Boosting Tourism in South Africa’s Townships

In the dim light of a makeshift beer hall in Phillipi township, South Africa, tourist Rob Denhom is introduced to a taste like no other. A man passes him a rusty can full of Umqomboti, a traditional bitter-sour millet beer. It is more than the British teacher has bargained for. His face puckers at the taste and he eagerly passes the brew to the person sitting beside him.

“How do you say the name of that beer again?,” he laughs as his tongue trips over the Xhosa pronunciation. The reaction is exactly what tour guide Zeitoon Najjaar wants from her customers. “I want people to not only see the various aspects of the Cape Flats, but to experience them,” she says.

Najjaar is a member of Sonke, an organization that promotes tourism development in the underprivileged communities near Cape Town. Through Sonke, Najjaar is part of a research project undertaken by the University of the Western Cape, with support from Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), to assess the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on small, medium, and micro enterprises and to see how these could be incorporated into the tourism industry.

A part-time teacher, Najjaar is better educated than most of Sonke’s members, yet technology is a recent addition to her life. Typical of many South African women, she turned her first computer on only a few years ago. Despite her initial doubts, she is beginning to see the benefits of technology. A lot of her business comes from referrals by satisfied foreign customers — something made possible by Najjaar’s embrace of technology. Her business card carries both an email and Web site address (Tourcape.com). “One thing I’ve learned is that if you don’t respond quickly to someone’s email, you lose their business,” she says.
Tourism in the townships

Cape Town is fast becoming a premier tourist destination. It is the third most visited city in Africa after Johannesburg and Cairo. According to statistics held by the province of the Western Cape, more than five million passengers passed through Cape Town International Airport in 2002. Officials are expecting that number to double within the next five years. “Last year just under a million overseas visitors came here,” says Nombulelo Mkefa, the head of tourism development with Cape Metropolitan Tourism.

Cape Town has many drawing cards — the natural beauty of Table Mountain, the ocean, and the wine lands — but Mkefa says foreign tourists are also coming because they perceive South Africa to be a safe destination in these uncertain times. But Cape Town, like other urban centres in South Africa, is a tale of two cities. Not far from the modern skyscrapers and first world luxuries, lie the sprawling, impoverished townships of the Cape Flats.

Post-apartheid, the townships have proved popular tourist attractions. Many visitors are interested in seeing first hand places made famous during the struggle for freedom — Crossroads, Gugulethu, Khayalitsha. Others are looking for something different, a chance to engage the people and diverse cultures of South Africa.

The key challenge facing tour operators and tourism officials is how best to draw foreign tourists — and their money — to the townships. The largely white-owned tourist industry is eager to capitalize on the untapped business potential of the townships, but it lacks an understanding of the area, and, more crucially, does not see the importance of investing in its development. If they are to corner their own market, indigenous tour operators have found they must bolster their entrepreneurial capacity. One question researchers have sought to answer is how ICTs help these budding tour operators achieve that.

Overcoming fears about ICTs

“If we are serious about tourism development and supporting emerging entrepreneurs,” says Mkefa, “they are not even in the game if they don’t have access to ICTs.” Denise Biggs, a research manager in the department of Information Systems at the University of the Western Cape and leader of the IDRC project, agrees, but is quick to point out that technology has its limitations. “We have to remember that for the most part we are dealing with intelligent, entrepreneurial people who do not always have the skills to seek or manage information,” she says.

Moreover, fear of technology is an obstacle facing Sonke’s members, she adds. “There is a reluctance to use it because they can’t see it,” explains Wadji Abrahams, Sonke’s business development officer. “We have stepped out of the industrial age and into the information age. But most of our clients are still in the industrial age.”

Through a series of workshops Biggs and her team have exposed Sonke members to technology, from the basics of computers and typing to more advanced skills such as surfing the Web and creating a Web page to advertize their products. “Workshops are a chance for us to sell them the benefits of technology, and for them to get their feet wet in a non-threatening environment,” she explains. “At the end of the day it’s not really about personal computers (PCs),” she says. “It’s about information management. It’s no use providing access to PCs only to have them gathering dust in a cupboard somewhere. It’s about combining micro business development and the intelligent use of technology.”
Putting technology to work

That message has struck a cord with Gina Mohale who runs a restaurant fashioned from two shipping containers across the street from the taxi park in Nyanga township. Over a decade ago Mohale escaped from an abusive husband. Disadvantaged by poverty and apartheid, Mohale had little formal education or money with which to support herself. She squatted in an abandoned shipping container while a deadly war over the lucrative taxi market raged outside. She survived by selling “fat cakes”—donut-like delicacies—to travellers across the street. She is now one of the rising business stars of Nyanga, earning a monthly income of almost CAD$5000, in part earned by selling traditional dishes to foreigners who stop by for lunch while on a township tour.

Business is so good she recently added electricity and another shipping container to the restaurant. She is now part of the “formal” economy, paying the salaries of eight employees, rate taxes to the municipality, and value-added taxes to the government.

But with success came a greater need for administrative help. “One thing I learned from the seminars is that I haven’t been keeping my books the proper way,” she says. “I’m a forgetful person, but if I put the information into a computer I would be able to run my business more professionally,” she says. “Sometimes I lose my receipts and I don’t know what I’ve spent, what comes in, what goes out. With a computer my stocktaking would be better. I won’t use energy to think about those things. I won’t stay awake at night thinking about them.”

In the coming months Mohale says she will buy a computer to help with her accounting. She also plans to use email and the Web more often because a catering service is in the works.

Future prospects

Mkefa credits Sonke with not only giving tourists a more authentic and memorable experience, but with creating a group of tour operators who are “serious about developing their capacity, and want to understand and deliver what the customer wants.” A recent decision by the Cape Metropolitan Council (CMC) to provide greater public access to computers is related in part to Sonke’s promotion of ICTs, says Mkefa. The CMC is also planning to launch SmartCity, a database that advertizes products and the services of tour operators.

The future strength of Sonke lies in its members developing such networks with like-minded organizations and tour operators across southern Africa, says Biggs. She’s also hoping that other industries will benefit as township tourism takes off. As people realize the benefits of technology, she says, they may commission local designers to create a Web page for them, for example.

The early successes of Sonke have caught the attention of other South African tourist bodies and educational institutions, which have expressed interest in whether the research could be applied in their areas. Corporate clients are also getting involved. Sonke recently organized an overnight stay for 16 managers from a leading South African bank: for most of them it was their first time in a township. On behalf of the South African Revenue Services, Sonke played host to 200 tax collectors from all over Africa who were attending a conference in Cape Town. South African Breweries is also in discussions with Sonke, in partnership with Open Africa as part of their African Dream project, to establish a “Shebeen Tour” that would take tourists on a route of traditional South African taverns.
“I read an article recently about what happens when you merge two separate ideas — a bell and a clock gives you an alarm clock,” says Biggs. “It made me wonder what we are creating by marrying ICTs and township tourism. We might not be creating a bunch of ICT graduates, but hopefully some kind of tourism network.”

*Alan Martin is an Ottawa-based freelance journalist who was recently in South Africa.*

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