

Preparing for guests in a time of Covid-19

As travel shows the first signs of rallying, even if primarily for business travellers, for now, this is the big question facing hoteliers in Africa: "What are you doing to persuade jittery potential guests to choose you?"



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Travel seemed like a completely foreign concept in a Covid-19 world until just recently. But then lockdowns began to lift, even if in a phased approach, and more freedom of movement, particularly for business travellers, is slowly being permitted.

At the end of May, Zurab Pololikashvili, secretary-general of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), welcomed the growing confidence in the global tourism sector, noting that it stands ready "to return to growth". At the same time, however, he cautioned that "at both the local and the global level, the crisis we have faced up to together has shown the importance of making the right decisions at the right time".

Reopening strategies

The task comes with a whole new set of challenges and parameters. Adequate safety measures remain an imperative globally, while non-essential travel, especially to countries with high prevalence of Covid-19, is still not recommended.

According to Pololikashvili, the recently-released UNWTO Global [Guidelines to Restart Tourism](#) serve as a "comprehensive set of measures" to open tourism up again "in a safe, seamless and responsible manner".

And the tourism sector hasn't been slow off the mark.

Mark Havercroft, Minor Hotels regional director for Africa, states categorically what is non-negotiable in the reopening strategies of tourism businesses in the current circumstances is assuring the safety of guests and team members in every way possible.

"Hotels are at risk of becoming hotspots from which infection can be spread further. It is vital to have stringent protocols in place to assure the safety and comfort of guests and the welfare of team members" he cautions, adding that both the world, and the capacity for safe travel, has changed intractably. Travellers heading out into the world in the midst of an ongoing pandemic will, understandably, be overcautious.

Addressing the onus on the entire tourism industry to create a safe environment for travellers, Havercroft highlights the fine line between having adequate safety measures in place and breeding discomfort.

He notes that the Covid-19 threat is an invisible one, making it harder to comprehend than, for example, the need for metal detectors for security purposes (sadly ubiquitous in the hotel industry in many locations). It cannot be ignored in these challenging times the necessity for precautions remains and must be rolled out with the consideration of guests in mind.

Minor Hotels brands in Africa, Avani and Anantara, for example, have already opened their doors.

"New normal" for hotels

The Minor Hotels group operates more than 565 properties across 56 countries, including the Elewana, Oaks, NH Hotels, NH Collection and TIVOLI brands. In line with recommendations of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the group is already implementing strict hygiene interventions to safeguard both guests and staff across all its establishments.

"We have already begun to disinfect and sterilise every space in all of our properties. All team members who will be in contact with guests are undergoing comprehensive Covid-19 safety protocol training," explains Havercroft.

"Internationally, we must be united in our reopening strategies and hygiene policies across the board, while considering the requirements, customs and traditions of the specific countries in which we operate. In line with our training, and in staying updated with credible information globally, we continually inform staff and guests on the latest safety measures."

Front-line staff wear face shields, masks and gloves, temperature checks are conducted, hourly sanitation stations are strategically placed across all premises for the use of everyone on site, he adds.

In South Africa, under level 3 lockdown regulations, business travel is allowed provided travellers have the relevant permit.

According to Havercroft, travel will not look the same as we remember it but it is becoming possible again, albeit all of us being more mindful of our own safety and that of others.

Their preparations for reopening must be focused, purposeful and send a clear message that this is a safe establishment at which management teams are doing much more than just ticking the boxes in terms of assuring the well-being of both their guests and their staff.