

Let's get back to meeting face-to-face

By [Jan Van Der Putten](#)

29 Mar 2022

Prior to Covid-19, live events were a very important part of the South African tourism and hospitality sector, whether they were meetings, dinners, or celebrations. In the two years since the onset of the pandemic, we have all missed experiences like interacting with the people we would see at regular industry-related events and the opportunity to network with friends, colleagues, and business partners.



Source: Supplied | Jan Van Der Putten, Vice President, Operations, Africa & Indian Ocean at Hilton.

Conferences and conventions in particular have provided a strong level of business for certain cities in South Africa and this industry has a significant impact on local employment. Large events— like the Mining Indaba, which is returning to the CTICC, Cape Town from 9-12 May 2022, or the Tourism Indaba returning in Durban from 5-7 May 2022 — are hugely important for the local economies and showcase why it is so important to reboot the industry.

The return of large expos

The return of these larger, in-person events like those mentioned above signifies that we may be close to turning a corner in the event and hospitality industry post-Covid in Africa. However, certain considerations must be taken when planning these gatherings. The trend we are seeing is that the lead-in-time for larger conventions is necessary to ensure proper planning and adherence to safety protocols, and this needs to be respected with event organisers.

We will see a few large events held again quickly, but on the whole I believe that we're looking at 2023 for everyone to be more comfortable with attending large events. Additionally, for these big conferences and conventions to return to the levels they were at pre-Covid, and they will likely do so with strictly enforced rules in place.

An increase in smaller gatherings

We've also seen an increased desire from our customers to attend smaller events such as meetings or events in hotels for a 100 people or less, or dinner parties and celebrations. Many companies want to increase engagement with employees and clients and are seeking to create networking opportunities for these stakeholders.

However, there will always be a bit of caution in the mix – at Hilton, for example, we saw a surge of bookings in October and November when restrictions were relaxed, then Omnicom arrived and events were cut off again. I do think now — with an improved level of freedom, and the fact that vaccinated international visitors to South Africa no longer need the PCR tests at the border — that you will see a increase in the smaller types of events and the related business and meeting travel that comes along with it.

With all this in mind, I'm very optimistic about the future of gatherings and meetings in South Africa. I predict in the second half of 2022 we should see the market gain strength and gradually build up towards where it was pre-Covid through 2023.

What happens to digital events?

An area I will watch with interest is how the industry will adapt to digital and hybrid events. Many people have discovered digital meetings and may well continue using those facilities, but I don't believe digital meetings will ever completely replace business and face-to-face meetings. Many people have come to realise that inter-personal, face-to-face contact is critical for business operations.

In-person events result in higher engagement levels with the audience, and feedback received during and after the events is better too. While you might get a higher registration rate with online or hybrid events, organisers have realised is that many participants are running the event in the background while they continue with other tasks so the level of focus and meaningful participation is lower than it would be for in-person events.

Safety remains top of mind

We will continue to see clients requiring an enhanced level of Covid safety measures in place at events. Washing your hands, having multiple sanitisation stations, and keeping surfaces clean will continue to be the norm. Conference exhibition centres will need to be mindful that while we're all keen to be in the same room again, when it comes to things like buffet lunches, or tea and coffee breaks, the setups will still need to allow for reasonable social distancing.

When it comes down to it, those of us who facilitate events have a duty to do so in a responsible and realistic manner as we return to a more personal meeting environment. Facilities that can offer various size rooms, and in particular the larger rooms to accommodate more people comfortably, will be well placed.

The event and hospitality industry is ready to welcome back the public, and prepared to do so responsibly. At Hilton, we look forward to bringing back the unique experience that comes with in-person events.

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