

Tourism entrepreneurs from across South Africa shine in Airbnb's Faces of Tourism Exhibition

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Tourism is being touted as a key factor in economic growth and a crucial driver of job creation. Airbnb hosts a photographic exhibition that shines a light on unlikely entrepreneurs that are creating opportunities for themselves in the tourism industry



With tourism growth a key element of South Africa's economic growth, Airbnb's exhibition titled "Faces of Tourism" that is currently on at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg could not be more timely. The exhibition, which is open to the public from 31 October to 15 November, features stunning portraits, sound recordings and quotes from twelve South Africans that use the Airbnb platform to participate in the tourism economy, highlighting that entrepreneurship and empowerment can occur in seemingly unlikely places. Photographer Thom Pierce travelled across South Africa to take photos of hosts that use the Airbnb platform in places like Soweto, Kayamandi and Khayelitsha as well as in more far-flung areas such as Kassiesbaai, which is not close to a city centre or the usual tourist hotspots.



The exhibition tells a powerful story of the great potential for South Africa to reach its ambitious tourism goal of 21 million tourist arrivals by 2030 as set by the President in his State of the Nation Address earlier this year, if communities and government continue to keep the barriers to entry low for those who occasionally open up their homes and share their passions with guests. Faces of Tourism highlights how opening a person’s home to travellers, or showing them a part of local community life as an Experience, can open the door to an economy these hosts never imagined they could be part of.

“For this particular project, it was lovely to be able to travel around the country and meet people who were excited about their venture, keen to show off their accommodation and proud of what they had achieved,” says Pierce. “I like that I am able to showcase people who are being facilitated in taking control of their businesses and their futures in partnership with a large organisation. It’s a twist on the usual narrative of my work, which has previously focused on human rights violations”.



“Since 2008, Airbnb has welcomed over 2 million guests throughout South Africa which results in an estimated direct economic impact of more than R8.7bn for the country,” says Velma Corcoran, Airbnb Country Manager for Sub-Saharan Africa. “South Africans are looking for innovative ways to create opportunities for themselves - much like the hosts who are part of our Faces of Tourism exhibition”.

Stats SA recently highlighted that the official unemployment rate increased by 1,4 percentage points to 29,0% compared in Q2 of 2019. The highest unemployment rate since Q1 of 2008. Currently, Black African women remain one of the most vulnerable groups when it comes to unemployment in South Africa, standing at over 30%, according to StatsSA. The unemployment rate for youth aged 15 - 24 stands at over 50%.

There are now over 35,000 hosts in the South African Airbnb community, with a significant percentage of them (65%) being women.

“The Faces of Tourism Exhibition shows the transformative power of tourism and how it can be used to combat very real social and economic issues within South Africa,” says Velma Corcoran.

Visitors to the exhibition will dive into the unique life stories of the hosts and will learn about how each one found a different way into tourism. All of them have participated in the Airbnb Africa Academy, a programme that was developed to support a new generation of tourism entrepreneurs across the continent. By partnering with community-based and grassroots organisations, the Academy provides tools and resources to support mainly women and youth to share their homes or host unique experiences on Airbnb’s platform, further expanding the role of local, healthy and inclusive opportunities in African tourism. Through these initiatives, Airbnb continues to promote travel that is local, diverse and inclusive in South Africa.

“Through being involved in Experiences on Airbnb and the Airbnb Africa Academy, we have found people have grown through the process,” says Buntu Matole and Ayanda Cuba. “The Academy has forced people to look at tourism in a different way because initially they didn’t see themselves as people who would ever be in tourism. Now, however, they can see that this is something interesting that they can do and learn from. We know that tourism plays a huge role in Cape Town and that it contributes a large percentage to the local economy. For us to really understand and be invested in this space helps us to build our community.”

The public can view the Faces of Tourism exhibition at the Women’s Jail at Constitution Hill from 31 October - 15 November, between 10am and 4pm every day. Entry is free of charge.

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