

▼ ED'S LETTER



South Africa's tourism industry faces a challenging and uncertain time over the coming months, as the impact of the changes to the country's visa regulations starts to be felt across all sectors of the industry.

At the time of going to press midway through June, there may have been few disruptions reported from South Africa's main gateway, O.R. Tambo International Airport, but there's no doubt that the true impact will only be felt in a few months' time. Unfortunately, according to the country's tourism bodies, by then it will already be too late to halt South Africa's slide from 'international tourism heavyweight' to 'unattractive also-ran'.

In fact, the likes of ASATA and SATSA are saying that it's already too late, citing the fact that China has taken South Africa off its brochure for 2016, due to the draconian new immigration regulations implemented by South Africa's Home Affairs department, including the requirement for adults travelling with children to produce an unabridged birth certificate.

Even more concerning than that is the message from the Home Affairs ministry that this is in line with international best practice and that they only implemented these regulations after consulting with the industry, a contention that has been shot down by ASATA's Otto de Vries and SATSA's David Frost, who say they have been begging the ministry and government as a whole for serious engagement for over a year, with little success.

At the moment, South Africa's government is ignoring pleas from the tourism industry to sit down, engage with the industry, and find a better way of combatting child trafficking, which is where this all started.

But, whilst the government is refusing to budge, the country is losing visitors. It's a no-brainer – why would you endure the cost and inconvenience of the whole in-person biometric visa data collection procedure, along with having to dig up or source an unabridged birth certificate for your child – never mind going through the uncertainty of whether or not you have the correct documentation and will be let on the plane – just to travel to South Africa?

I say that with the knowledge that there are other countries around the world with attractive offerings covering safari experiences, beach holidays, golfing vacations, wine tours, cultural and historical excursions etc.

South Africa will simply lose out, and perhaps the only way the government will sit up and take notice is when Tourism Minister Derek Hanekom stands up in a couple of months' time and attempts to explain why visitor numbers are down significantly.

That, in a country with a poor growth rate and massive unemployment, yet with a tourism sector that is one of the country's best-performing industries.

Well, prior to the visa regulations debacle, of course. ■

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