

# Appealing to the youth market: Why younger travellers will lead SA's tourism recovery

By [Tim Louw](#)

29 Jul 2020

As South Africa's travel and tourism sector contemplates the future, it's clear that the country will need to appeal to intrepid, adventurous and more socially- and environmentally-conscious travellers - with the 18-34 category at the heart of its post-Covid recovery.

The World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) predicts that younger travellers in the 18-35 age group, who appear to be less vulnerable to Covid-19, will be among the first to begin travelling once again.



In truth, this group has been flexing their travel muscle for years. According to the South African Tourism 2019 Annual Report, six out of 10 international tourists visiting South Africa in 2019 were below the age of 34 years. With 10.2 million international visitors recorded last year, close to six million fall into the youth category.

The domestic report portrays a slightly different picture, with the 18-34 age group accounting for 45.5% of domestic holiday-makers. This is still a significant number – and a group which can't be ignored.

## The changing face of youth travel

*“ It's no surprise that youth travel is on the rise. Travel allows young people the opportunity to spread their wings, gain confidence, meet new people, learn new languages, explore different cultures and develop an entirely new outlook on the world. They're a formidable group – with money in their pocket. ”*

Research by WYSE Travel Confederation and UNWTO indicated that the total value of the international youth travel market was almost \$190bn in 2009. By 2018, that figure had risen to more than \$333bn. Significantly, young people often take much longer trips than most other tourists (52 days was the global average in 2017) and they are spending more on

average too – often in local communities, which means they have a more direct and positive economic impact on the communities they visit.

Yes, young people are setting off in their numbers and a 2019 study by [booking.com](https://www.booking.com) shows that their travelling behaviour is becoming more and more 'conscious', with the majority of millennial and Gen Z travellers looking for sustainable experiences to offset their trip, places to stay that reduce their plastic usage and experiences that contribute to their 'sustainability credentials'.

The survey of 163 million verified guest reviews and 21,500 global travellers across 29 countries found that young travellers want to broaden their knowledge, enrich their lives (and those around them) and that single-use plastics will continue to be a hot topic, environmental concerns will turn into greater environmental action; and that travellers will want to add more purpose to their trips by learning life skills or giving back to locals through volunteering.



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South Africa is well-positioned to take advantage of this trend, indeed a 2020 survey by Tourlane places Cape Town among the best cities worldwide for an eco-friendly getaway.

But will South Africa's travel and tourism survive long enough to take advantage?

## Tourism's protracted lockdown: the grim reality

Unfortunately, with domestic leisure travel still prohibited under alert Level 3 restrictions and international travel looking increasingly unlikely until 2021, the outlook for South Africa's travel and tourism sector remains bleak.

It's all well and good to promote youth travel, but will South Africa's 'youth travel' offerings and establishments survive?

A recent survey undertaken by Satsa's Youth Chapter polled various organisations across South Africa (including tour operators, guides, accommodation establishments, language schools, volunteer organisations, international intern bodies and attractions) to gauge the ability of South Africa's youth travel market to withstand a protracted lockdown.



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## 58 of many

The 58 participating enterprises (with an average number of 18 employees per company) give a stark snapshot of the current situation.

Although one in four respondents remain hopeful that they will not close down completely, many remain unsure – with 44.2% indicating that they will be forced to close between July (10.2%), August (6.8%), September (6.8%), October (8.5%), November (6.8%) and December (5.1%) if the situation does not change. Critically, 60% of the respondents rely on inbound travel, which generates over 91% of the revenue (R505m).

And while opening the borders will certainly help, the industry faces challenges around sentiment (how well has the Covid-19 pandemic been handled in South Africa? Is it safe to travel?), seasonality (if borders don't open by September 2020, the country will miss prime season between November and February) and the cost of air travel – another major consideration for youth travellers.

Barriers to travel, opening dates and access to funding are all important considerations – and time is of the essence. If we can get inbound tourism up and running as soon as possible and get access to funding with reasonable terms in place, many more businesses would be able to survive.

*“ The challenge now is to look for opportunity among the ashes. To improve and innovate. Let's consider new travel options, including long-term visas for students, digital nomads and interns. Or implement visas on arrival for more countries – with an e-visa system for our top 15 source markets. ”*

Recovery requires an overhaul of current systems and thinking, with a willingness and appetite for change.



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## Appealing to the 18-35 market

It's dangerous (and pointless), to make broad assumptions when looking at the youth market. It's not helpful to label all youth travellers as millennials, for example, or perpetuate the view that youth travellers are the preserve of the budget or backpacker segment.

As Jabulani Debedu, senior consultant with advisory firm BDO South Africa, stated in their Youth Travel report published in August last year:

*“ The youth market is far more nuanced. While it does tend to focus on affordable tourism products, it is, in fact, part of the travel mainstream and should not be consigned to the periphery. ”*

Skift's millennial and Gen Z Traveller 2019 survey goes even further, dividing the category into young Gen Z (16-18); old Gen Z (19-22); young millennials (23-30); and old millennials (31-38).

The groups share commonalities (for example, they prioritise experiences and are tech-savvy) but, once again, there are nuances at play. Young millennials have more in common with old Gen Zs than with their older counterparts. Each group has different priorities and are at different stages in their lives (with young Gen Zs just finding their feet), they consume and use social media differently (Instagram vs Facebook), use technology differently (smartphone vs other devices) – and travel

differently.



### 3 ways to appeal to the youth travel market

2 Jul 2019



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In other words, any travel agent, operator or establishment looking to attract the youth travel market, needs to offer solutions that cater to the different needs and preferences of a dynamic group of travellers, including a strong social media presence, optimised website, simple (and fast) online booking solutions, interesting and unique holiday packages, competitive prices – and a youth-focused offering appealing to social-and-environmentally conscious travellers.

When South Africa emerges from this crisis, survival will depend on how quickly international (inbound) visitors can and will return to our shores – and the numbers involved. The opportunity exists in sustainable trips; volunteer tourism; reducing red tape and regulations for digital nomads; different and unusual accommodation options; and unbeatable experiences. We just need to make it the other side.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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