

Unveiling key trends in the travel and tourism sector



By [Nombulelo Guliwe](#)

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The changes that have occurred in the past few years that have significantly impacted on how we live our lives, interact and socialise, do business and engage in other economic and leisure activities, have been nothing short of evolutionary.



Nombulelo Guliwe, Acting Chief Executive Officer of South African Tourism

Evolution has as one of its characteristics the glacial pace at which it unfolds. However, the rapid infusion of pervasive telecommunications, digital, artificial intelligence and other technologies has had an accelerating effect on the current phase of human evolution.

Yet equally prominent have been the evolutionary cues that point to, and reel and anchor us back to our humanity. As a result, our generation has arguably come to appreciate that all the tech in the world cannot entirely substitute for our most basic need for, amongst others, human connection, real-life (as opposed to virtual) adventure and unforgettable experiences, physical, emotional and spiritual wellness.

The result is that it can be argued that one of the dominant quests for modern human-kind is to strike a balance between the technologically, digitally and informationally evolved elements of life, and the grounded human spirit and all its attendant yearnings for wellness, adventure, new experiences, learning, meaningful relationships, and personal growth.

Few sectors display this arguably predominant quest better than the travel and tourism industry. This quest for balance has resulted in one conspicuous and arguably one of the stand-out trends that study after study has returned in the post-pandemic years; the prioritisation of unforgettable and life-changing experiences as one of the decisive factors informing destination choice and willingness to spend there-on.

From this arguably neon-lit trend, as well as the quest for balance mentioned above, flow many of the other trends anticipated to deeply impact the travel and tourism sector in the coming months and years.

Wellness wandering

The noticeable trend amongst millennials to seek out travel experiences that enhance their wellness has spawned a niche tourism market. Nature and outdoors-based retreats, authentic cultural healing experiences, and meditative spaces count as examples of the tourism products increasingly finding appeal, especially among young adults; a trend well worth noting and examining for the opportunities it signposts for local tourism industry businesses.

Wellness is emerging as an important consideration not only at destination level, but also in the "getting there" part of many a traveller's sojourn. In-flight well-being apps, mid-air meditation platforms and stress-reducing airline food offerings are increasingly being incorporated by airline brands, to reduce the stress and anxiety that air travel can induce among many.

Airlines like Air France and Virgin Atlantic have been pioneers with their in-flight meditation services, while the likes of Air New Zealand have been exploring the use of sleep pods on long-haul flights in an effort to plug into the wellness needs of today's traveller. Whether the South African and continental aviation sector embraces this trend, will be fascinating to observe.

In-flight elevation and personal edification

Some of the emerging airline industry-related trends have as their inspirational spark the reality of long layovers, connecting times and frankly, the occasional idleness of mind a traveller may experience during long-haul flights. Thus airlines are increasingly exploring ways to infuse productivity and personal growth experiences such as offering in-flight educational programmes and business productivity-oriented business class cabins, as a way to help the traveller feel that their in-flight time was gainfully utilised.

How the solo traveller is getting their groove back...at 37,000 feet

In recent years, the trend of solo travellers has also been on the ascendance. Many of these travellers undertaking the so-called 'solocations' do so by design and with the intention of enjoying solitude while taking in the experiences a destination has to offer. Some however are open to and sometimes actively seeking to make a connection with other singles during their travels. Enter the growing trend of airport and in-flight dating apps.

While these apps have been evolving for at least the past decade, they are now truly coming of age with operators like the travel agency Flight Centre and the UK-based low-cost carrier Easy Jet either having launched (in the latter's case) or planning to launch (in the former's case) their own dating apps.

LGBTQ, inclusivity and accessibility travel

Let's face it, while equality and inclusivity are our societal norms and ideals, overt and subtle exclusion and discrimination sadly pervade many aspects of society, including the travel experiences of members of certain demographic groups such as the LGBTQ community, people of colour and those with disabilities. Thankfully, the curation and packaging of travel experiences aimed at addressing that deficiency is also emerging as a growing trend.

Increasingly, across the travel and tourism sector, there are brands and offerings that are intentional about packaging travel experiences that focus on connecting members of the LGBTQ community to safe and empowering spaces and destinations, diversity-embracing tourism services and destinations for enjoyment by people of colour, as well as accessibility-conscious locations for people with disabilities.

This sampling of trends, along with the crucial technological advances starting to impact the transactional side of travel (for example, through internet decentralisation and the metaverse, NFTs and token-based economics), advances in traveller biometric security and other experimental forms of travel are currently shaping the travel and tourism sectors in real time.

Observing these trends and planning how to adapt to, and embrace them, is critically important for the competitiveness of the South African tourism sector.

ABOUT NOMBULELO GULIWE

Chartered accountant Nombulelo Guliwe joined South African Tourism as a financial compliance and performance manager in 2011. She has since held numerous finance management positions within the organisation, leading to her appointment as chief financial officer in August 2019. She is currently the Acting Chief Executive Officer of South African Tourism

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