

UP Museum Commentary Series
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South African Tourism Webinar – Tourism Recovery Plan III

The third and last webinar in the series hosted by Sisa Ntshona, CEO of South African Tourism, occurred on Thursday 16 April from 12:00 to 13:30 and below is a detailed commentary and summary by the UP Museums to encourage further debate and for sharing.

South Africa is learning its lessons as the result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, much is happening around the world and with the extended lockdown, many consequences are unprecedented and new to many of us. While the beginning of the crisis was rather abrupt, the easing off of the lockdown period is envisioned to be phased (into five levels) with several continued restrictions. The rest of the world is also slowly lifting its restrictions, but many borders and travel restrictions may stay in place late into the year until November 2020. In order to adjust to the changing circumstances, the South African tourism industry therefore needs to be flexible and planning for 6-9 months ahead and post-Covid is going to be a necessity.

Various panellists have viewed the current crisis as a huge opportunity, especially with regard to digital marketing and tourism technology. The travel industry is evolving. Clients in the source markets want to use digital media and the tourism and hospitality industry needs to adapt to this. In the past, a lot of money has leaked out of destinations due to third party platforms that facilitate the bookings on behalf of tourism businesses. The crisis gives tourism businesses time to catch up to the technology, to get digitally enabled and to become more sustainable by taking back control by enabling customers to communicate and book directly with the establishment instead of using intermediaries.

Travel technology is seen as a great enabler that levels small and large businesses. It is necessary to be able to connect to target audiences. Technology will not replace, but rather enable tourism. It empowers the viewer to make an informed decision and it has a large impact. It creates trust, which in turn creates tourism bookings. It is a compliment and a must-have for any tourism business. It does not replace the actual experience, but rather allows them to dream, and in this regard is a good starting point that addresses the mental model of the travel planners and dreamers. In this way, future travellers need to be inspired through communication and digital technology.

New trends are arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic: Travellers will not want to venture out in large numbers. They want to be assured of their health and security and they will search for unique experiences, enjoy good cuisine, relax as Covid-19 is a stressful period and they would want to reconnect with their loved ones and with nature.

The lockdown will not end abruptly, but it is expected to be phased out slowly. In the first phase of the recovery, tourism businesses should not expect overnight visitors or paying guests. The visitors instead will be experiential aiming to visit parks and attractions close by- as a means of escape. The first customers may come from the local community, the immediate neighbourhood or from within the same city. They will venture out with trusted people and small family gatherings. This new mind-set, post-pandemic needs to be taken into account for the tourism businesses to recover. They need to provide for personalised experiences by making better planning and information available to audiences. Spending quality time with close loved ones in small groups and having quality experiences and enjoying simple pleasures will be their aim. Therefore, tourism businesses need to collaborate to offer package experiences and value for money. In this regard, small businesses could recover faster than bigger ones, as they do not depend on large numbers of visitors and can be more attentive to individual needs.

Tourists will remain reticent of large gatherings as they are concerned of reintroducing Covid-19 to a destination or reinfections. Therefore, the MICE industry (meetings, incentives, conferences and events, i.e. business tourism) is expected to recover last (after domestic, then regional and then international travel). This contradicts some of the expectations of the second webinar session, but it makes sense, as the MICE industry is characterized by large groups of people at a meeting, conference or event. Especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in this industry will therefore be the businesses that may experience the hardest hit as they need to hold out the longest. Meetings are expected to come back in digital and hybrid form first. The MICE industry may take a lot longer to return than many tourism businesses expect.

This trend will also affect domestic business tourism. Therefore, collaboration with local economy and industry will be essential, as well as creating a deliberate strategy to procure the event management from small businesses, so that these can sustain themselves.

Large events with significant budgets need to pair event organisers to spread the opportunities. Deliberate attempts must be made to create opportunities for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Therefore, it will be essential to educate, lobby and appeal to event owners to choose a spread of SMEs rather than single companies. All companies are in the same situation, but the majority of companies are SMEs. But, research, knowledge creation and expertise gathering are at the centre of many MICE events. Therefore, the MICE industry needs to become a more customer centred niche.

In the meantime, in order to stay afloat, the tourism industry needs to try to maintain cash flow and cut down on unnecessary expenses. They need to identify and eliminate areas of waste in order to stretch the Rand. Redirected funding is going to be critical- opening doors to fewer people, but at least paying clients is a better objective to set than large huge event plans or campaigns. Incremental changes are crucial and reconsideration of all expenditures should be spent on tourism technology and perhaps going paperless would be a good opportunity.

SMEs were founded on the concept of collaboration. The tourism industry will need to collaborate and share in benefits, to be able to survive financially, otherwise it will take longer to recover. As the proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together." By collaboration, tourism businesses must make use of local skills and resources to rebuild the local economy. To be able to maintain sustainability within a domestic market, tourism businesses need to offer competitive prices, but not international prices. The challenge lies in being competitive and sustainable at the same time.

Initial prognoses indicated that for the first six months following the end of the lockdown period, South Africans will remain within their own country and travel domestically. Since domestic markets are expected to recover first on the potential road to recovery, the local tourism businesses must offer value for money products and services in collaboration with their partners and create networks to put together safe and trusted experiences and products. They must re-establish the trust of future travellers, as this is vital in the travel decision. Domestic travel needs to be safe, easy, local and flexible. Local businesses will need to offer locally geared prices for travel experiences to make travel affordable for local travellers.

Only once international borders start opening up again, international prices should be re-introduced. Until the crisis is over, the time should be used productively for building and sharing skills, identifying new opportunities, building new networks and collaboration, improving connections and building a new and better brand for South African tourism: Stay home today, travel tomorrow. People will think about their first trip away. Tourism businesses need to identify what they crave and need.

As South African tourism industry is experiencing unprecedented challenges, the path to the recovery of the museum, heritage, arts and cultural sector will remain very challenging. The declaration of the National State of

Disaster has had dire implications for all and future lockdowns have not been excluded as Covid-19 is unpredictable. The following lessons can be learned:

1. Greater collaboration with local partners is going to be key to the road to recovery.
2. As domestic markets are likely to recover first, local communities and people coming out of lockdown will be searching for nearby local, relaxing, memorable and affordable experiences in small groups with trusted loved ones.
3. The increased use of digital media, tourism technology and online offerings will allow for better communication and engagement.
4. Museums and art galleries must commence now with post-Covid plans, to inspire and entice future visitors to enjoy collections, galleries and exhibitions as a relaxing experience not necessarily a learning one. Tourist escapism will be crucial.