

Digital gateways the new normal for SA travellers

By [Benjamin Boesch](#)

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The recent move to Level 1 lockdown and the announcement around South Africa's (SA) removal from the United Kingdom's 'red list' is very likely to have spurred a surge in online travel bookings.



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While this journey towards digital customer experiences began a long time ago, physical distancing and lockdown constraints during the pandemic have further accelerated this trend - so much so that planning travel experiences from our devices is now a part of everyday life.

With digital customer experiences progressing rapidly, the travel industry is witnessing sweeping changes in consumer preferences, with new touchless solutions providing the assurance and comfort needed to reignite international travel.

Emergence of discerning digital customers

As we start to recover from the global lockdown in 2020, the shift in consumer behaviour is increasingly evident. A Bain and Company study on Southeast Asia, which was conducted in partnership with Google and Temasek and based on Kantar data, showed that over a third of consumers were new to digital platforms, yet nine out of 10 said that they intended to continue using those platforms after the pandemic.

Closer to home, Deloitte Africa recently commissioned a South African survey on online shopping in an effort to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing online shopper behaviour. The research found that the frequency of online shopping was expected to increase in the coming years - with two in three respondents indicating they use online platforms more in 2021.

While the report's findings applied specifically to online shopping, the consumer behavioural pattern that indicates a growing comfort with digital can be extrapolated across multiple facets within the local digital economy.

Wider acceptance of digital tools

People from different age groups, geographies and backgrounds are comfortable with digital tools. Birthday celebrations and family reunions on video calling apps, or same-day delivery providers, emerged as a lifeline and routine for a world living in lockdown.

These cross-industry shifts have prompted companies like VFS Global, the world's largest visa and consular service provider, to revisit its customer proposition. While global lock-down restrictions may be lifting, health and safety considerations are of greater relevance, and so the move towards online experiences will continue.

Holders of the South African passport are familiar with the process of applying for visas. For this service, which used to be strictly regarded as an in-person activity, the availability of contactless options is attracting new takers. From document pre-checks or digital payments, remote submission of applications, doorstep visa services, or passport pick-up and drop services, the pandemic has heightened the need to add more convenience.

In this context, VFS Global's Visa at your Doorstep (VAYD) is a key milestone because it empowers customers to apply for visas like calling in for food or groceries from the comforts of their homes. Even critical information such as biometric enrolment could be offered from any location.

The SA government is also shifting online, thanks to factors such as safety and convenience. Amid calls for a digital vaccine passport, it recently announced that a digital vaccine certificate would soon be introduced, complementing citizens' physical vaccination cards.

Global mobility is driven by innovation

Another critical dependency on emerging technology would be ensuring effective and integrated partnerships between the private sector and border control.

This would be imperative for resumption of leisure travel and global events. Over the past 18 months, we have witnessed innovations such as the International Air Transport Association's (IATA) Travel Pass, a digital passport for verifiable test and vaccination details, the UK government's NHS App, which proves your vaccine status, and France's TousAntiCovid app, which houses its health pass.

Given the potential of the travel sector, as an economic driver and catalyst for social development goals, seamless adoption of digital technologies by the entire ecosystem is pivotal. These technologies enable frictionless solutions for health and safety needs of travellers and provide the much-needed fillip to local businesses and economies. A sharp focus on innovation, therefore, is the only way to regain pre-Covid momentum in global mobility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Boesch is Chief Digital Officer at VFS Global.

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