

# Post-Covid travellers are looking for flexibility

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The great tourism recovery race has begun and to meet the 'new wave' of travel guests and their sceptical strains, South African hoteliers are turning to innovative tech tools to enable them to prepare and adapt for tomorrow's business challenges.



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Market research specialist McKinsey predicts that Covid-19 is likely to accelerate the shift to digital. Travellers are now looking for flexibility and willing to make last-minute bookings as our situation evolves. Case-in-point: more than 90% of recent trips in China were booked within seven days of the trip itself.

McKinsey also states that looking ahead, economy hotels will have the fastest return to pre-pandemic levels, and luxury and upper-upscale hotels to have the slowest. That is in part because economy hotels are better able to tap segments of demand that remain relatively healthy despite travel restrictions, including short-stop and extended-stay guests.

Covid-19 changed the game, and it will not be business as usual for quite some time. As governments dictate the movement of travellers, the pandemic means we must adapt accordingly. And here clever technology is the answer because it enables hospitality operations – including boutique hotels, guest houses, lodges, and independent hotels – to create an efficient service.

And this is where connecting with the right software partner is critical. A great example was recently announced in the media earlier this year detailing Western Cape tourism company, Wesgro entering into an agreement with Airbnb to promote the province as an ideal place for digital nomads to work. Airbnb offered up to 50% off stays longer than 28 days.

More and more independent and medium-sized accommodation establishments are finding ways for people to work in concert with new technologies. They are adding smart touchless or contactless elements to the customer experience, including contactless checkouts via app or email. This can all be conducted in conjunction with decent property management software that is completely 'in the cloud'.

## Technology

This means that all reservations that have been made are safely stored online. This allows complete reservations visibility, meaning the hotel software is accessible from a laptop, tablet, and smartphone and no special equipment or hardware is needed. All they need is an internet connection and a device which can access the internet. It is even possible to log on simultaneously with several colleagues.

Technology will clearly assist us in driving growth in the B2B hospitality sector as hotels become smarter with more automated processes. A recent global report revealed the extend of the drop in travel and tourism's contribution to the SA economy, from 6.9% in 2019 to 3,7% GDP in 2020. This has had a ripple effect, resulting in a massive drop in expert skills as professionals seek careers in different sectors. Again, reinforcing the need for smarter automated processes and clever technology.

In closing, there is no right response for all, but we can apply universal guidelines. Forward thinking businesses that care for their employees will succeed, and management of customer expectations remain key and recognising that these will continue to evolve as we address safety concerns. Hoteliers will need to revise their commercial strategy for the restart, with an eye towards the next normal. In the long term, travel will return because of an important shift in consumption—an accelerated pivot from buying things to buying experiences.

Yet this new frugality does not necessarily mean that travellers are wholly sacrificing the quality of the travel experience for lower prices. McKinsey's survey on Covid-19 travel sentiment shows that the top two types of accommodations travellers prefer now are international economy hotel chains and local boutique hotels, which are usually perceived as combining reasonable prices with comfort.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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