

Webinar: Gauteng Tourism Authority reignites sector confidence

As a first step towards reaffirming solidarity and the gradual and eventual reopening of the tourism sector, the Gauteng Tourism Authority (GTA) launched its first webinar in a four-part series of targeted engagements. Guests and attendees of the live interactive event included provincial destination marketing executives, Gauteng's signature attractions and product owners, tour operators as well as a plethora of other key role players.



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Occupying the stage was the sharing of information, current challenges and success stories with a view to create models of a post-Covid-19 tourism sector.

The overriding tone of the province's sector was one of solidarity both from the top tier tourism trade and owners to the smaller township members of the sector. All were united in affirming that Gauteng will rise again, albeit under different and uncertain circumstances in a bid to gain its growth under the COVID19 pandemic. "We have to adapt to the new normal even as it is unknown at the moment," said Fezile Ngqobe, acting CEO for GTA. "What we do know is that as a sector, we are all in this together."

Participants agreed that the safety and protocols needed for the safe reopening are important and that profits should not be the only concern for the sector as these are not mutually exclusive choices. The reopening of restaurants, casinos and hotels have also spelled confidence in the recovery process, a factor seen as a starting point to stem the tide of businesses folding.

Double-digit growth forecasts undertaken in the first quarter of the year have fallen flat alongside the rapid closure of borders and travel restrictions. "These restrictions now mean more local tourism will be needed to supplement the loss of revenues from international tourists," said CEO at Constitution Hill - one of Gauteng's most important heritage sites.

Local travel importance

Some 120 economies now have some sort of restriction in place, ranging from outright bans to selective geographical

tourism, effectively raising the need for local travel to even higher importance.

The transition under Covid-19 to a digital world to create and satisfy experiences has become a major drive for many operators like Constitution Hill, Liliesleaf Farm and other entities who are now embracing the role that technology, through virtual tours and information sharing can play.

"We are repackaging our strategy for visitors to include more digital offerings as we will have to limit physical numbers as social distancing may well be with us into 2022 to manage infections brought about by large groups of people, adds Mark Hands who is the CEO of Emerald Resorts.

Enhancing visitor experiences

The embracing of the new normal has also meant more innovative ways are being sought to enhance the visitor experience and support businesses. Liliesleaf Farm, a veritable source of the liberation struggle information and the historical value of the farm provided valuable insights into the effects of Covid-19 on their business model, noting that downscaling has become a part of their new way of doing business.

Founder and CEO of the heritage site honouring the South African liberation movement, Nicholas Wolpe, shared that: "There now have over 1,400 hours of archive material that we will be taking online and through virtual tours and information banks that can be accessed off-site."

Altogether, the participants agreed that the rise in tourism must be managed through a careful risk-adjusted strategy and recovery measures that show innovation and care for the visitor. The new normal is all about creativity as well as ensuring the sustainability of the sector under the pandemic.

As low volumes are an expected feature of the new normal, this could place further stress on operators and owners to stay afloat. The GTA has also assured the sector of its continued support and solidarity, citing its model as supporting an industry that is driven by business and communities to ensure labour absorption.

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