

Cape Town can continue to welcome international and local travellers despite water crisis

The acute water crisis faced by the Western Cape and the City of Cape Town, in particular, is unlikely to negatively affect the region's tourism during the busy year-end period. Although acknowledging the severity of the water shortage, Martin Jansen van Vuuren, director: tourism, hospitality and leisure at Grant Thornton, believes context is crucial.



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“December is undoubtedly the busiest time of the year for the Western Cape – especially for Cape Town – and it would appear that tourists descend on the area in their droves, but once we take a closer look at the numbers, we can gain a better perspective on their impact.”

He explains: “Cape Town receives approximately 1.5 million foreign tourists per year. About 10% of these – around 150,000 – visit the city in December. For a city with a population of around four million, a 4% increase due to foreign tourists is not really a significant increase.”

He adds that foreign tourists stay anything between five and 14 days and that arrivals are not only concentrated around Christmas and New Year but also reasonably spaced over the entire month.

Tourists flock in as Capetonians go elsewhere

Domestic tourism has buoyed the sector over the past few years, and in keeping with this, there is a greater number of local visitors that flock to the Western Cape over the festive season.

“During December, approximately 250,000 domestic tourists travel to Cape Town, but our data shows that around 290,000 Capetonians leave the city – often to go elsewhere in the Western Cape, such as to the Garden Route or to the Overberg. This means that the impact of domestic tourists to the city is not as big as we may believe,” he says.

Those who live in the City of Cape Town may well believe differently, given the additional traffic in the main tourism areas. “We have to be reminded that December is also the time when locals – who may spend most of their time in the suburbs otherwise – descend on the tourism areas in greater numbers, either to show visiting friends and family around or to enjoy the festive season attractions themselves. This leads to congestion in these areas and it also gives the impression that the city is busier than it may actually be.”

Hospitality establishments taking measures to reduce water consumption

According to Jansen van Vuuren, hospitality establishments have employed measures to contain the usage of resources.

“Even before the drought, many hotels and guest houses have taken steps to reduce water consumption as this leads to cost savings. These measures include low-flow shower heads and the implementation of prominent tourist awareness campaigns which encourage showers instead of baths. Some establishments have utilised unused bottled water from guest’s rooms to water their gardens instead of it being wasted. Some bigger establishments have even replaced their swimming pool’s fresh water with seawater.”

No need to change travel plans

He does not believe the crisis is at the point yet to warrant foreign visitors to change their travel plans.

“For most foreign tourists, visiting South Africa is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and they would have planned and paid for the trip well in advance. They may thus not be in a position to change their plans. Even if they could change their plans, I believe that there is generally an awareness among tourists about any resource scarcity which may exist in the regions where they visit, and this does not act as a deterrent to travel,” he says.

Jansen van Vuuren adds that some domestic tourists may be tempted to change their plans, as their arrangements are likely to be more flexible. “Much of the domestic tourism is centred around visits to friends and family, and these plans can be changed more easily. Domestic tourists may also opt to travel elsewhere in the Western Cape, to areas that do not have such strict water restrictions as the City of Cape Town.”

Business tourism unlikely to be affected

He believes business tourism over the rest of the summer is also unlikely to be affected significantly from their regular travel pattern and seasonality.

“The majority of business tourists stay for one to two days and spend their time in hospitality establishments where many steps have been taken to reduce water wastage. Business tourists also tend to stop travelling during the school holiday periods when the holiday tourists arrive. Conferences are often organised months in advance, and these are not likely to change on short notice.”

He concludes: “The key to managing the crucial tourism sector through this crisis is constant awareness and strict monitoring of wastage where it is in our control. The hospitality sector has done a lot in this regard and as long as we continue to use our resources wisely, Cape Town should continue to welcome and host tourists.”

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