



# Visiting friends and relatives travel matters for sub-Saharan Africa

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## Abstract

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is one of the most neglected topics in international tourism scholarship. In terms of sub-Saharan Africa despite acknowledgement of major flows of VFR travellers it is shown that there has been undertaken only a handful of research which is explicitly directed at VFR travel mobilities. The objective in this article is to argue that VFR travel 'matters' for African tourism scholars and its neglect should be rectified by a wave of new research studies focused around VFR travel in the continent. Two sections of material are presented. The first section provides an overview of key international scholarship and debates about VFR travel. The second section shows the limited existing African scholarship concerning VFR travel. Overall, it is concluded that the academic neglect of VFR travellers in sub-Saharan Africa should be addressed by an expanded research agenda, the findings of which can have potential relevance for African policy makers.

**Keywords:** VFR tourism; VFR travel; international debates; migration; sub-Saharan Africa

## Introduction

According to Munoz et al. (2017: 1) the phrase 'visiting friends and relatives' (VFR) represents "a tourism term used in academic and practitioner vernacular that refers to a substantial amount of activity and is yet commonly disregarded". Arguably, the activity of visiting friends and relatives historically is one of the earliest – if not the oldest - forms of tourism (Cohen and Cohen, 2015; Backer et al., 2017). Seaton (2017: 455) points out that apart from the chronically unfortunate, isolated or disaffected "relationships between family, relatives and friends, and visits to them, are mainstays of human life". At all places and times the bonds between friends and relatives are forged and sustained by reciprocal visits such that it can be argued that VFR travel is "more central to human experience than leisure tourism" (Seaton, 2017: 455).

Although the exact size of global VFR travel is unknown it is conceded widely that VFR travel constitutes a "huge form of travel throughout the world" (Backer and Morrison, 2017: 395). Until recently, however, VFR travel has been a marginalized category of mobility for tourism scholars as well as national and local tourism planners (Backer, 2012a; Backer and King, 2015). Among others Munoz et al (2017: 1) describe it as "a comparatively under-researched phenomenon" with current understandings and knowledge deemed as both unstructured and 'chaotic' (Palovic et al., 2014). Two recent content analyses of international scholarship on VFR show that VFR research began only in 1990 (Griffin, 2013; Yousuf and Backer, 2015). The work of Jackson (1990) is generally seen as the starting point for serious academic engagement with VFR travel. During the 1990s and 2000s there has been an upturn of research and debates. Nevertheless, the status of VFR in scholarship is that it "continues to remain one of the more neglected fields of study in tourism" (Yousuf and Backer, 2017: 436).



In total, over the period 1990 and 2015 it was revealed that only 129 publications had VFR as their primary focus of investigation (Yousuf and Backer, 2015). For Backer and Morrison (2017: 396) this level of output is described as both underwhelming and disappointing. Moreover, for Backer et al. (2017: 56) it is evidence that VFR travel “remains under-estimated, under-valued and under-researched”. The greatest proportion of these VFR studies was focussed on the global North with European and Australian research especially prominent in recent years. Overall, it can be agreed with Yousuf and Backer (2017: 436), that in light of “the magnitude of VFR travel by visitor numbers, such a small number of papers highlights a research imbalance”. Many scholars thus have taken the position that VFR is under-recognised and potentially undervalued both by academics and policy makers (Backer, 2012a, 201b; Backer and King, 2015). This said, by 2017 Backer and Morrison (2017: 398) could identify an upturn of international academic concern for VFR tourism and in particular “with a notable increase in the past 2 years”. Likewise, Munoz et al. (2017: 1) write of VFR travel as “receiving growing interest in tourism academe and practice”. This awakened scholarly interest around VFR tourism yet may result in the outcome of giving “VFR travel the respect it deserves” (Backer and Morrison, 2017: 398).

The aim in this paper is to argue that VFR travel ‘matters’ for African tourism scholars and its neglect should be rectified by a wave of new research studies focused around VFR travel in the continent. Two sections of material are presented. The first section provides an overview of key international scholarship which surrounds and is emerging about VFR tourism. The second section point out the limited existing African studies on VFR travel and provides evidence from South Africa of its size and potential significance for destinations both in urban and rural areas of the country. Overall, it is argued that VFR travellers merit a more substantive place on the African tourism agenda than they occupy at present.

### **VFR International Debates**

In existing international VFR scholarship much attention surrounds both its conceptual definition and of how to leverage its commercial possibilities for local economic impacts (Backer, 2007; Griffin, 2013; Backer and King, 2015; Munoz et al., 2017). It is evident that VFR travel should not be treated as an homogenous segment. Several studies have drawn attention to the necessity to recognise often important differences between visits to friends as opposed to relatives and of the differences between visits from international as opposed to domestic VFR visitors (Backer, 2008; Backer and King, 2015; Backer et al., 2017). Current evidence substantiates that visits to relatives substantially outnumber visits to friends with some studies suggesting that visiting relatives may make up close to 80 percent of VFR travel (Backer et al., 2017). In addition, trips to visit relatives are usually more frequent than those to visit friends; different length of stay patterns as well as expenditure patterns also appear to occur with visits to friends as opposed to relatives. Further, the category of visitors to friends is often a younger cohort of traveller than those visiting relatives. Overall the empirical evidence suggests quite clearly that “VFR travel is not one homogeneous ‘market’” (Backer et al., 2017: 58).

In other useful conceptual contributions, Munoz et al. (2017) build upon work by Backer (2012) and suggest that we should be writing about the synthetic term “VFR travel” as opposed to VFR tourism. The rationale is that “VFR is not simply tourism; there are instead multiple practices within visits that have little to do with tourism such as attending a funeral, child care or visiting an ailing relative” (Munoz et al. 2017: 4). Indeed, VFR travel may not be associated with a leisure experience at all and in many cases “is motivated by a range of reasons according to which specific obligations are fulfilled through host-guest interactions” (Katsoni, 2016: 19). In establishing a categorisation of the VFR market Backer’s (2012a) typology has been both extensively debated and adapted (Backer and Ritchie, 2017; Munoz et al., 2017). At its core, Backer (2012a) differentiates between (at least) three different groups of VFR travellers. The first are ‘pure’ VFRs who are travellers who stay with friends and relatives and

state VFR as the main purpose of a trip. Second, are the CVFRs or commercial accommodation VFRs who stay in commercial forms of lodging but who have travelled to particular destinations with a VFR purpose. In Canada one recent investigation disclosed that 14.5 percent of all person nights spent by international visitors in paid accommodation is accounted for by visitors who also stay with a friend or relative (Griffin and Nunkoo, 2016). Finally, there is the group of EVFRs or 'exploiting' VFRs who choose to stay with friends and relatives, despite the fact that the main purpose of visit to them maybe leisure rather than actually seeking to reconnect with friends or relatives. In other works such as Munoz et al. (2017) this classification is re-calibrated and further expanded to incorporate the influence of the host on the nature of VFR travel.

Both Griffin (2013) and Munoz et al. (2017) contend that the most distinguishing feature of VFR travel as opposed to other forms of travel is the existence of a prior personal relationship between the visitor and host. The importance of the host and of social interactions between travellers visiting friends or relatives emerges as a vibrant new important theme in international VFR scholarship most of which is dominated by studies on the VFR traveller (Yousuf and Backer, 2017). Among others Yousuf and Backer (2017: 435) point out the vital role of the host in moulding the patterns of trips and expenditures undertaken by VFR travellers through the offer of recommendations on where to visit or eat. An array of different kinds of VFR hosts can be identified including residents of a destination, second-home owners, university students, diaspora and temporary migrants who can all offer advice to VFR travellers (Poel et al., 2006; Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Young et al., 2007; Capistrano, 2013; McLeod and Busser, 2014; Munoz et al., 2017). Put simply, the role of the host can be a significant factor in determining the economic impact as well as business opportunities that might be leveraged with VFR travel for local communities (Dutt and Ninov, 2017).

Several economic benefits have been highlighted for destinations in terms of the growth of VFR travel. It has been demonstrated that VFR travel is associated with repeat visits, is less susceptible to seasonal variations than leisure tourism, and is resilient in times of economic downturn (Backer, 2012b; Backer and King, 2015). In many parts of the global North there is also evidence that VFR travellers can be a market for commercial accommodation, including hotels and bed and breakfasts (Backer, 2010). Several investigations emphasise the value of VFR travel for destinations in terms of combined expenditures made by both the host and the VFR tourist (Backer, 2007; Backer and King, 2015). In addition, as stressed by Backer and Ritchie (2017: 405) a significant aspect of VFR travel as compared to other forms of tourism "is that VFR travellers are connected to the community" through the friends and relatives that are being visited".

VFR travel has considerable policy implications not just in terms of economic impacts but in terms of social considerations (Backer and King, 2017). Arguably, according to Munoz et al. (2017: 5), it is the social element of VFR travel which differentiates it from other aspects of tourism "where travellers are mostly detached from the normal life of locals, have mainly an interest in the community as a destination, and rely on their own information sources. Among others Backer and Morrison (2017) highlight the important point that often "VFR travel involves socio-economically disadvantaged individuals who otherwise cannot engage in other forms of travel". Accordingly, VFR travel can assume the form of social tourism with significant ramifications for enhancing quality of life both for the visitor and the host (Backer and King, 2017). Indeed, as argued by Backer and Morrison (2017: 396), "VFR offers an important aspect of a naturally occurring form of social tourism that has important policy implications". One of the distinguishing characteristics of VFR tourism is that travellers "have an important relationship with the destination through the host" (Backer and Ritchie, 2017: 401); in many respects it can be considered that VFR travellers are connected to the destination community through the friend or relative that is to be visited. Accordingly, it is argued that VFR travel is "a potential target market to aid destination recovery after crises/disasters" (Backer and Ritchie, 2017: 401). Overall, Backer and Ritchie (2017: 403) are of the opinion that VFR travellers



constitute “a unique form of travellers as they are genuinely connected with the impacted region and can be a source of comfort for the local residents whom they are friends/relatives with”. Research in Australia points out that VFR travel is dominated by those who are socio-economically less well-off and without the means to participate in leisure travel (Backer et al., 2017). Accordingly, it is stressed that travelling to see relatives may provide opportunities to secure quality of life or social benefits.

Another approach to studying VFR travel relates to the relationships between migration and mobilities research. Gafter and Tchetchik (2017) argue that the growth of international VFR travel is inseparable from globalization and the attendant expansion of flows of international migrants. Williams and Hall (2002: 38) observe that migration “is a precondition for VFR tourism, although this can be indirect in the sense of being dependent on the migration of earlier generations”. Palovic et al. (2014) assert that VFR travel is a concrete expression of the complex relationships between migration and tourism. Likewise, Uriely (2010) alerts us that VFR tourism is a form of travel that links tourism with migration and involves trips between two sets of different ‘homes’. Boyne et al. (2002: 241) assert that “VFR tourism enjoys a distinctive relationship with migration in that some form of migration is (in some cases, even if it involves an inter-generational time lag) a prerequisite for VFR tourism” (Boyne et al., 2002: 241). For example, the activity of VFR expands with the growth of rural to urban migration flows, both of a permanent or circulatory character, which causes the splitting and dispersion of family and social networks and correspondingly, the pursuit of regular ‘home’ trips by migrants. Labour migration from less to more developed countries is a vital trigger for the growth of international VFR travel (Cohen and Cohen, 2015). Williams and Hall (2002: 11) argue that “migrants can become poles of attraction for VFR tourist flows, while they themselves become tourists in returning to visit friends and relations in their areas of origin”. To a large extent, therefore, the expansion of VFR travel is anchored on the circular and cumulative linkages that co-exist between tourism and migration (Williams and Hall, 2002).

In the context of the global South Cohen and Cohen (2015) view VFR travel as one form of “discretionary mobilities” and representing one of the major practices of low income groups. Indeed, across the global South the practice of VFR is most appropriately conceptualised as part of the informal sector of travel and tourism. The relevance of a migration focus for studies of VFR travel in emerging tourism regions of the global South is highlighted particularly by the persistence – if not expansion in certain regions – of forms of temporary migration which result in the existence of geographically stretched or multi-locational households (Dick and Schmidt-Kellert, 2011; Dick and Reuschke, 2012; Steinbrink and Niedenfur, 2017). The growth of what Steinbrink and Niedenfur (2017) describe as trans-local linkages blurs the distinctions between the urban and the rural. In addition, it draws attention to the complex character of rural-urban relations in the global South (Steinbrink and Peth, 2014).

### **Limited African Debates**

Historically, much of the tourism industry across sub-Saharan Africa has targeted international tourists from outside the continent with the consequence that the tourism product “has been predominantly structured and designed for international tourists from outside Africa” (UNCTAD, 2017: 101). This said, it is recognised that given past and recent migration flows “tourists visiting friends and relatives also account for high volumes” (UNCTAD, 2017: 112). Current African tourism scholarship, however, is massively weighted towards investigating the activities and expenditures of international leisure tourists. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that in survey after survey of African tourism research, the phenomenon of VFR travel obtains hardly a mention (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2011; Rogerson and Visser, 2011; Visser and Hoogendoorn, 2011; Hoogendoorn and Rogerson, 2015; Visser, 2016). The large volumes of VFR travellers mostly are ignored by African tourism scholars who seem to prefer





to focus on the activities of the more high profile groups of international tourists and their perceived economic impacts for local communities and destinations.

Overall, therefore, there exist only a handful of scholarly investigations concerning VFR travel in sub-Saharan Africa. As shown by the global review of research on VFR travel the amount of African scholarship lags far behind that of other parts of the world (Yousuf and Backer, 2017). This is confirmed, for example, by a content analysis of the *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* which in its several volumes has never published a single article which explicitly focuses on issues around VFR travel. In addressing the underdeveloped character of VFR research, a starting point for African researchers is the need to acknowledge that VFR occupies a meeting point between debates concerning migration, mobilities and tourism (Palovic et al., 2014). This nexus applies to investigations around both international and domestic VFR travel. International VFR travel in the context of Africa is a major investigatory void. Nevertheless, in two recent rich contributions Marschall (2017a, 2017b) explores the temporary home visits undertaken by groups of African transnational migrants based in South Africa in terms of their motivations, subjective experiences as well as the perceived significance of these home visits for migrants' sense of identity and belonging. Arguably, in the case of international migration and VFR travel there can be important tourism policy implications. For example, Asiedu (2008) points to the potential value for Ghana to incorporate marketing initiatives designed to encourage international VFR tourism inflows from the diaspora, mainly living in Europe and North America.

As is typical of other parts of the global South, the largest component of VFR travel in Africa is represented by domestic VFR movements and cross-border VFR travel particularly in areas where ethnic connections straddle political borders. Examples of cross-border VFR travel would be substantial flows between South Africa and Lesotho or South Africa and Swaziland (Rogerson, 2017). The major movements of domestic VFR travel can only be understood in relation to the growth of urbanization and of shifting migration dynamics which engender close ties between urban areas and the second rural 'homes' of migrants (Hoogendoorn, 2011; Rogerson, 2014a; Rogerson and Hoogendoorn, 2014; Rogerson and Mthombeni, 2015; Rogerson, 2015a, 2017). The widespread occurrence of multi-locational households and of trans-local livelihoods across many parts of sub-Saharan Africa is documented by Steinbrink and Niedenfur (2017). In the case of Botswana, Morupisi and Mokgalo (2017) draw attention to the nature of Botswana culture in accounting for the growth of VFR travel. This involves only a limited amount of domestic leisure travel in the country as compared to regular visits back to home villages, farms and cattle posts primarily for the purpose of visits to relatives (Morupisi and Mokgalo, 2017).

In South Africa large flows of VFR travel are accounted for in relation to the role of multi-locational households and the persistence of circulatory migration flows even after the ending of apartheid influx control restrictions (Steinbrink, 2010). Together these shape the detailed patterns of VFR mobilities in the country by geographically stretched households as members move between different rural and urban bases or 'homes' (Rogerson, 2014b; Rogerson and Hoogendoorn, 2014; Rogerson and Mthombeni, 2015). Large flows of VFR travel are triggered by these structures with VFR travel dominated by 'ordinary' travellers including from the country's poorest communities' which points to a potentially significant social tourism element for VFR travel especially in rural South Africa (Rogerson, 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

In many respects the pioneer VFR research for Africa as a whole was that produced in 2003 by Rule et al. (2003). In this often unacknowledged contribution to VFR scholarship Rule et al. (2003) identified VFR travel as South Africa's most 'popular' form of domestic tourism. The authors sketch out the broad characteristics and geography of VFR travel. The article identified that the contours of the VFR market link "in approximate proportionality to the national population, albeit it was observed that "black Africans were over-represented amongst VFR tourists" (Rule et al., 2003: 101). As a whole it was estimated in their 2001 survey that more than three-quarters of VFR tourists are black Africans and more than half of VFR tourists are

female. Concerning spatial patterns of VFR travel they identified important destinations as areas with a high population density, economic hub locations and areas that experienced high levels of labour migration. Although it was disclosed that the average spend of VFR travellers was far less than that of leisure or business tourists it was argued that VFR expenditure should not be overlooked as it was calculated as “comprising more than a quarter of the expenditure at domestic tourism destinations” (Rule et al., 2003: 105).

The critical significance of VFR travel expenditures for destinations was recognised particularly in terms of spending on transport, food and gifts. The important observation was made that, whilst VFR travellers tended to be low spenders, “VFR tourism expenditure primarily in the transport and food sectors is most likely to be captured by the minibus industry and inexpensive eating houses and restaurants” (Rule et al., 2003: 107). Finally, gift-giving associated with African VFR travellers opened up opportunities for informal traders operating particularly in the vicinity of minibus taxi ranks.

It was more than a decade after the publication of the Rule et al.’s (2003) work that issues surrounding domestic VFR travel were again picked up by South African tourism scholars. Rogerson (2015a) argued for the need to ‘revisit’ VFR travel and mapped out the geography of VFR movements stressing its significance both in South Africa’s major cities and in the underdeveloped former Homeland regions of the country. In addition, Rogerson and Hoogendoorn (2014) explored the relationship between second homes, historical migration and VFR travel and along with other works highlighted the important role of VFR travel in South Africa’s distressed areas. Further studies involved a deeper understanding of the geography of domestic tourism and of tourism flows to small towns and marginal regions (Rogerson, 2014a, 2014b, 2015b, 2016). These studies have pointed to the specific importance of VFR travel for tourism development in these areas (Rogerson, 2015b, 2017). Indeed, in former homeland areas, which are not traditionally considered as tourist destinations, VFR travel is the most significant base for local tourism economies (Rogerson 2014a 2015b) Other recent investigations have begun to uncover intra-urban variations in VFR flows. In metropolitan Johannesburg, for example, Soweto is shown to be the central focus for VFR movements into metropolitan Johannesburg (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2016). The sheer scale of both domestic and international VFR travel in the example of South Africa has been tracked and its uneven geographical impacts identified (Rogerson, 2015a, 2017).

Taken together, the results of this emerging corpus of South African VFR research underline the critical imperative for undertaking additional scholarship on the topic and especially in relation to tourism development in small towns and the distressed underdeveloped regions of the country. Furthermore, they also point to a potential parallel agenda for expanded VFR research in other countries of sub-Saharan Africa which also are characterised by multi-locational households and trans-local livelihoods (cf Steinbrink and Niedenfur, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Over a decade ago Rule et al. (2003) argued strongly for an expanded research agenda on VFR travel in South Africa. It was stressed in particular that local South African tourism stakeholders should “recognise the magnitude of the sector and to explore the potential it holds as a generator of movement and economic activity” (Rule et al., 2003: 105). The potential for VFR tourism to contribute towards a more inclusive South African tourism economy was also flagged as it held “particular relevance to the small business and informal components of the tourism industry that policy is being specially geared to empower” (Rule et al., 2003: 105). Since the publication of that article there have been only a handful of further African research investigations about VFR travel in the continent, most notably on Botswana, Ghana and South Africa. The contemporary size and significance of VFR travel makes it imperative for African tourism scholars to gain a better understanding of its contributions



especially to domestic tourism activity and revenues (Rogerson, 2014a; Backer et al., 2017). In final analysis, it is argued that VFR travel matters to tourism scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa and that the neglect of VFR travellers should be addressed by an expanded research agenda, the findings of which can have potential relevance for policy makers.

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