

Is Africa ready for the new shape of travel?

Could the US outbound market save the fragile tourism sector in Africa?

That is the question posed by flight analyst ForwardKeys, whose research found that the volume of flight searches from the US to South Africa has grown by 2% from January to February 2022, while the overall volume of flight searches to South Africa for the same period is up by 30%.

International arrivals into Africa and the Middle East confirm that this travel intent is translating into tourist arrivals.

International arrivals to Africa in Q2 of 2022 are at -33% compared to 2019 levels, above the total international outbound average of -45% and just behind the leading recovery region, the Americas (-27%). Last year this figure was at -64%, so this is a marked improvement, noted ForwardKeys.

Shingai George, Africa Market Expert, ForwardKeys, has revealed the best-performing destinations.

For tickets issued between January 1 and March 18 for long-haul travel for any time in the future versus 2019 levels, the list was dominated by West African cities and countries: Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Ghana.

The exceptions are the classic island destinations such as Zanzibar (+33%), Praia in Cape Verde (+10%) and Seychelles (-2%) – the typical sun and sea destinations made even more popular by the pandemic with people seeking more natural and large open spaces.

Most of the above-listed destinations also have more frequent direct flights with the US which are not only facilitating more travelers but attracting a more affluent class, too.

There is a growing luxury market opportunity across Africa, noted George. “As we’ve seen taking place elsewhere in the world, the pent-up demand, need for more space and excess savings are driving a boom in premium class cabin travel to Africa, just 24% under pre-pandemic levels,” he said.

These premium travelers report that the purpose of their travel is 69% for leisure, 12% for business and 12% are visiting friends and family (VFR).

“While Africa is finding its feet in the early phase of travel and tourism reactivation, it cannot afford to overlook the influence of its local domestic tourism efforts and many VFR touching down across the airports of Africa,” George continued.

Throughout 2021 local tourism kept the industry afloat as international travel was badly impacted by tough lockdowns and the impact of the Omicron variant. In 2022, despite the Omicron variant and conflict in Russia-Ukraine, international travel has restarted and is being pushed by VFRs the most, followed by leisure seekers. And they are staying longer than ever before, he observed.

The length of stay has increased by 7% in 2022 versus 2019, with 28% of issued tickets for 22 nights or more. The large bulk of travelers, 57%, plan to stay for 6-21 nights.

“Are the hospitality industry and local infrastructure ready for this?” asked George. “With travelers staying for a month or so, it could be down to flexible work conditions as remote working grows in popularity. Here’s that ‘bleisure’ opportunity ready to be seized.”

He concluded: “Africa is on a trend upwards but there are still plenty of new opportunities to tap into”

and new source markets to reach in LATAM and the world to replace the loss of Chinese travelers.”

*ForwardKeys is providing attendees and exhibitors of WTM Africa 2022 (to be held April 11-13 in Cape Town) 10% off any annual subscription for its suite of data solutions if enquiries are made before May 31, 2022, quoting WTMAfrica22. Email: info@forwardkeys.com