

Airbnb in Africa for the long haul

By  Juanita Pienaar

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Chris Lehane, head of global policy and public affairs for Airbnb recently visited South Africa to sign a collaboration agreement with the City of Cape Town to promote the benefits of people-to-people tourism for Cape Town residents and their communities, as well as promoting Cape Town across the world as a unique travel destination. The online marketplace and hospitality service also announced a \$1m investment over the next three years to promote community-led tourism projects in Africa.



Chris Lehane, head of global policy and public affairs for Airbnb © [Airbnb website](#).

“We’re here for the long haul,” Lehane told me when I sat down to chat with him about Airbnb’s plans to expand into Africa. “We’re not just in Cape Town. We don’t really have any choice but to go big in Africa because our mission is ‘Belong Anywhere’ and if we’re not belonging in Africa, then we’re not doing our mission.”

Here Lehane elaborates more on what these plans entail, comments on some of the travel and tourism trends coming up in 2018 and explains how a global brand such as Airbnb remains relevant, resilient and innovative.

■ ***Can you comment on some of the top disruptor trends we should look out for in 2018 with regards to travel and tourism in particular?***

Broadly, I think that there are larger challenges in the world right now because I think technology has gone pretty far ahead of where the government is and impacting the economy. A lot of stuff, I think, isn’t aligned and I think a lot of anxiety and stress that you see with people is a result of those sectors not necessarily being aligned. In particular, technology replacing and displacing people. As well as technology platforms themselves taking responsibility for the roles they play in society.

I obviously drink the Kool-Aid and I'm a big believer in the Airbnb model but I think our model is a little bit different and our house makes 97% of the money. We're **democratising capitalism**. We're spreading it in different types of ways and ultimately, we're using technology to connect people and create that economic opportunity but also connect them so they actually have offline experiences. They are not living in a digital bubble. President Obama when he gave us his farewell address, back in January, in Chicago talks about some of the challenges that we're facing because people are living in a digital bubble. Only interacting with people like themselves. What we do is actually different. We connect people offline from different backgrounds. So, I do think we're bit different from the other technology platforms in that way.

“ We want to use technology not just for technology's sake, not so that people can live in a digital bubble, not to replace or displace people but to provide a tool to help people achieve economic empowerment. ”



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Robin Fredericks 26 Oct 2017



Specifically, with regards to the trends for the new year, what we're seeing and specifically in terms of Cape Town is that millennial travellers are going to get bigger and bigger and I think they're about 56% of the travellers here. They are going to be 75%+ of the key consumer demographic over the next 10 years. So, they are really going to be shaping a lot of the trends out there – what products and services succeed. They, in particular, are looking for what we would call, **authentic experiences or real experiences**. They want to be in a real neighbourhood, with real people, having a real experience, living like a local.

And then, within that, you see that people are now travelling based on their passions. Passion for food, art, history, wildlife. There's different types of things that play into one's passions. I think that's one of the reasons Airbnb is succeeding so much in Africa, in South Africa and especially here in Cape Town. There are more hosts/listings in Cape Town than any other place in Africa. And it's because people are having those authentic type of experiences. So, we're taking all the natural beauty that already exists here but then connecting with real people.

📌 **Can you elaborate on Airbnb's plans of further expanding into Africa?**

There is a couple of things that we're going to be doing immediately. We're doing this \$1m commitment and that \$1m commitment will help us to expand into 15 townships in South Africa. We eventually want to go bigger in 2019. But for 2018 we're going to add 15 more townships and we're going to develop host communities similar to what we have in Khayelitsha.



Airbnb announces \$1m investment in community-led tourism projects in Africa

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Secondly, we're doing the Tourism Summit and I think a big part of that Tourism Summit is the focus on company packages and exclusive tours. We can look at what we can do to make sure the technology is acceptable and working as well as possible - the way people are actually living in Africa.

Thirdly, South Africa is amongst our most successful markets since we launched. We launched Experiences with 12 cities

and we're up to 50 cities at this point but Cape Town has outperformed virtually every city out there. And I think it's because this market, in particular, lends itself to those experiences.

🔴 ***Airbnb is one of the biggest brands in the world today. How do you remain relevant, resilient and innovative on such a huge global scale? How are you getting it right?***

It begins with us meeting with you every time we're here. I think one must stay true to one's mission. We're a community-based brand and we only work if we have a great community. That means we have to put our community first. And I think you should also always understand what your values are and putting those first and never losing sight of those. I think what's special about Airbnb is that its founders have values. I think one of the reasons that we're here is that our platform is designed to help people.

🔴 ***Why do you think entrepreneurship is so important and how does it tie into Airbnb's values and what you're trying to do in terms of empowering communities such as Khayelitsha?***

We want to use technology not just for technology's sake, not so that people can live in a digital bubble, not to replace or displace people but to provide a tool to help people achieve economic empowerment. We like to see technology give entrepreneurs a chance. So, we don't want technology to replace these people, we want technology to give more access to people like them.



Airbnb empowering communities, spreading the benefits of tourism

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I do believe there's a big conversation going on in the world right now about open versus closed. People who think that technology is separating people as opposed to people spending time with one another from different backgrounds. So how do we use our platform here in a small way to help people and to connect people? It's a way that you advance the human condition at the end of the day.

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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