

Accessibility hampering domestic tourism growth - Indaba 2011

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11 May 2011

As South Africa begins working hard towards achieving its target of becoming a top tourism destination by 2020, including increasing the number of domestic travellers to 18 million from 14.6 million, some observers remain sceptical about the feasibility of the project, stating that the issue of accessibility is too critical to be ignored.

Domestic airlines tickets are too costly, graded and ungraded accommodation costs an arm and a leg, car rental operators and tourism attraction sites charge exorbitant fees... These, among others, are just some of the major obstacles hampering the ordinary person on the street from travelling regularly.

"Tourism is for the rich people, both black and white, and not for people like us because everything is too expensive," domestic worker Mbali Dlamini (32) told Bizcommunity.com in Durban in the vicinity of the International Convention Centre, where the destiny of SA tourism was being discussed.

"My wish is to take my kids to the Kruger National Park to see how lions and giraffes live, but I cannot afford it," Dlamini admitted.

Excessive costs

Some lament that even the fees charged by government-managed tourist sites such as Robben Island are 'exaggerated'. Likewise, many people do not consider a trip by cable car up Table Mountain cheap.

Domestic trips in SA decreased by 2% in 2010 with 29.7 million trips taken, compared to 30.2 million in 2009, according to official statistics. About 43% of the SA adult population travelled, translating to approximately 13.4 million adults.

Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal are the major source markets for domestic tourism, and are also the major beneficiaries of domestic tourism.

SA Tourism acknowledged that economic constraints remain the biggest barrier to domestic travel, with 31% of respondents in a recent survey mentioning that they cannot afford to travel.

Despite being Africa's biggest economy and a BRICS member, SA remains one of the world's most unequal societies, with the majority of the population surviving on less than R20 (about US\$3) per day, while a minority - high-profile politicians and well-connected business people - indulge in luxury parties and undertake expensive trips abroad with their families and

friends.

Nothing is free

Some delegates at the Indaba 2011 even suggested that the government should start subsidising tourism packages to get encourage domestic travel.

Asked whether the government was aware of complaints raised by ordinary people regarding the pricing of domestic tourism packages, L M Makhubela, national department of tourism DG, said: "I want to make it clear that the government will not intervene in this and anyone who feels like doing something on the pricing is free to do so.

"When I came to this department, I heard people talking about social tourism, which I believe doesn't exist. I'm worried about insinuations in this conference that there are freebies in tourism because nothing is free. Somebody has to pay.

"We want to avoid a situation whereby some people would start holding violent protests to say that they want to go and stay in a five-star hotel but they don't have the money.

"I also want you to know that the developmental state has many challenges."

Roshene Singh, chief marketing officer at SA Tourism, suggested that, one week during every Tourism Month, local people should be taken free of charge to view the destinations of their provinces to give them a sense of what is on offer in terms of tourism attractions.

"That's an added-value we are looking at," she added. "We have to make it easy for people to get there, and we need to move forward."

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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