

# Tourism SMMEs: Looking for opportunity in uncertainty

There's no doubt that 2021 has got off to a bumpy start. Globally, January has seen more of the same - lockdowns, border closures and travel restrictions. In South Africa we're grappling with a blanket alcohol ban, curfew, a virulent second wave of infections - and warnings of a third wave to come.



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It's hard not to feel overwhelmed. But while 2020 saw the overnight shutdown of the travel, tourism and hospitality industries, Jurni CEO, Dr Nomvuselelo Songelwa believes that 2021 will usher in a new way of travelling, opportunities amid the uncertainty, and the space to develop new tourism products and services.

"Socially-distanced travel, safe travel and more conscious and sustainable travel are here to stay," says Songelwa, "And while change and uncertainty are terrifying – especially for those who saw their incomes disappear in 2020 – it's important for SMMEs to identify the opportunities and grab hold of them where they can."

For Songelwa this means taking the opportunity to:

## 1. Reflect and build a better offering

Although South Africa's tourism industry is heavily reliant on international travel, the reality is that with travel restrictions still in place around the world, domestic tourism will make up the bulk of travel for the foreseeable future. South Africans will hopefully begin exploring their country in new ways, which gives SMMEs the chance to reflect on their business, improve their offering – and present it to a South African audience for polishing.

Health and safety are going to remain key. The Department of Tourism has just released their norms and standards for the safe operations of the tourism sector in the context of Covid-19 and beyond. According to Songelwa, SMMEs need to take the time to familiarise themselves with the norms and standards and ensure they are able to meet the requirements as laid out in the gazette. It's the perfect time to iron out any kinks.

## 2. Find your niche

Part of this reflection might be finding your niche. In a post-Covid world, travellers will be looking to travel destinations, operators and establishments that make it easy to maintain social distancing.

Niched travel design is an emerging trend as customers avoid traditionally crowded spots and large group tours. Think off-the-beaten-track destinations, small group tours, solo travel, private transport, and highly-niched escapes like birding tours, glamping, slack-packing hikes, photography holidays and biking adventures – where travellers are less likely to come into contact with others.

In niche travel, price becomes less of a driver too as clients are willing to pay for the expertise, guaranteed health & safety and socially-distanced 'bubble' offered by niche operators.

### **3. Update your tech – and exist online**

Of course, 'off-the-beaten-track' does not mean 'off the grid'. If Covid-19 taught us anything it's that travellers need to remain in touch with the outside world and are wary of being caught off guard in terms of border closures, new travel restrictions and the like.

Establishments and operators need to keep their clients up-to-date with travel information – offering a level of comfort and peace of mind in changing times. This means connectivity, even in the remotest of locations.

It also means leveraging technology in order to reach new customers. "Today's travellers are 100% online," says Songelwa. "SMMEs need to look closely at their online marketing initiatives and booking processes. From enquiry to booking and payment it should be as seamless as possible. The new Jurni booking platform allows smaller players to extend their reach by putting them in front of a wider audience and we're committed to working closely with SMMEs so they can use technology to remain connected, relevant and visible."

### **4. Develop your brand**

Social media platforms, and in particular pages and communities, are playing an increasingly important role as information sources for travellers. People share information, first-hand experiences, reviews and photographs across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and more.

Now is the time to develop your social media game, build your brand and become an authoritative voice on your region. Share stories, photographs and other things to do in your province – even the efforts undertaken to make your establishment, operation and area safe for travel.

### **5. Start a network, join an association – and keep in touch**

Being an SMME in South Africa can be a lonely place. Reach out to other tourism SMMEs in your region and see if you can join forces to create a tourism route. While you build your brand, share other tourism experiences and excursions;

celebrate other offerings, and champion your region as a whole.

"More than that," says Songelwa, "Join a tourism association, ask questions and share knowledge. Let 2021 be a year of opportunity and growth."

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