

From QR codes to marketing in the metaverse: How tech is changing the face of tourism

When you hear people say that tourism plays a vital role in South Africa's economy, it's easy to get caught up in the idea that they're talking about major game parks, the companies that have the concessions for the country's biggest attractions, and big hotel groups. But small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs) are just as crucial to the industry.



Source: Tim Douglas via [Pexels](#)

Whether it's the small bed and breakfast that people come back to year after year, the tour guide companies that give tourists personalised experiences of some of the country's hidden gems, or the people who make bespoke souvenirs, all are crucial to a sector that typically makes up around 7% of South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP). And while the last two years have presented unprecedented challenges for big and small tourism players alike, they come on the back of a decade of technological change that has fundamentally altered the sector.

Those changes have had an especially big impact on SMMEs, offering both opportunities and challenges. As the world slowly returns to something like pre-pandemic travel patterns, technology's growing role won't slow down either.

"Today's tourism industry is almost unrecognisable from a decade ago," says Tshepo Matlou, head of marketing and communications at Jurni. "For SMMEs with limited resources, it can feel intimidating trying to keep up with all the latest developments, but for those who are willing to evolve, the rewards can be immense."

Beyond booking

Perhaps the most obvious way technology has changed tourism is the growth of online booking. The idea that we once had to rely on travel agents or the pamphlets at tourist boards to find accommodation seems ludicrous now. Being able to pick and choose the characteristics you want while browsing through high-quality photos of potential accommodation is just the most obvious route now.

But the world's biggest online booking platforms haven't always worked in the interest of the small guest houses and business owners. With more socially aware and conscious travellers becoming the norm, they're also looking for more authentic experiences than typical booking engines offer.

"In South Africa, especially, we've seen that accommodation providers in previously disadvantaged areas have struggled to make a mark," says Matlou. "That's a pity, because these areas are incredibly rich in cultural value and have much to offer visitors who are willing to explore them. That's one reason we've made this market a particular focus at Jurni."

Matlou also believes that localised booking sites will become more prevalent in the coming years.

"Local operators understand the market intimately and can use that knowledge to effectively market both the platform and the accommodation providers on it," he says.

Saving with payments and software

Another major area where technology has played a role in tourism is payments. Today it's easier than ever for players across the tourism value chain to accept payments. That's thanks to the rise of QR code payments, payment gateways, and payment devices aimed specifically at SMMEs. All of these options come with significant cost reductions when compared with traditional payment methods.

"In an industry which sometimes operates with thin margins, any saving should be welcomed," says Matlou. It also offers a way into the formal economy for people who previously relied on cash payments."

Many of these payment options are also bundled with software that makes balancing the books easier. But that's just one example of software that's made life easier for people in the tourism sector. From booking management to website builders, and inventory management, there are any number of tools available to people in the tourism industry looking for improved ways to manage and market their businesses.

Marketing in the metaverse?

Those technologies are well established now, but how might technology benefit tourism SMMEs in the future?

One potential avenue is the metaverse, with people letting guests explore accommodation in virtual reality (VR) before making a booking. Alternatively, tour operators could provide VR tours either to entice people to a destination or as a standalone product.

"During hard lockdown, we saw a number of operators conducting virtual tours," says Matlou. "But there is only so much you can get out of a two-dimensional experience. There are exciting possibilities for SMMEs to provide more immersive experiences as the technology becomes cheaper and more ubiquitous."

Wherever technological changes the future holds, there can be no doubt that they will impact the tourism industry.

"If the past decade has taught us anything," says Matlou, "it's how important it will be for SMMEs to ride these changes and embrace the ones that will help them move forward and thrive."

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