

From cultivation to cup: South Africa must brew up rooibos tea tourism

Issued by [North-West University \(NWU\)](#)

30 Apr 2024

- *Rooibos tea, which is indigenous to South Africa, is a significant part of the country's cultural tapestry and holds many tourism opportunities.*
- *By concentrating on rooibos – from its cultivation to its deep cultural and historical roots – the authenticity of the tourist experience can be enhanced.*
- *Rooibos tea is an exceptional South African product that has captivated the global market, reaching over 30 countries. It is growing in popularity due to its health and wellness properties.*



It does not take the Mad Hatter sharing a cup with Alice down in Wonderland to know that few things soothe the soul as much as a steaming serving of tea. But, as Prof Martinette Kruger from the North-West University (NWU) explains, South Africa's indigenous tea is all that, and more: "Rooibos tea is more than just a beverage; it is a cultural treasure."

Kruger, who forms part of the research unit Tourism Research in Economics, Environs and Society (TREES), is currently conducting research in collaboration with Curtin University (Perth, Australia) that looks to uncover and develop the numerous tourism possibilities that rooibos tea holds. The study is designed to explore both the supply and demand sides of the rooibos tourism sector, and also to identify the industry's challenges and opportunities.

"Rooibos tea is a significant part of South Africa's cultural tapestry, being indigenous to our nation and thriving mainly in the Cederberg Range, a part of the globally recognised Cape Floristic Region. This area, a Unesco world heritage site and one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, is home to the unique rooibos tea. In a landmark recognition, the European Union awarded rooibos tea the prestigious Protected Designation of Origin status in 2021, making it the first African product to receive such recognition. This designation not only secures the South African origin of rooibos, but also celebrates our rich agricultural heritage, making rooibos tea a compelling attraction for international tourists," says Kruger, adding that: "Rooibos is more than just a tea; it is a gateway to experiencing South Africa's unique flora and fauna, shaped by its fire-dependent ecology and fascinating geological history. The region itself, known for its breathtaking landscapes, archaeological richness and distinctive biological diversity, offers vast potential for eco and adventure tourism."

Two significant milestones that serve as a foundation for the expansion of rooibos tea as a lure for tourists were the establishment of the Rooibos Route in 2017 (although this endeavour has stagnated in recent years), and the 2019 Access and Benefit-sharing (ABS) agreement, which ensured that the indigenous Khoi-Khoi and San communities receive fair benefits from the commercial use of rooibos. Then there is the popularity of the region that rooibos calls home.

"The Cederberg region, a popular destination attracting over 70,000 visitors annually, showcases a significant opportunity for sustainable development through tea tourism, particularly focusing on our native rooibos. Most of the region's 57,000 residents live in rural settings, and tourism is a critical part of their livelihood, contributing more than half of their net income. By integrating tea tourism, we are looking at creating unique, culturally rich tourism experiences that leverage existing agricultural practices and the region's natural beauty," Kruger explains.

Then there is the product's reach: "Rooibos tea is an exceptional South African product that has captivated the global market, reaching over 30 countries. It is celebrated for its unique flavour, numerous health benefits and caffeine-free properties. Rooibos has successfully been integrated into various products, from cosmetics to culinary flavourings. This versatility speaks to its appeal as a wellness product. Moreover, the rooibos industry is vital to our economy, supporting over 5,000 livelihoods. Integrating rooibos into South Africa's tourism offerings is an exciting opportunity to combine cultural heritage and economic development. By leveraging rooibos as a unique element of our national identity, we can create multifaceted tourism experiences that resonate on a global scale."

Kruger further states that – given its growing popularity and the increasing global interest in health and wellness – rooibos is perfectly positioned to be a cornerstone of South Africa's wellness tourism. Through establishing rooibos-related routes, as well as incorporating tea cafes and educational tours into the tourism package, the tourism sector can showcase the entire journey of rooibos tea.

"We want to show the process from leaf to cup. Moreover, we plan to use Geographical Indication (GI) and Designation of Origin (DO) branding to market rooibos more effectively. These labels connect the quality and reputation of rooibos directly to its South African roots. Such strategies have been successful in other contexts, such as wine tourism. Rooibos tea is a beloved beverage and a symbol of South African heritage and biodiversity. Our research is dedicated to exploring the full potential of rooibos tea, aiming to enhance and differentiate our region's tourism offerings. By focusing on rooibos, we are not just promoting a product, but celebrating a rich cultural legacy. This effort is about creating experiences that resonate deeply with locals and visitors, showcasing the cultural and economic importance of rooibos tea to our nation."

With that, it is teatime.

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