



DEREK HANEKOM INTERVIEW

Tourism is reviving after coming through a ‘bad year’

Linda Ensor

SA is experiencing a bumper tourism year as the easing of visa restrictions, a weak rand and the disappearance of Ebola from the continent have removed previous barriers to tourists visiting the country.

The government is working with CEOs to find ways to boost the tourism industry. The Department of Tourism wants growth to be inclusive and last week started an incubator in the Pilanesberg area – the first of a number across the country – to help about 50 small businesses develop.

Foreign arrivals climbed

about 24% in the first eight months to August. The overall figure including visitors from the rest of Africa, rose about 14%. Tourism Minister Derek Hanekom said in an interview on Monday.

Strong growth in numbers from China – up 66% in August, compared with August 2015 – and India is encouraging. Also, a 300% increase a month in visitors from Saudi Arabia is welcome, Hanekom says, as these visitors come in the off-peak season. This keeps the industry afloat when tourists stay away.

The UK, Germany and US remain the three biggest markets for SA.

Forward bookings are looking good. The months of December and January are big tourism months for UK visitors, the minister adds.

He cautions, however, that growth is coming off the low base of 2015, when onerous visa requirements and Ebola acted as a deterrent, particularly in China. It was a “bad year”, Hanekom says, with tourism declining 6.8%. The visa regulations, which caused an industry storm, required that prospective tourists submit travel documents in person at a South African embassy or consulate, as well as unabridged birth certificates for children travelling with them.



Derek Hanekom

The effect was severe and the Tourism Business Council of SA informed Parliament’s tourism committee last week that, because of the unabridged birth certificate requirement,

13,246 people were denied boarding to SA between June 2015 and July 2016.

China was hard hit by the requirement that those applying for visas submit applications and documents in person. With an estimated 120-million Chinese tourists travelling abroad annually, China is an important market for SA to develop, Hanekom says.

In addition to the turnaround in these factors, the deterioration in the rand made SA a value-for-money proposition in 2016.

Hanekom says the requirement for unabridged birth certificates for minors has not yet been abolished, as

decided by Cabinet, because it has been included in the immigration regulations of the Department of Home Affairs. The tourist industry is not happy that the draft regulations published for public comment do not include this amendment, which he hopes will be incorporated in the final draft.

Hanekom says the bottlenecks at OR Tambo International Airport in dealing with processing biometric data are under discussion with the Department of Home Affairs. The delays are causing reputational damage to SA as people are missing their connecting flights.

The Tourism Business

Council of SA reported to the committee that between October 1 and October 18 visitors had to queue for between 90 minutes and four hours; 800 passengers missed connecting flights. International migration service counters were 40%-staffed, on average.

“Due to these missed connections, airlines have lost an estimated R1.6m over the 18-day period. Clearly, our migration office is under-equipped and understaffed, costing our tourism sector and economy millions,” DA tourism spokesman James Vos said after the committee meeting. ensorl@businesslive.co.za