the markets become confident and adventurous to travel again, it is essential to keep the source markets engaged and to provide opportunities for communication.
- In order to rebuild the confidence to travel, tourism businesses need to implement new health and safety measures:
  - Disinfect aeroplanes
  - Introduce the use of masks on the aeroplanes and other close-quarters modes of transportation or transition zones such as airports
  - People may not want to travel to big cities in Europe, Asia and the USA – natural sites in South Africa may benefit
  - Once a vaccine is available, travel may return to 'normal'.

Practical hints that were identified:

1. Take stock: During the Covid-19 pandemic, it is essential to think and not to panic.
2. Be agile and adaptable: Locally and internationally, the tourism industry is treading into uncharted territory. One cannot continue using the old way of thinking and doing business in the old ways as the environment has changed.
3. Be collaborative: Tourism businesses need to share resources, expenses, ideas and opportunities in order to survive.
4. Be strategic: Use the time during the crisis to reset. The business will recover and the crisis will end eventually. Prepare for when it does end:
  - Identify pain: What didn't work? Don't bring it forward, leave things that didn't work behind.
  - Identify remain: What is currently working that needs to remain and be brought forward?
  - Identify gain: Identify new opportunities and new ways to do things that will bring about a gain. Identify what you want to gain.
5. Be optimistic: The tourism industry will emerge from the current crisis and rebound. While the long-haul markets are key markets for the future, they are expected to take time to recover. Instead, focus on the domestic market and become ambassadors for South Africa. Identify new opportunities (weak rand, changing business ways).

The tourism industry will recover, as people will continue to dream and they will want to continue to travel in the future. However, it may take some time for the recovery to materialize. As a result, this first webinar set the tone for the future webinars, for the questions that are being asked and for the conversations that need to take place: it sets a new trajectory for tourism to thrive.

Just as the tourism sector has suffered the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, so too have museums, the arts, creative and heritage industries have also all been impacted. From March 2020, the UP Museums were faced with a wave of postponements and tour cancellations due to the declaration of a national state of disaster in South Africa. As a result, the implementation of a harsh, but necessary full lockdown, the UP Museums, as well as all other museums, had to close its doors to visitors and implement an unprecedented system of working remotely from home. The boundaries of work, home, family life and all responsibilities are greyer than ever.

As a consequence, the UP Museums need to maintain the trust and confidence of our communities as an ongoing civic responsibility. Visible health and safety regulations, as well as compliance with government regulations remain critical and social distancing for museums as social spaces has taken on a new meaning. From a logistic side, future museum operations must anticipate that alcohol-based hand sanitiser would be made available at all entrances to the museum buildings, social distancing would need to be maintained when offering guided tours, possibly even only limited to less than ten people at a time. Moreover, only small groups of visitors would be allowed on a tour or in a gallery at a given time. Additional measures, such as face masks and gloves for museum staff may have to be compulsory.

Until now, the UP Museums have directed efforts towards growing its digital visibility to engage any prospective audiences by means of online technology. Continual improvements and regular maintenance of the museum website as a communication platform is crucial. The introduction and wider use of social media seems to be a practical trajectory that many museums are exploring and the UP Museums are gradually improving in this area with current resources. Museums will have to be more flexible, adaptable to better respond to future museum digital engagement and online audiences. This appears to be a given with efforts focused on increased flexibility during a crisis such as the unprecedented situation that the globally museums and the tourism industry is facing.

The tourism recovery plan is based on the expectations by tourism experts that domestic tourism will be the first to recover before regional and international travel resumes. If and only once museum doors re-open will the new way of travelling mean that people would be searching for value for money and sharing quality experiences with their loved ones, without having to travel far. Museums, cultural heritage and the arts have a way of uniting people, of providing an escape from everyday life and dreary circumstances. The fact remains that all professional and creative industries need to adapt or die, perhaps there is reassurance in the fact that museums like art are resilient, creativity cannot be suppressed and will not fade from memory