

Preparing for a post-Covid-19 era in the tourism industry

By  Mariette du Toit-Helmbold

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Our world has been turned upside down by the Covid-19 coronavirus outbreak. It calls for innovation and smart solutions as we brace ourselves for the economic and social impact of the outbreak and the much needed social isolation.

When we were thinking about the [biggest global trends impacting people's travel behaviour](#) earlier this year, we could not predict that we would find ourselves in a global travel shutdown three months into this new decade.



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We knew that with economic pressures, political and social upheavals and a growing awareness of our contribution to climate change, the industry would face significant shifts as travellers look for slower, more meaningful and deliberate ways to travel, swapping over-crowded, mainstream destinations with more unique and unknown places.

Like many we predicted that people would continue to travel in the new decade and that we can expect tourism to continue growing, albeit at a slower pace and with dramatic changes to how, when and where we travel too.

Fast forward to March 2020 and the world's most crowded destinations are deserted as governments ground planes, shut borders and scramble to deal with the biggest impact on our world in recent history – Covid-19.



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A lot has been written about Covid-19 and the importance of flattening the curve with great tips shared on how to protect yourself and what to do when you think you are infected. Social media is awash with horror stories, fake news, bad news, hopeful accounts of recovery, humour in the face of panic and trolls who still think it's better to build walls than to build bridges and show a little humanity and kindness. A crisis always reveals our true character.

More mindful travel

Already we have seen dramatic changes in people's travel behaviour prior to Covid-19 with a shift in where and how people travel. We will definitely see a greater awareness, sense of responsibility and appreciation for what we took for granted. I predict a few interesting travel trends shaping up once we are over the worst of the corona outbreak and people start travelling again. I think we will see much more mindful travel, a surge in retreats, special family holidays and a reconnection with our most-loved destinations. I definitely think people will head out to reclaim their right to travel, but it will be with far greater care and a sense of purpose. As an industry we must prepare ourselves for this great expedition now already.



Once the worst is over, it would definitely be the right thing to support the domestic tourism industry and explore our own country before heading to international destinations. The local tourism and hospitality industry is hard hit and we will see many small businesses suffer. It is important to try supporting them by not cancelling our trips, but rather postponing it. Talk to the industry, check what is possible and work something out. If you are able to book a weekend away or post-corona

holiday with flexible terms and dates for the future, it could help save tourism businesses.

It is time to become more customer-centred in everything we do. I think that every crisis brings opportunity and I hope that as an industry we are able to use what we have learnt and shape a whole new way of doing travel.



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There are no quick fixes and one thing is clear, our industry will be changed forever by Covid-19. We will not return to a state of normal. Normal no longer exists and won't be enough to safeguard us in the short term or help us recover fast enough when this crisis finally abates. So what do we do?

You are most likely caught up in a panic wondering how your brand will survive this crisis. Potential customers may not be planning trips or visits right now, but now is the perfect time to create and strengthen the bonds your customers or audiences have with you and your brand. Now is not the time to come up with a clever marketing campaign exploiting the crisis or trying to play on people's emotions. It is the time to be sincere, to be kind, to show your humanity and illustrate to your customers that you are ready to ride out this storm, even if you feel you are not, and that you will be there to welcome them back when they are ready to venture out again.



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It is much harder to reach new customers than to keep current customers. If you go silent now, you will be forgotten by the time Covid-19 is under control.

So here are a few things we recommend:

1. Develop a resilience plan that will help you survive the next few months
2. Develop a communications and social media plan that will keep your customers informed and hooked into your brand. Whatever you do, don't bombard anyone with advertising or special deals now. You can do that later, or actually, just stop selling on social media altogether. Rather inspire. Tell stories. Be human and read the room.
3. Brainstorm and test innovative new ways of doing business in the short and longer-term. Involve your team (if you have one), your clients and your customers. Talk with people and find ways to build new partnerships and collaborations.
4. Develop your recovery plan now so that you are ready and able to hit the ground running when the crisis abates (and it will!). Try your best not to fall into old habits of communication and doing business post-Covid-19. You have a few weeks to really talk and listen to customers and make sure you turn this challenge into your opportunity.
5. Assess your brand's online presence and customer journey to make sure it is fresh, user-friendly and effective not just for the weeks to come, but for the future. Be critical. Put yourself in the shoes of your customers and audiences. Start a podcast or a blog or a YouTube channel. Plan your content ahead. Get rid of jargon. Get real. Be sincere.
6. If you don't get social media management and content creation, reach out and find someone who does. There

are brilliant freelancers and online storytellers who are in great need for work now.

We are all in this together and our customers want to hear how we are doing and what we are doing to get through this crisis. Let's show them our resolve and what they can look forward to from us in the near future. We will beat Covid-19 of that I am certain.

[Destinate](#) is offering five small female-owned businesses the opportunity for strategic and communications support at no charge. Please email at info@destinate.co.za with a short letter of motivation and business overview to apply.

ABOUT MARIETTE DU TOIT-HELMBOLD

Mariette du Toit-Helmbold is an international destination marketing and tourism thought leader, as well as a writer and public speaker on tourism, responsible tourism, destination marketing, brand innovation and digital strategy. She established Destinate, an international specialised destination and tourism marketing agency, after an enviable tenure of 10 years as the CEO of Cape Town Tourism.

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