

Visa rules hurt SA during peak season

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Initial indications are that the tourism industry failed to take full advantage of the traditionally busy December period because of the "absurd" visa regulations, the Southern African Tourism Services Association claims.



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The association, which represents inbound tourism services companies, said it had received information from the UK press and some travellers who were turned away at various airports because they did not meet the visa requirements, particularly the birth certificate requirement.

Awaiting rule revisions

In October the government announced the easing of some of the more onerous visa rules. Inbound travellers accompanied by minor children were no longer required to produce an unabridged birth certificate, and prospective visitors did not have to apply for visas in person. But the revised rules are yet to come into effect. The Department of Home Affairs has said it will take at least three months to effect the changes.

Southern African Tourism Services Association CE David Frost said it was "absurd" that the revisions had not yet come into force.

"Why did home affairs choose to wait three months? These regulations have caused irreparable damage ... we should have taken advantage of the weak rand to grow the sector, but the birth certificate requirement still stands," he said.

Reports last month were that between 10 and 20 families were daily denied travel to South Africa from London's Heathrow Airport, on the basis that they did not meet the visa requirements.

Mr Frost said due to the weak rand, visitor numbers should have been up 30% over December. Official visitor numbers are expected to be released by Statistics SA within the next three months.

Leveraging the weak rand

Democratic Alliance tourism spokesman James Vos said last week the government's tardiness was costing the economy billions of rand, as tourists did not want to travel to SA because of the "difficult and cumbersome" requirements.

"With the rand being at its lowest point in 14 years, SA's tourism industry should be thriving, but it is not because onerous visa regulations are repelling tourists' interest in our country. If the (African National Congress) government acted to relax the visa regulations, as it promised to do in October, festive season inbound travel could have been seamless and booming," Mr Vos said.

But home affairs said last week reports of UK-based travellers experiencing problems when entering SA because of immigration regulations were "baseless and inaccurate". It said negative reports had emerged due to the misrepresentation of facts.

Not all doom and gloom

Meanwhile, Cape Town Tourism said yesterday major attractions in the city had noted "favourable attention" during the season so far. Cape Town International Airport reported a 13% increase in visitor arrivals at the airport in November, with close to 430,000 passengers arriving.

"The exchange rate is extremely favourable for international visitors, and it's also making more locals have 'staycations', travelling as tourists in their own city rather than splashing out on overseas trips" so a positive impact on the statistics is cautiously anticipated once the figures are released at the end of January," said Cape Town Tourism spokeswoman Nicole Biondi.

Source: Business Day

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