

Tourism Month: 'lesser known' provinces cry foul over marketing budgets

 Bylssa Sikiti da Silva

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South Africa's 'lesser known' provinces are facing the tough challenge of marketing themselves efficiently as attractive tourist destinations because of inadequate marketing budgets, while the well-funded big three - Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal and Western Cape - are basking in financial and touristic glory. This emerged at the media expedition undertaken over the long weekend in Limpopo for the commemoration of the 2010 World Tourism Day celebrations.

A thorough investigation found that a huge province such as Limpopo, which critics believe fares far better than some of the big three in terms of exciting touristic attractions, only received R67 million this financial year, R4 million of which was allocated for marketing projects. Reports said, however, that the big three do each get around three times of that amount annually.

"What can you market with R4 million?"

"What can you market with R4 million in this big province? Marketing is a costly exercise that requires more money and skills," Mike Tauatsoala, Limpopo Tourism and Parks spokesperson, told Bizcommunity.com in Phalaborwa, the home of the marula tree.

Limpopo Tourism and Parks, which uses Capricorn FM radio station to market the province locally, is understaffed and lacks a proper marketing division, he said, adding that the lack of funding and proper marketing structures poses a serious challenge to the development of tourism in the province.

As the media crew cruised past elephants, hyenas, giraffes and impalas through the Kruger National Park (KNP), he said more than 70% of the park was located in Limpopo, and the rest in Mpumalanga, and not the way around.

"The confusion arises because we have not been able to market this place properly due to inadequate funding and staff shortage," he said, adding that his organisation is in the process of establishing a marketing division and hiring more marketers as soon as enough money comes in.

Underfunding the main cause

Some observers said underfunding was the main cause of the lesser known provinces' tourism projects falling through and visitors staying away.

Limpopo's world heritage site, the Makapane Valley, home to the Cave of Hearths and the Cave of Gwasa, is in a deteriorating state, and the number of visitors to the site continues to shrink due to lack of promotion. The Cave of the Gwasa is the site of deadly battles in 1854 between the Kekana Ndebele groups, led by chief Mokopane, and the Trekboers under the leadership of Potgieter.

"We have no money to market this amazing treasure," site manager Ernest Mkhari told Bizcommunity.com. "What we only did was to prepare a video of this place, which we handed over to [South African] Tourism to market for us internationally. But we also need to market it to locals because it is part of our country's history."

Another lesser visited province, the Free State, is also complaining about inadequate marketing budget. Trevor Sibeko, of the Free State's Tourism Programme Development, said it was impossible to even compare his province's agency budget of R20 million to one of the big three's R200 million.

"Want to increase capacity"

"We are seriously underfunded and understaffed. We want to increase capacity and develop strategies by working together with marketing agencies," Sibeko said, adding that his organisation learned valuable and unforgettable lessons from the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

In an interview with Bizcommunity.com near Chuene Village, SA Tourism CEO Thandiwe January-Mclean said: "Our mandate is to promote the country, not the provinces. But we are always appealing to them to use us as a platform to market their provinces as tourism destinations. That is why we maintain good relations with the provinces."

Asked whether tourism could be affected if the country's media freedom was compromised, she said: "That is a hot debate that I would prefer not to discuss. However, I don't believe that tourism will be affected by that."

Regarding the Durban Olympic bid, she said the bid, if successful, would enhance tourism and further promote SA as an attractive tourist destination. January-Mclean also said that her organisation has learned fantastic lessons from the world cup: "As people, we proved to the world and to ourselves that we can do better."

Lastly, she said her organisation will only release the final tally of world cup visitors towards the end of the year.

For more, go to www.southafrica.net, www.golimpopo.com and www.freestatetourism.org.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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