

Reawakening tourism through technology

Many flourishing tourism businesses saw their income dry up overnight with the arrival of Covid-19. The pandemic has dealt a particularly cruel blow to the women in the industry, who make up 70% of the workforce



Vughala Mashitoa, Sinazo Sgwabe, Jannine Adams and Nomvuselelo Songelwa of Jurni

Tourism has always offered women in South Africa incredible potential to hold leadership positions. UN Women, in collaboration with United Nations World Tourism Organisation and Amadeus, recently released a report that indicated that across the private and public sectors women are harnessing the potential of tourism to become financially independent, challenge stereotypes and start their own businesses, says Dr Nomvuselelo Songelwa, chief executive officer of Jurni.

Her company is a case in point, besides Songelwa, there are three other women on the team - Jannine Adams, strategic project manager, Sinazo Sgwabe, lead supervisor at the Jurni Contact Centre, and Vughala Mashitoa, junior finance controller.

With a good insight into the financial situation of the industry, Mashitoa would like to urge tourism players not to lose hope.

“ The opportunities exist, so don’t give up. ”

Sgwabe says it is a very difficult time for the travel and tourism industry and she is being faced with heart-wrenching stories on a daily basis. “The instability of the tourism industry is very difficult for accommodation owners today. They don’t know what is going to happen, they feel side-lined by insurance companies as well as by the government, and they feel a deep sense of frustration and despair. I’ve seen people who have been active in the industry for over 30 years who have had to close their doors because they can’t afford to keep their business open with no tourism.”

Fortunately, there has also been positive news with inter-provincial travel reopening. “Tourism is a resilient industry. And I know that tourism will return and recover. One day soon, tourists will flock to the shores of our beautiful country again in search of authentic and uniquely African experiences, she says.

Ride the wave

Adams agrees. “Times are hard for many these days and as a woman, keeping your head in the game takes a lot of effort when you are in survival mode. It causes you to act and think in desperation which only creates a downward slope in all the areas of your life. My advice is to see the season for what it is and ride the wave if and where possible. If necessary, make

changes that will suit your situation and do them sooner rather than later, but always seek out the good that can come from a bad situation.”

Songelwa explains more than ever before, tourists worldwide will be looking for undiscovered, unique and authentic tourism experiences. "After having been locked down in their houses for months on end, the vast open spaces of South Africa will offer a welcome relief. They are keen to start experiencing our culture and connect with our people again.”

Embrace technology

She says now is the time for tourism providers in South Africa, no matter how big or small, to make sure they embrace the fourth industrial revolution. “It is time for our country to highlight the experiences we have to offer beyond the major tourist attractions. We need to make it easier for the traveller, the tour operator and the travel agent to find out what our country has to offer.

“We are all driven by what is happening globally in terms of technology. In South Africa, so far, we have taken a reactive approach. It’s time to change this and lead the way. We have to ensure that the tourism players in our country – from small rural one-woman ventures to the bigger players - are in the digital realm.”

Technological innovation in tourism can come in many different forms and shapes. There are numerous women (and men) who have innovated our tourism landscape through technology or innovative ideas on a very high level.

However, almost more exciting to see, are the women entrepreneurs in rural areas who are innovating in their region by using technology to market their small tourism establishments and putting them on the international map.

“This kind of innovation leads to true transformation not only for the tourism sector, but for our country as a whole,” Songelwa says.

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