

# Online travel agency Wimdu SA enters fray

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8 Aug 2011

Within six weeks after its launch in June, international online accommodation booking agency Wimdu has spread its wings to 27 countries.

South Africa is one of the enterprise's newest destinations, and the spider in the company's yet to be woven African web.

"Wimdu, which was founded in Germany, is just six weeks old but is growing very fast. We are now in 150 cities across the globe and have 450 permanent employees," said country manager Sonja Ballenden this morning during the launch of Wimdu South Africa, which took place in Cape Town.

This rapid global expansion is to a large extent the result of the US\$90 million cash injection by German venture capitalist Rocket Internet and Swedish counterpart Kinnevik.

"Both companies are known for their dealings with Internet ventures such as Groupon, Facebook and eBay," said Ballenden.

More countries are on Wimdu's agenda and from SA, the company is looking at expanding into the rest of the African continent.

"We are looking at countries that are comfortable with the Internet, such as Egypt, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, while Madagascar and Ghana too are interesting. However, before we do that we want to get South Africa on track," said Ballenden, who has a team of nine staff under her wings and operates from Cape Town.

"Our aim is to reach 3000 SA bookings in six to eight months' time. To achieve that, we need to obviously grow our accommodation database," Ballenden explained, noting that Wimdu SA currently features around 250 accommodation hosts.

"We will concentrate on Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban first as that is where the interest lies of most international travellers."

From these cities, Wimdu SA will spread to the Garden Route and other popular regions in other provinces.

Ballenden emphasised that Wimdu only deals with guesthouses, self-catering apartments, cottages and bed & breakfasts and other types of accommodation. "We do not do hotels. What we offer is accommodation with a more personal touch,"

she said.

When someone books accommodation via the website, the host or owner gets the amount advertised minus 3%. "That fee pays for the transactions from our accounts into the host's bank account," Ballenden pointed out.

"This happens 24 hours after a booking takes place. We make our money through a 12% holiday fee for which the client is liable upon booking."

According to Ballenden there are no risks for the accommodation owners. "They are than welcome to advertise their services on other websites, as we do not seek exclusivity. We offer insurance in case of damage to a room or suite," she said.

The company will not just concentrate on mainstream B&Bs. Township accommodation ventures are also on the agenda, Ballenden added: "We have some B&Bs in Soweto, but none in the Cape. Our plan is to expand our township accommodation database."

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