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Research article

Nothing small about them: Advancing small-town tourism through route development

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is growing globally, and tourist destinations need to keep evolving. The South African tourism sector shows a similar trend. The objective of this study was to investigate whether small-town tourism could potentially be advanced through route tourism development. This study utilized case study research design and adopted a qualitative research approach and is grounded in the philosophical perspective of interpretivism. Semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data, and thematic analysis was applied. Seven small towns situated in the Free State province served as case study, and data was collected from 15 participants. The findings suggest that there is a need to develop a small-town tourism heritage route and recommend that a framework for route tourism development developed by Proos be utilized as a basis for the development. The framework stresses the importance of social interaction, and involvement of key stakeholders. A small-town tourism heritage route could bring much-needed visitors to a region, thus revitalizing small towns and presenting economic and social benefits. The participants stressed the importance of functioning infrastructure, and dedicated marketing initiatives. This research has numerous practical implications, and the findings could serve as guidelines for other regions considering small-town advancement through route development.

KEYWORDS

Small-town tourism; heritage; route tourism; development; Free State

Introduction

International tourism recovered to pre pandemic (Covid 19) levels during 2024. Some destinations even recorded an increase in visitors during 2024 compared to pre pandemic numbers. Visitor spending also indicated a continued slow growth during 2024. The World Tourism Barometer from the United Nations Tourism highlights that an estimated 1.4 billion international tourist travelled during 2024. During 2024, Africa welcomed 7% more tourists compared to 2019. During 2025, an expected growth of 3% to 5% was expected for international tourist compared to 2024 (UN Tourism, 2025). According to Statistics South Africa, the South African tourism sector continues to grow. The total international arrivals reached 8.92 million in 2024, indicating a 5.1% increase compared to 2023. The Minister of Tourism in South Africa, Patricia de Lille, highlighted that "it is encouraging to see that despite economic uncertainties in various parts of the world, the global tourism sector is growing. It is even more encouraging that our country follows the same trend and trajectory" (South African Government, 2025b). It is however important to highlight that tourists are in search of value for money (UN Tourism, 2025). South Africa is currently a value for money destination (South African Tourism, 2024). One such an example of value for money options is small towns. According to Rardon (2016), "cities are great, but smaller-scale destinations give travellers a chance to dig deeper and make more meaningful connections with locals". Considering the small towns situated in the Free State province, the Free State province will serve as case study for this study. It is important to note that the Free State province tends to be overlooked as a tourism destination by many tourists. The province also has a very high unemployment rate (Proos, 2022, 2025; Proos et al., 2017; Proos & Hattingh, 2020). According to Free State DA MPL David van Vuuren, "the Free State needs urgent action to create meaningful employment opportunities and empower the people of the Free State" (Mpame, 2025).

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Open Rubric

Considering the growth in recent tourism statistics, the tourism sector could potentially provide much needed employment in the Free State province. Tourism development could lead to a multiplier effect for the province which in return leads to economic diversification. The multiplier effect means that money spent by tourists, is circulated through the economy, generating additional economic activity (Central Technical College, 2025). Through economic diversification, the province could ensure that there is not only an overreliance on one industry such as mining or agriculture. The province consists of many lesser-known gems that could be utilised as potential draw cards for tourists to the province. These gems include all the various small towns throughout the province. These small towns include Fauresmith, Philippolis, Bethulie, Gariep, Paul Roux, Rosendal, and Fouriesburg. These towns served as case study. During a trip in North America, it is popular to stop over in small towns. However, the same cannot be said for travellers to other regions of the world (Sowards, 2018). The development of a small-town tourism route could however counter this phenomenon and provide sustainable development for a region. Small-town tourism routes could potentially lead to destinations worldwide such as the Free State becoming a must visit value for money destination, thus advancing small-town tourism, and revitalising small towns. A tourist route could also provide valuable exposure to small towns who are currently lesser known to tourists. The main objective of the study is to establish if small-town tourism can be advanced through the development of a small-town tourism route. The broader aim of the study is to assist in offering focused marketing initiatives for small-town tourism routes. The questions thus remain, could the development of a small-town tourism route lead to the advancement of small-town tourism, leading to benefits to the region?

Small-town tourism and local economic development (LED)

According to Hoogendoorn & Visser (2016), literature based on small towns published on South Africa is relatively limited in both scope and scale. However, small towns are internationally recognised as a critical sector for economic development in regions (Rogerson, 2016). According to Johnson (2025) small towns are vital contributors to the tourism industry as these communities have a certain charm, cultural richness, and a sense of authenticity which cannot be experienced anywhere else. Small-town tourism potentially leads to not only a growth for the local economy, but also preserving of local heritage, building community pride, and sustainable development. Johnson (2025), states that there has been a renewed emphasis placed on small and medium towns (Proos et al., 2017). However, within the South African context, the major share of tourism and its benefits flow geographically to metropolitan areas and secondary cities (Rogerson, 2016). Small-towns and LED go hand in hand. LED is defined as “a process in which local stakeholders and government work together to plan, combine resources, and engage other appropriate partners (such as the private sector) to boost economic activity and create jobs” (Zaaijer & Sara, 1993:129). According to Rogerson & Rogerson (2019), tourism expansion could contribute to the growth of local economy, and job creation for the local community. Tourism currently supports one in every 18 jobs in South Africa (South African Government, 2026). The Minister of Tourism in South Africa, Patricia de Lille stated during her 2026/27 budget speech that “focus on tourism investment will help diversify tourism geographically and spread economic benefits into smaller towns and rural communities” (South African Government, 2026). This is good news for small-towns considering potential tourism route development in the future as this could lead to potential advancement of small-towns. According to Johnson (2025), small towns rely heavily on tourism to maintain economic viability and depend on the tourism industry multiplier effect. During the inaugural Small Towns Conference, a key issue which was raised was the untapped tourism potential of small towns in South Africa. It was highlighted that appropriate research is required to realise the potential of small-town tourism (Department of Business Management, 2015). Currently, many small towns are popular tourism destinations in South Africa. However, some are almost unheard of on the global tourism platform (SA-VENUES.COM, 2024). According to TOWN WEB (2024), attracting tourists to small towns should not be expensive, you need to identify what makes your small-town special and use these features to your benefit. Thus, much more research is required to make these small-town tourism gems global competitors. One method to ensure potential sustainable success for small-town tourism is by utilising route tourism development.

Route tourism development

Route tourism can be viewed as a strategy to link up lesser known, often rural, tourist attractions under a unified theme (Snowbal & Courtney, 2010). A tourism route brings people together to promote travel to a certain area/destination (Lourens, 2007). To be considered a tourism route, attractions, accommodation, tour operators, local artists, tour guides, and restaurants need to be present (Open Africa, 2022). According to Proos et al., (2017), small-towns could potentially stimulate the flow of tourists to small-towns through route tourism (Proos, 2024). Economic development and entrepreneurial opportunities for local areas could

potentially be experienced due to route tourism development (Jacobs et al., 2019; Proos, 2024; Proos & Hattingh, 2019). Tourism numbers could increase to a region when route tourism development occurs, and when several small attractions are linked and marketed collectively (Rogerson, 2007; Snowbal & Courtney, 2010). However, it remains important to note that there are also certain challenges associated with route tourism development. These challenges include but is not limited to the management of the tourism route, insufficient route tourism planning, and the lack of human resources and skills (Snowbal & Courtney, 2010). Internationally, there are numerous examples of successfully developed tourism routes. Examples include Route 66 in the United States of America, The Silk Route in Asia, and the Camino De Santiago in Europe. In South Africa, well known tourism routes include the Route 62 Wine Route, and various Battlefields Routes (Forrest, 2013; Proos, 2024; Proos et al., 2017; van Wyk-Jacobs, 2018). Other successful route development initiatives in South Africa includes the case of the Midlands Meander. The Midlands Meander primarily focuses on local arts and crafts but receive most of its income from accommodation and food provision (Snowbal & Courtney, 2010). Route tourism has also been investigated by numerous authors in various ways. For example Olsen (2003) focused on the potential role of tourism themed routes in Australia; Briedenhann & Wickens (2004), investigated the development of rural tourism routes in South Africa and highlighted factors critical to its success; Meyer (2004), highlighted issues for the development of tourism routes and gateways and their potential for Pro-Poor Tourism; Lourens (2007), examined themed tourism routes as a potential driver for local economic development; Proos & Hattingh (2020), identified a need for the development of a South African War Battlefields Route; whilst van Wyk-Jacobs (2018), focused on understanding the importance of niche market-based tourism routes. More recently Proos (2024), highlighted the Social Development Theory of Vygotsky (1978) as potential framework for route tourism development. The framework proposed the following: social interaction (where the role players in the study area are identified and social interaction between them is facilitated by experienced individuals taking leadership roles), More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) (where data on the area is gathered and inputs from knowledgeable stakeholders are provided) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (where stakeholders are guided in establishing a Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) (Proos, 2024). However, it is important to note that limited research is available on small towns and heritage tourism routes, especially in the Free State province, South Africa.

The case of the Free State province, South Africa, and small-town tourism

The Free State province served as case study for this investigation into small-town tourism and route development. The province was selected due to its central location in South Africa, proximity to larger metros such as Johannesburg, Durban, Kimberley, and Bloemfontein, its numerous underused heritage attractions, abundant small towns each with its unique characteristics, scenic landscapes, and unused tourism potential. The Free State province, South Africa is surrounded by an international border with Lesotho and provincial borders with the Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, North-West, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng (de Klerk & Proos, 2018; Proos, 2022, 2025; Proos & de Klerk, 2024). Tourist traversing the province will experience open skies, farms, mountains, and widely dispersed towns which the Free State is known for (Proos, 2025; Proos & de Klerk, 2024; Proos & Hattingh, 2019). Activities on offer in the province ranges from adventure tourism, heritage tourism, dark tourism and visiting some of the well-known restaurants and artisanal breweries/distilleries (Proos, 2022, 2025). Bloemfontein is the provincial capital, as well as the judicial capital of South Africa and is one of the most well-known destinations in the Free State (Proos, 2025). Bloemfontein is also rich in heritage attractions. Other well-known tourism destinations in the province include Clarens and Parys (Proos & de Klerk, 2024). However, numerous lesser-known small-town tourism destinations are located around Bloemfontein. Therefore, a small-town tourism route for the Free State province could potentially assist in advancing tourism in the province, and in these small towns. This proposed small-town tourism route encompasses some of the major tourist attractions in the province and will add to the tourism portfolio of the area. It is important to note that the current study will only focus on the lesser-known/developed small-towns in the province and will thus exclude Parys and Clarens. However, Parys and Clarens can always be included in the proposed route to extend the tourism product even further if required. The following towns form part of the proposed small-town tourism route for the Free State province: Fauresmith, Philippolis, Bethulie, Gariep, Paul Roux, Rosendal, and Fouriesburg.

These small towns were identified as point of departure for a tourism route as they currently are accessible and have various tourism offerings on offer. They also currently have a strong presence of heritage attractions which could potentially be exploited for tourism development in the region. These small towns are also currently not on the proverbial “tourism map” of the Free State province. The route will also pass through Bloemfontein which could serve as a central part of departure on the route with Bram Fischer

International Airport, and various car rental companies situated here. The route is situated on both the eastern and southern sides of Bloemfontein (it is important to note that future expansion to other parts of the province is possible). Most of the towns on the route is less than one hour travel distance from each other. The whole route is easily accessible during a tour of the Free State province, and can be accessed via the N1, N5, and N8. Refer to Map 1 for an illustration of the proposed small-town tourism route. The map showcases all the small towns that form part of the proposed small town heritage tourism route, the distances between the towns, more well-known small towns in the province such as Parys and Clarens, and the bordering provinces/country.

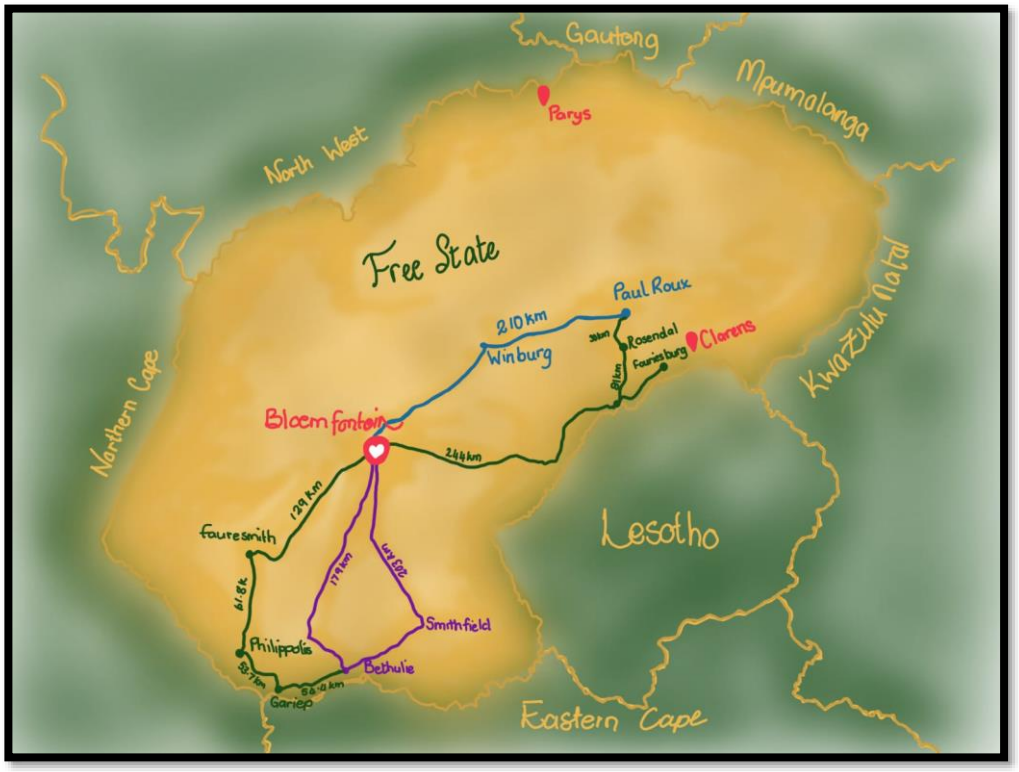

Figure 1: Map of the proposed small-town heritage tourism route for the Free State province
Source: Authors own

Methods

This study utilised case study research design and adopted a qualitative research approach and is grounded in the philosophical perspective of interpretivism. Semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Qualitative researchers seek out individuals, groups, and settings where the specific processes are studied (Strydom et al., 2002). The participants in this study were all employed in the tourism industry within the Free State province, and for this study, the sample was key tourism stakeholders in Fauresmith, Philippolis, Bethulie, Gariep, Paul Roux, Rosendal, and Fouriesburg. Snowball sampling was applied. The interviews were conducted during December 2025 – January 2026 and were compiled in English. Data was collected from 15 participants at various tourist establishments, including accommodation, coffee shops, curio shops, art galleries, restaurants, a winery, and an artisanal brewery. The distribution of the interviews is as follows: Fauresmith (2), Philippolis (4), Bethulie (1), Gariep (1), Paul Roux (2), Rosendal (2), and Fouriesburg (3). These totals were all determined by the availability of tourism establishments, and the availability of participants for the interviews during the researchers visit to the site. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes and were conducted at a location most convenient to the participants (i.e. in the tourist establishments offices). Some of the interviews were recorded after obtaining consent from the participants. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained before data collection started from the CUT Human Research Ethics Committee (CUT HREC). The ethical clearance number is CUT/REIC2025/000792. Theme identification is a fundamental task in qualitative research (Welman et al., 2005). Themes could emerge through interaction with the data, which is the essence of inductive qualitative data analysis (Schoch, 2020). Thematic content analysis was utilised to analyse the data. Common themes were identified by the researcher after reviewing the interview's research notes and voice recordings (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Miller & Gatta, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995). The interview guide consisted of five sections: Section A captured the

participants' demographics. Section B condition of infrastructure, Section C availability of tourism products, and tourism attractions in the Free State, Section D captured their views on a potential small-town tourism route for the province, Section E collected recommendations from participants.

Results

This section presents the results, which will later be used as guidelines for the development of a small-town heritage tourism route, and providing marketing guidelines. These findings could potentially serve as a point of departure for small-town heritage route tourism development. The demographic profile of the respondents will now be highlighted. Interviews were conducted in the following towns, Fauresmith, Philippolis, Gariep Dam, Bethulie, Paul Roux, Fouriesburg, and Rosendal. Establishments which were interviewed ranged from accommodation establishments, coffee shops, restaurants, breweries, heritage foundations, and local tourism forums. The type of tourism products on offer at the various establishments included accommodation, food, beverages, events, and heritage. The total years of operation for the 15 tourism establishments is 125 years, with an average duration of eight years of operation. The youngest business being less than one year in operation, whilst the oldest has been operating for 25 years. A total of 163 employees is employed across the various tourism establishments with an average of 11 employees per establishment. The main target market for the product owners included domestic tourists from the Free State and bordering Gauteng province, and a few international tourists. Interestingly these target markets are fascinated in experiencing local heritage.

Table 1: Overall quality of the infrastructure in the region

Theme: Infrastructure and facilities in the region	**Explanation and participant extract:** **Infrastructure includes roads, signage water, electricity, and internet connectivity.**
	"Water used to be an issue but has since been resolved, signage, electricity and connectivity is in a good condition, roads remain a problem" (participant 5)
	"Everything is in a good condition" (participant 8)
	"We only have issues with some roads in town; they are not good" (participant 6)
	"Everything is currently working; we just need to see an update in our town sewage systems as they are outdated" (participant 10)
	"I would give infrastructure a eight out of 10" (participant 3)
	'All good except water issues we are currently experiencing' (participant 15)

Table 1 highlights that the infrastructure in the region such as signage, water, electricity, and internet connectivity is mostly in a satisfactory condition. However, a grave concern was raised by a few participants with regards to the roads in and around towns. Participant 9 felt strongly that roads need to be upgraded urgently and had a response which stated: '*If we want to grow tourism in the region, we need our roads to be in a good condition, unfortunately as you could see driving here, there are currently some issues and an upgrade is needed*'. Respondents were also required to provide a rating of the various infrastructure in the region. The rating scale was from zero to 10, with zero being extremely poor, and ten excellent. The average rating was as follows: roads five, signage seven, water and electricity seven, internet connectivity eight. The above issues of roads in the region were even further emphasised by the respondents when they highlighted that transportation issues affect visitor access to their businesses. Some of the concerning responses included: '*100% a big yes it does influence my business negatively*' (participant 4), '*Yes definitely, tourist do not want to see this'* (participant 13), '*Yes, this affects if tourist will even decide to come back to the region*' (participant 2) and '*Since we have gravel roads, I have to say yes, it does impact on our business*' (participant 3). Concerningly only two respondents mentioned that they are not impacted by transport issues. These two responses included: '*No, we are used to the roads in South Africa and know what to expect*' (participant 12), '*No, some roads were recently upgraded in the region*' (participant 1). It can thus be concluded from the interviews that the infrastructure in the region is in a satisfactory condition except for the roads which need urgent attention. This was once again highlighted by respondents when asked if they know about any infrastructure that needs urgent attention. The responses from the participants enabled the researcher to develop a detailed list of tourism attractions in the various towns. A theme of 'heritage tourism attractions' was identified as the standout tourism attraction in the region. The Free State has a rich heritage situated in its small towns (Free State Online, 2026), and one which needs to be capitalised on. According to Demiröz, et al., (2025), heritage and tourism development has been a tourism resource for generations. Heritage tourism focuses on aspects of history or cultural heritage, and includes events and festivals, sites and attractions related to people, lifestyles, and traditions of the past (Zeitlin & Burr, 2011).

Since the identified small towns share a plethora of rich heritage attractions, the researcher reviewed the relevant literature to ensure a detailed list is compiled of the various heritage attractions available in the region (Nienaber & le Roux, 1982; Proos & Hattingh, 2019; van der Merwe, 2012). This list will be utilised later as point of departure for the potential small town heritage tourism route for the Free State province – see discussion section. The list of the heritage tourism attractions which are available in the immediate area includes: Fouriesmith: NG Church; Art Route; Burger Monument; Cemetery (British Graves); and the train

in the main street, Philippollis: NG Church; Emily Hobhouse Memorial; Cemetery (British Graves); Transgariep Museum; Karoo Craft Beer Brewery; and the Adam Kok Cannons, Gariep: Gariep Dam; and the Gariep Nature Reserve, Bethulie: NG Church; Reformed Church; Horse memorial; Concentration Camp; Museum; and the various historical buildings, Fouriesburg: NG Church; Meiringskloof Nature Park; Anglo Boer War Block House; Burger Monument Fouriesburg Town Hall; President Steyns House; Mile High Vinyards; and the water tunnels, Rosendal: NG Church; Voortrekker Monument; and Ark Contemporary, Paul Roux: NG Church; Museum; Uniondale Guest farm (dinosaur footprint); and the Pine Forrest. As can be deducted from the above list, heritage attractions are numerous in the region.

Participants indicated that the condition of these various heritage tourism attractions (listed above) is in a good condition and that there is a wide variety on offer. Below, some of the participants' remarks on the variety and quality of these heritage tourism attractions: '*I can only describe it as world class, and a must see*' (participant 4), '*Simply put, ten out of ten*' (participant 3) and '*Very good currently, and needs to be visited whilst exploring our region*' (participant 2). One response that stood out for the researcher was a response by participant 5 whom stated that '*current attractions are good, but there can be more attractions added, and they all need to be more disabled friendly*'. Participants also feel strongly that there are enough complementary services nearby, participant 11 stated that '*see for yourself, we are a small-town with a wide variety of restaurants to choose from, something you do not see every day. A short drive and you get to experience nature, history and so much more*'. Participants also emphasised that collaboration between tourism product owners occur in the small towns. One quote that stood out was from participant 3 who stated that '*we would like to see more collaboration between small towns in the region*'. The most popular attractions or experiences in the region highlighted by the respondents included heritage attractions. Participants view on developing a small-town heritage tourism route for the Free State province was overwhelmingly positive. Participants also emphasised the fact that a small-town tourism heritage route could advance small-town tourism in the region. Only participant 4 highlighting that '*I am neutral in such a development since I have seen other initiatives start with much dedication and passion and then die down and leads to nothing for the region*'. Positive views included statements such as: '*This is an outstanding initiative, and we must emphasise on the regions history*' (participant 1), '*Yes, and once more yes! Then the guests can be provided with options on what to do on the route in the province leading to them seeing and doing more. There is plenty to do, let's show them our heritage and everything*' (participant 2), '*This would be amazing. We can then share our resources and opportunities with other towns*' (participant 3), '*Positive, just have a very unique name for the route that stands out and draws attention to the region*' (participant 5) and '*100% positive, this could lead to the revitalisation of our small-town and the surrounding towns, something which is clearly needed and very urgent*' (participant 10)

The participants agreed that Fouriesburg, Philippolis, Gariep, Bethulie, Fouriesburg, Rosendal, and Paul Roux be included in the small-town heritage tourism route. Other suggestions from participants included adding Jagersfontein, Smithfield, and Senekal to the planned route. These small towns were suggested due to their location, and their variety of heritage tourism attractions available. These towns can be added once a formal route is being developed, with the option to also include more popular small towns such as Parys and Clarens. Participants strongly suggest that stronger marketing initiatives for the Free State province needs to be implemented as they feel not enough is done and visitors only know about the bigger tourism destinations such as Clarens and Parys. Recommendations from the participants included a strong online focus, wholesome content, showcasing the beauty and heritage of the region, a long-term vision, marketing materials in different languages, strong social media focus, and being more present. A strong theme that emerged from the participants is that a potential small-town tourism route should be marketed more broadly. It can be concluded from the participants that a small-town route for the Free State province around the theme of heritage must be developed.

Discussion

The above findings from the case study area (Fauresmith, Philippollis, Gariep, Bethulie, Fouriesburg, and Rosendal) will now be discussed, and their implications/recommendations will be used as guidelines for developing a small-town heritage tourism route for the Free State province. Worldwide, and especially in African countries such as South Africa, high unemployment rates are experienced. The unemployment rate in South Africa is currently 31.4% (BUSINESSTECH, 2026). The effects of these high employment rates are especially evident in small towns. However, South Africa's tourism industry is set to create more jobs according to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2025) and could assist in bringing in much needed economic and social benefits to small towns. It is thus important to consider the potential of tourism development to assist in declining the unemployment rate in countries such as South Africa and in small towns. Interestingly, the small towns from the case study, employs a minimum of 11 people at various

establishments. This shows similarities with Newsroom (2016) who stated that 14 people from surrounding communities benefit indirectly from income from tourism as a result of tourists staying at a lodge. The staff employed at the lodges, circulates the money again back into the community where they live, and helps grow the economy in this manner. The current unemployment rate in the Free State is 37,8%, the second highest in South Africa (van Vuuren, 2026). Tourism development through initiatives such as route tourism could lead to the creation of many more employment opportunities for a region currently struggling with high unemployment. Entrepreneurial opportunities can also be generated from development initiatives such as route tourism. This sentiment is emphasised by Prof Lubbe whom stated that "the tourism industry, as a growing, global and labour-intensive industry is well-positioned for both formal job-creation and for stimulating entrepreneurship" (Panyane, 2019). It is thus clear that tourism can serve as a method to advance small-towns, and route tourism could serve as catalyst for this change.

However, for a tourism destination and especially small towns to be competitive, grow local employment opportunities, and route development to occur, tourism infrastructure is critical. This notion is supported by numerous authors (Jovanović, 2016; Lourens, 2007; Proos & Hattingh, 2019; Rogerson, 2007; van Der Merwe, 2014). Tourism infrastructure is defined as collaborative infrastructure that creates a tourism destination by Chettiar et al., (2022). Dwyer & Kim (2003) stated that tourism infrastructure ranges from accommodation, food and beverage establishments, transportation facilities, themed attractions, tour wholesalers, tour operators, travel agents, car rental firms, local convention and visitor bureaux. Numerous ancillary services are also required to make tourism a success. It is thus crucial to establish if small-towns considering route development consists of this above-mentioned tourism infrastructure before they commence with development. Before any development of a region commences, it is important to establish the condition of the infrastructure. With the infrastructure in a satisfactory condition (with the one exception of roads) in the study area, small-town tourism route development can be proposed for the Free State province. This is confirmed by Imikan & Ekpo (2012) who stated that without infrastructure like roads, sanitation, harbours, portable water, electricity, safety services, hospitals, communication and accommodation tourism will not be possible (Chettiar et al., 2022). This notion is further supported by Tourism & Hospitality Management (2025), who stated that easy access for tourists is ensured by good tourism infrastructure facilities, which in return leads to an enjoyable stay for tourists. It is important to note that route tourism focusses on tourists who make use of their own transport to travel and visit various attractions at their own discretion and time (McLaren, 2011; Mhlabane et al., 2023), therefore road conditions need to be in a good condition if small-town tourism route development is considered. A link between infrastructure and economic development is visible. LED is heavily reliant on infrastructure availability (Makhathini, et al., 2020) and is something that was emphasised during data collection in this study.

The overall perspective of the establishment of the route is extremely positive with a consensus that small-town tourism could be advanced through the development of a tourism route. More specifically a theme of a small-town heritage tourism route was apparent amongst participants. Most of the participants highlighted that the development of such a route would have major benefits for the region ranging from economic, social, and infrastructure developments. This shares similarities with findings from Lourens (2007), and Proos & Hattingh (2019), who stated that the development of a tourism route would have a positive impact on a region. Since small-town tourism route development is feasible, now marketing initiatives to create awareness becomes crucial. According to Snowbal & Courtney (2010), cultural heritage routes can protect, and dispersed heritage sites and attract tourists. These routes could also serve as a means of local economic development for the region. Another important outcome of heritage routes is the increase in visitor spending and LED. Route tourism is viewed as the world's best hope for securing sustainability in tourism (Lourens:2007). Considering this statement and after reviewing the positive results for this study, it is recommended that a framework for route tourism development developed by Proos (2024) be utilised as a basis for the development of small-town heritage tourism route. The implementation of this framework could lead to the advancement of small-town tourism in the region. This framework will be applied below to the small-town heritage route in the Free State province: According to Mhlabane et al., (2023), route tourism planning relies on collaboration of various stakeholders. Proos (2024) agrees with these sentiments, and highlights that the first component of the framework is social interaction which can be considered as the departure point for route tourism development. Proos (2024), states that without any social interaction, no development can take place. At this stage of the development process, it is important for an individual or individuals to take charge of the initiative and be the driving force until the MKOs are established at a later stage.

To start the social interaction, a preliminary list of all the relevant stakeholders in the region should be established and include museums, accommodation establishments, restaurants, tourism information offices, government tourism organisations, and tour guides etc (Proos, 2024) emanating from Fauresmith,

Philippollis, Gariep, Bethulie, Fouriesburg, and Rosendal. This list can be compiled by driving the proposed route (Figure 1), or by visiting current tourism websites that showcase tourism products in the region. A snowball approach can also be utilised where one establishment refers to the other to ensure everyone is included who so wishes at this planning stage. Social media, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), could also assist with this part of the development process. Invites could be forwarded to all stakeholders, and a meeting could be arranged to discuss the development of the proposed heritage tourism route. It is key that social interaction shapes the basis of the planned route development. A meeting, either in person (centrally for example in Bloemfontein), or virtually (through online applications such as Teams) can be set up. At this stage, the initial driver/s behind the route can introduce the idea of the route development to the other stakeholders at this meeting. The initial drivers can then decide to step away from the driving role, or if they choose to still be part of the route, be considered as one of the MKOs. During this meeting, it is important that the knowledgeable individuals from the various stakeholders be identified. This is a crucial step in the development process as they need to take up leadership roles in the development of the route from the beginning. This is emphasised by McLaren (2011), who stated that if successful route tourism development wants to be achieved, strong leadership is required (Proos, 2019). This can be achieved through a formal nomination and voting process. They will be known as MKOs and will lead the development of a small-town heritage route into the future.

The MKOs in the region could be product owners, or academics that are able to guide the route development process and who knows the overall condition of the infrastructure and tourism sites in the area demarcated for route tourism development. These could be the participants who indicated they have more experience than the other during the interview process during this study. The local community should also be approached at this stage in the various towns to include them in the development process. At this stage cooperation is key between all the stakeholders. It is crucial that a cooperating network be established as soon as possible between all involved. A social media networking platform for example WhatsApp could be utilised to share information quickly and efficiently amongst role-players. These sentiments are shared by Mclaren (2011), who emphasises that co-operation, and mutual support between stakeholders, and the inclusion of the local community is a necessity in route tourism development (Proos, 2019). These MKOs will form part of the DMO at a later stage of the development process. At this stage, the condition of the current state of the roads in the region needs to receive attention. It is important to consider comments such as that of participant 5 in this study which stated that attractions need to be more disabled friendly. The MKOs should take comments like these seriously and consider them moving forward with route tourism development. Ways forward needs to be discussed by the MKOs to rectify the current condition of the roads in the area. Strong relationships will be required to be built at this stage with local and provincial government, especially considering the importance that the condition of infrastructure plays in a region. Here, the local communities could provide crucial information regarding the infrastructure and tourism in the region. Workshops with all stakeholders can be arranged to facilitate this process. A detailed list (such as the one complied in this study for heritage attractions) needs to be compiled for the region to ensure nothing is left out. Since the small-town heritage tourism route in the Free State is feasible according to participants, route tourism development may now commence. The MKOs can now construct a tourism development plan for the heritage route with the engagement of other stakeholders in the region. The steps for route tourism development includes solid market research that identifies key target markets (this has been confirmed through this study as being domestic tourists from the Free State and bordering Gauteng province); an audit of tourism products in the area (confirmed through this study as being in excellent condition); identify the unique selling features of the area where the route will be based (confirmed through this study as being the local heritage); a brand identity needs to be established (suggestions from the study includes ‘Explore unlimited local heritage, breathe in the view, and stay a little longer’); operational structure decided on (MKOs needs to establish this after they have been confirmed); and lastly, think long term about finances etc. of the route (this needs to be discussed by the MKOs of the route) (Proos, 2024; Tourism Tattler, 2017). This development process is not without it challenges and must be addressed seriously and with due consideration as they appear by the MKOs.

According to George (2019), government and private partnerships are critical to sustainable tourism development. According to Proos & Hattingh (2019), a DMO for a tourism route needs to be formed if a route wants to be sustainable and successful in the long run (Proos, 2024). The leadership for the route will come from the DMO which will be established comprising of the MKOs in the region. This stage is known as the ZPD. Engelbrecht (2019), states that a DMO is responsible for the marketing of a province, region, or cities. According to Proos (2024), the MKOs (stakeholders), need to form partnerships as peers and equal partners to establish a DMO (tourism route forum). It is thus critical that a DMO is established for the small-town heritage tourism route in the Free State. The DMO would be responsible for managing and marketing the route. Throughout the development process, social interaction remains key as this informs the process.

According to Smith (2025), a traveller will never know what could be discovered in small towns and off-the-beaten-path destinations if they do not visit these destinations. It is thus very important to note that small towns should not be overlooked (Marthinus, no date). The promotion of a tourism route depicts the success of a route and is crucial to consider when considering route development (Mhlabane et al., 2023; van Wyk-Jacobs, 2018). This was also emphasised by the participants. It is thus crucial to take into consideration the recommendations made by participants regarding the marketing of a small-town heritage tourism route. These recommendations included a strong online focus (the development of a website), wholesome content, showcasing the beauty of the Free State, a long-term vision, marketing materials in different languages (this can be catered accordingly to the target market of the small-town heritage tourism route), strong social media focus (on platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram), and being more present. Considering these recommendations from the case study, target marketing is of high importance. According to Tsiotsou & Goldsmith (2012), target marketing consists of three steps: market segmentation, targeting and positioning. The target market was identified as domestic tourists from the Free State and Gauteng provinces, the route can thus be positioned in the mind of the potential tourists as a must visit value for money, heritage destination.

Small-towns considering route development should also identify their unique selling point. (USP). USPs can be identified by conducting a SWOT analysis, listening to current customers/tourists, being unique, being passionate and targeting your audience (Tourism Northern Ireland, 2026). The USPs of the small-town heritage route should be highlighted in all marketing initiatives. Aspects such as the hospitality and affordability of a region must also be highlighted in marketing. The marketing should also emphasise important aspects such as travellers can travel the entire route and experience various tourism activities such as local heritage, events in the region, the views, quietness, and local food. The goal should be to change the perception of a destination. This could be achieved via the development of a heritage tourism route. From the case study this aligns with Free State Economic Development and Tourism who stated that the Free State province is not just a go through province but one that is ready to be explored and rediscovered (South African Government, 2025a). These sentiments could also align with the economic, small business development, tourism, and environment MEC Ketso Makume who encouraged Free State residents to think local and enjoy their own backyard (Mosebetsi, 2025). For other small-towns, route development could potentially address their local issues experienced. It is further suggested that a formal website be designed for the small-town heritage tourism route that can showcase its products and services to the target markets. According to El Maazouzi (2020), websites play a crucial role in attracting more tourist to a region. Websites assist in providing information to tourists regarding aspects such as exploration opportunities, entertainment options, learning benefits, and available communication channels (El Maazouzi, 2020). El Maazouzi (2020), and Marine-Roig (2019), also stated that travel websites are used to communicate with potential visitors. The National Department of Tourism Republic of South Africa (2018) provides the following tips for a destination marketing website: URL should be recognisable and linked to the brand, be brand consistent (the use of colours), be easy to navigate, adaptable to mobile devices, integrate social media, provide different pages for different target markets, provide a downloadable map, provide contact details, and measure website traffic. Thus, the website design for the route thus needs to be attractive, informative, and easy to navigate whereby users can ask questions, leave reviews, and perhaps even share pictures of their experiences in the region. A link to other social media platforms could also be provided on the website. The website could serve as a platform to communicate with potential customers as suggested by El Maazouzi (2020). The website should also be made available in various languages as suggested by the participants (adapted in line with target audiences). Chen et al., (2024), confirms this by stating that making use of diverse languages is becoming more important than ever in destination marketing.

An inexpensive way to market a route would be utilising social media (National Department of Tourism Republic of South Africa, 2018). Social media provides real time feedback, and updates can be made daily. Suggestions from the National Department of Tourism Republic of South Africa (2018) regarding the use of social media in marketing a destination includes posting information at least a few times a week. Social media influencers can also be approached to assist with this initiative. Morrison (2019), states that influencers are professional or semi-professional travel writers. These writers frequently prepare blogs and vlogs and are a source of inspiration for those who follow them (Proos, 2025). They could potentially be invited to travel the entire tourism route and showcase the offerings available. They could highlight key aspects such as road conditions, accommodation options, restaurants on offer, and what can tourist experience and engage in whilst visiting the small-town route. Visitors might get inspired by these influencers to visit a particular route. Route tourism development offers the opportunity for small-towns to be placed on the theoretical ‘tourism map’ especially for small-towns and regions which has been previously passed over as tourism destinations. Small towns in regions such as South Africa, Africa and even further abroad who is interested in advancing small-town tourism could consider route development. It is thus

suggested that for small-town tourism to be advanced through route tourism development that thorough research is conducted, social interaction between key stakeholders is enhanced, infrastructure is developed and maintained, whilst a strong dedicated marketing presence is presented.

Conclusion

For many people, imagining their dream getaway will consist of a small, picturesque town surrounded by natural beauty and filled with old-world charm, authentic character, and lots of colours (Smith, 2025). Now imagine a route that caters specifically to these needs of the traveller. The implementation of a new route is not without its challenges that needs to be overcome as stated by Lourens (2007). The main aim of this study was to establish if small-town tourism can be advanced through a small-town tourism route. In conclusion, stakeholders in the study agree that there is a need to establish a small-town heritage tourism route, and that it can advance small-town tourism. The development of such a tourism route for a region could lead to economic and social benefits for a region struggling with high unemployment rates. The participants stressed the importance of functioning infrastructure, and dedicated marketing initiatives for a small-town heritage tourism route to be developed and sustained. It is thus suggested that a small-town tourism route around the theme of heritage tourism is developed for the Free State province to assist in advancing tourism in the region, specifically for small towns. The study recommends that a framework for route tourism development developed by Proos (2024) be utilised as a basis for the development of a small-town heritage tourism route. The framework stresses the importance of social interaction, and involvement of key stakeholders. By implementing a new tourism route that is sustainable and purposefully driven, small towns in the Free State can become successful tourism attractions. Initiatives such as these could lead to development of infrastructure and economic situations in various destinations. This could lead to the preservation and continuation of these small towns long into the future. For future research, it is suggested that the demand-side perspective of tourists visiting the small-towns be measured to provide further developmental guidance.

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