

Trade show celebrates tourism's golden opportunities

Indaba 2007, South African Tourism's principle marketing platform, kicked off this past weekend in a colourful ceremony which celebrated South Africa's tourism successes, and showcased the golden opportunities that the tourism industry brings to the country, its economy and its people.

Indaba is the one place and time in the year that the entire South African tourism industry is united in the pursuit of a common objective – to sell SA effectively in order to grow the industry and the economy.

Held at the International Convention Centre auditorium in Durban, the event was attended by the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Marthinus Van Schalkwyk, the CEO of South African Tourism, Moeketsi Mosola, the premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Sibusiso Ndebele and the mayor of eThekweni Obed Mlaba plus a host of local and international media, buyers and exhibitors.

Increase in contribution to GDP

In his keynote address, which was integrated into the ceremony in a 'talk show' format, Van Schalkwyk said: "Tourism has been recognised at the highest possible level for its significant impact on the economy. The industry's contribution to the GDP has increased from 4.6% in 1993 to 8.3% in 2006. We are now looking to increase our GDP contribution to 12% by 2014.

"Tourism brings in over R66 billion per annum to the economy and contributes over half a million jobs... and the industry just keeps growing," he said.

Last year, almost 8.4 million foreign nationals visited SA. This was easily the highest number of arrivals South Africa has ever experienced, and it represented an impressive 13.9% increase over the previous year (2005). According to Van Schalkwyk, what is most encouraging is the fact that increases were realised across all key regions.

In order for the tourism industry to achieve its objectives, and contribute towards the alleviation of poverty, the minister explained that there were key challenges which the industry has to address as a matter of urgency. These are skills development and transformation.

On the issue of skills development, the minister commented: "There is serious lack of skilled managers from previously disadvantaged backgrounds." He also cited a lack of foreign language skills among operators and agents as a cause for concern.

"Now that we know where the challenges lie," he said, "a strategy for dealing with these will need to be finalised. Moving from strategy into action and from words into action will be our main focus over the next five years. This effort will be spearheaded by the revised National Skills Development Strategy and sector skills plan."

Also addressing Indaba delegates, Moeketsi Mosola, CEO of South African Tourism, said: "In order to continue to grow and thrive, we have learnt to be responsive to global market trends. We know that 'Word of Mouth' is highly influential and that Internet use is growing at a phenomenal rate and are therefore harnessing the power of these two mediums in most of our markets and using them to make relevant information available and accessible to our consumers and trade partners.

Mosola emphasised that South African Tourism had listened to and learnt from the trade, and cited the trade extranet, meetings and trade familiarisation trips, and sales toolkits as key interventions that are delivering results.

He also announced that South African Tourism's Events Division would be set up to focus on leveraging global, regional and national events to drive numbers and spend. This division will be fully operational later this year.

2007 Welcome Awards

The ceremony ended on a high note with the presentation of the 2007 Welcome Awards. These awards, which are in their second year, recognise the tourism businesses that have made their mark in terms of service excellence and innovative product delivery by turning holidays into life-changing experiences.

The awards are given in four categories: tour operators, accommodation, travel agencies and tour guides. All the short-list finalists were present at the ceremony, where Velile Ndlumbini, a freelance township tourism guide who specialises in tour of Mdantsane in the Eastern Cape, walked away with the Grand Prix prize. Gallivanter Tours 2000 won first prize in the tour operator's category, while Tumie's Bed and Breakfast scooped the accommodation category accolade. In the travel agency category, Travel with Flair received top honours.

Commenting on the awards, Mosola congratulated the winners and urged them to continue to strive for excellence and to embrace this and every opportunity to inspire and motivate South Africa's emerging tourism business owners, especially those in the all-important SMME sector. The SMME sector has been widely acknowledged as the category with the most potential to grow a sustainable tourism industry in SA – one which creates employment, alleviates poverty and empowers the people of SA's people.

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