

## The Impacts of COVID-19 on Urban Tourism Destinations: The South African Experience

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### Abstract

The impacts of COVID-19 for cities are generating an extensive international scholarship. This study contributes to the literature on the ramifications of urban tourism. The research is an assessment of what might be termed the early stage or 'first round' of the impacts of COVID-19. Using the IHS Global Insight local tourism base for South Africa the study analyses COVID-19 impacts during 2020 for the country's eight metropolitan areas. It reveals the pandemic's devastating impacts for tourism flows and correspondingly the diminished role of tourism in urban economies. An important finding is that South Africa's metropolitan areas experienced a greater proportionate decline in tourism than the recorded national rate of decline. The consequence is a reduction during 2020 in the relative share of metropolitan areas in the South African tourism economy. This implies a reversal of established trends towards polarization and increasing city dominance that have been observed over the previous 20 years. The major burden of the collapse of urban tourism has fallen upon the five largest metropolitan areas which have been severely impacted by government regulations to halt the pandemic and resultant changes in consumer preferences for travel.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; urban tourism; South Africa; metropolitan areas; de-polarization

### Introduction

COVID-19 has exerted devastating health and socio-economic consequences throughout the world emphasizing the imperative for evidence-based research and epidemic preparedness (Pak et al., 2020). Rose-Rosewood et al. (2020: 98) maintain that the "COVID-19 pandemic is, first and foremost, a global public health crisis, yet its impacts extend far beyond the realm of epidemiology alone. We are also witnessing a political, economic, and social crisis the likes of which the world has not seen since the 1918 influenza pandemic and the Great Depression". Further, as stated by Andrews et al. (2021: 2), whatever "the eventual outcomes of COVID-19 pandemic, and the developments that might arise on the way, it is already very clear that it represents not only one of the most significant health crisis of our time but something that, in terms of overall significance, will very likely stand as a major event in human history alongside other great events including other global pandemics; wars and conflicts; industrial, political, social and cultural revolutions; natural and environmental disasters; and key technological advances and moments". COVID-19 impacts "will likely reverberate in the ways our world prospers or works for many years after the last case. Those of us who lived through it are likely

never to forget it, and generations to come will likely be taught about it” (Andrews et al., 2021: 2).

The potential consequences of the pandemic, its impact on human lives and its reconfiguration of society and space “are at times difficult to comprehend” (Chan et al., 2020: 343). This said, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic is creating and will leave behind “multiple, profound and overlapping scars” on societies and economies (Davies et al., 2020: 210). The pandemic’s effects will likely be experienced for years to come – among others in economic, health, environment and tourism systems (Gössling et al., 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). National governments generally have led the response to the COVID-19 crisis because of their unique powers, responsibilities, authority and legitimacy (Allaberganov et al., 2021; Visagie & Turok, 2021). Common responses by governments across the world to this public health crisis have included, *inter alia*, prioritised testing and tracking, airspace and border closures, quarantine and stay-at-home orders, the imposition of social distancing, restrictions of business operations and practices; an emphasis on ‘essential workers and services’ as opposed to ‘non-essential services; the closure of educational institutions, the halting of sports and entertainment events and venues; and, most recently, the roll out of mass vaccination campaigns (Greer et al., 2020; Nhamo et al., 2020). For the tourism and hospitality industry these government responses to the pandemic have recast entirely the sector’s institutional landscape and operational practices.

Within countries Visagie and Turok (2021) maintain one would expect the socio-economic impact of the crisis to vary between different types of places, dependent both on the resilience of their local economies and the strength of their institutions. In South Africa the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic disclose geographical variations in the disaster’s impact for metropolitan areas, secondary cities, small towns and rural areas. In addition, they point to, in many cases, the amplification of existing inequalities between regions, between rural and urban areas, and between different forms of urban settlements (Turok & Visagie, 2021). Against such a backdrop this research represents an exploration of the geographical impacts of COVID-19 on tourism within countries. The contribution to literature is an assessment of what might be termed the early stage or ‘first round’ of the geographical impacts of COVID-19. Our focus is specifically on urban tourism destinations in the Global South where several centres are identified as significant foci for urban tourism including a number of cities in sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2021b). A recent international overview of ‘the other half’ of urban tourism pointed to tourism’s importance as both a mobility phenomenon and policy issue across the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). The case study is urban South Africa and the period for investigation is the immediate impacts of COVID-19 during 2020. Two further sections of material and findings are presented. The next section locates the study within the broader context of literature on COVID-19 and tourism. Following this discussion is an analysis of the disastrous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for South Africa’s major cities which in pre-COVID-19 times constituted the leading foci for tourism development in the country (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014, 2017, 2021c).

### **COVID-19 and tourism scholarship**

An unanticipated impact of COVID-19 is that tourism and hospitality research “is experiencing a renaissance” (Zopiatis et al., 2021: 275). The pandemic underlines the critical importance of an enhanced understanding of change in tourism (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021), including the often neglected issues around historical change (Rogerson & Baum, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021d, 2021e). Critically, the pandemic has triggered a ‘paradigm shift’ in the psyche of tourists which is allied to risk perceptions around safety, health and travel (Matiza, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Matiza & Slabbert, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021f; Villacé-

Molinero et al., 2021). Cheer (2021: 12) states that the onset and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic “has dealt a severe blow to the global tourism industry and its wide cross-section of stakeholders from government and industry, to communities, non-government organisations and wage earners and micro-enterprise holders whose livelihood are derived from tourism”.

For the past two years, tourism researchers have sought to capture ‘change’ as it happens, reflect on the significance of the pandemic, and engage in forecasting tourism futures (Yang et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, the pandemic has been a trigger for an “explosion” of research (Zopiatis et al., 2021: 278) and a massive outpouring of writings from tourism scholars about COVID-19 impacts on the tourism and hospitality sectors (Kwok & Koh, 2021). One recent ‘systematic integrative review’ of international COVID-19 hospitality and tourism research identifies the emergence of distinct clusters of investigations around the themes of pandemic impacts, tourist perceptions, and opportunities for sustainability, transformation and operational change (Zopiatis et al., 2021). Similar findings are reported from other global research surveys on tourism and COVID-19. In the review of early literature on COVID-19 and tourism conducted by Yang et al. (2021) five major themes are pinpointed, namely (1) psychological effects and behaviour; (2) responses strategies and resilience; (3) sustainable futures; (4) impact monitoring, valuation and forecasting, and (5) technology adoption.

For Kwok and Koh (2021) a content analysis of tourism writings suggests the key research directions can be distilled into the three themes of ‘ramification’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘transformation’. ‘Ramification’ surrounds assessments of the pandemic’s impact on tourism, including changes in tourism demand as well as evaluations of the impacts of government support; ‘adaptation’ research includes responses in terms of the application of new technologies as well as explorations of the capacity of destinations and tourism businesses to adapt to change and build resilience; and, ‘transformation’ captures that body of work which is forward-looking as it reflects on the prospects for restructuring future tourism as well as debating post-pandemic outlooks (Butler, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Rastegar et al., 2021; Lew et al., 2022). New conceptual frameworks for tourism research in the COVID-19 environment also have been offered (Cheer et al., 2021). In terms of the unit of analysis a range of different lens – individual, organization, destination and industry - have been applied. Individual-level studies consider people’s perceptions, behaviour and well-being with a common focus on tourists’ perceived risk of travelling. Organization-level studies evaluate COVID-19 impacts on enterprise operational performance, responses and resilience to the pandemic. Destination-level studies assess the pandemic’s impacts on particular regions or cities and review response strategies for recovery (Rutynskyi & Kushniruk, 2020). Industry/sub-industry level studies centre on how the pandemic influences particular sub-industries such as hotels, guest houses or the cruise sector (Yang et al., 2021).

In the global context of COVID-19 and tourism scholarship the survey by Yang et al. (2021) shows South Africa to be the leading focus of research in sub-Saharan Africa albeit it remains that as compared to the rest of the world Africa as a whole (including South Africa) still has a relatively undeveloped literature. Tourism scholars in South Africa responded to the challenges of the pandemic crisis and produced a range of investigations which contribute to policy debates (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021e). Concerning the unit of analysis, the largest group of South African research studies relate to the sub-industry level and seek to explore how the pandemic has impacted particular components of tourism and hospitality. Such research has been conducted variously for hotel and guest house accommodation services (Sucheran, 2021a, 2021b), hospitality services (Sao Joao, 2021) business events, MICE and sport (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2021; Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021; Hemmonsbey et al., 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021; Swart & Maralack, 2021), nature tourism (Visser & Marais, 2021) and with reference to coastal locations both for surf tourism (Martín-González, Swart & Luque-Gil,

2021) and cruise tourism (Sucheran, 2021c). The application and potential for virtual tourism has been discussed by Lekgau et al. (2021) and for sports tourism by Woyo and Nyamandi (2021).

The COVID-19 ramifications for VFR travel (Dube-Xaba, 2021), tour guides (Nyawo, 2020; Mbatha et al., 2021) and the potential opportunities opening up in niche tourism (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021g, 2021h) also have come under scrutiny. Issues surrounding the important shifts taking place around consumer intentions to travel have been examined variously by Matiza (2020), Bama and Nyakana (2021), Matiza and Slabbert (2021) and, in an international perspective, by Rogerson and Rogerson (2021d). Further, the potential opportunities for boosting domestic travel through the activities of stokvels and pay at your own pace options have been explored (Adinolfi et al., 2021). Organization level studies are represented in several works which have been pursued on enterprise adaptive responses by different kinds of tourism firms (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson et al., 2021; Rogerson, 2021; Booyens et al., 2022). In addition, research is available on the ramifications for environmental management linked to small, medium and micro-enterprises (Lewis et al., 2021). Finally, in the category of destination-level research, debates about national response and recovery strategies debates are opened up by Musavengane et al. (2020), Rogerson and Rogerson (2020a, 2020b), Dube (2021), and Rivett-Carnac et al. (2021). For the national level a detailed baseline study that shows the uneven geographical patterns of tourism in South Africa at the close of the pre-COVID-19 era was produced by Rogerson and Rogerson (2021c).

### **COVID-19 impacts on urban tourism: The South African record**

Arguably, cities represent “physical spaces where the needs of tourists and inhabitants intersect” (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2022: 1). The ramifications of COVID-19 for cities are generating an extensive literature. In one thematic review of the emerging international agenda of city research Sharifi and Khavarian-Garmsir (2020) highlight the importance of issues surrounding environmental quality, socio-economic impacts, management and governance, as well as of transportation and urban design. In a significant contribution Florida et al. (2020) investigate the effects of the pandemic on urban economic geography at both the intra- and inter-regional scales in the context of four major forces, *viz.*, the social scarring instilled by the pandemic; the lockdown as a forced experiment; the need to secure the urban built environment; and changes in the urban form and system. The analysis concludes it highly unlikely that COVID-19 will derail the long-standing process of urbanization and the dominant economic role of cities. Nevertheless, it is argued that even if cities will not shrink or die from the COVID-19 pandemic “they will certainly change” at least in the short-term (Florida et al., 2020: 2). One potential area for short-term change is urban tourism. Based upon Chinese evidence Zhang et al. (2021: 719) argue that “crisis events have different impacts on urban and rural tourism” with tourism in cities found to be highly susceptible to economic crises.

Cities as tourism destinations have experienced several short-term challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As pointed out by D’Orazio et al. (2021) they represent significant locations for the spreading of contagion because of the possibilities of direct or indirect interactions among individuals is boosted by such conditions as (1) interactions between residents and visitors with the danger of ‘importing’ infections and increasing local outbreaks; and (2) crowd levels which cannot be always managed by tourism stakeholders and amplifies transmission possibilities. In a COVID-19 environment urban tourism faces particular setbacks cities are less suited to social-distancing-friendly forms of tourism than rural areas. Changes in consumer psyche and travel behaviour “could ultimately reshape the demand for urban tourism” (Zenker, 2022: 284). Fundamental changes are occurring in the nature of business tourism which are disrupting the business model of many tourism and hospitality enterprises

for urban tourism (Zenker, 2022). A vibrant debate surrounded the radically changed environment of those urban tourism destinations that were struggling with problems associated with ‘overtourism’ (Koh, 2020; Oskam, 2020; Chaney & Seraphin, 2021; Milano & Koens, 2021). Among others Smith (2020: 51) points to the dramatic and immediate change wrought in many European cities: “One minute, tourism experts were desperately seeking solutions to chronic overtourism in St Mark’s Square in Venice and the next, they were watching (albeit fake) online videos of dolphins frolicking in the undisturbed canals!”. Russo (2020: 74) discusses whether “the global sanitary crisis and its long tail could be working as a watershed moment in the handling of the structural drivers that produce overtourism”. One of the leading writers on overtourism asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic now demands a comprehensive “reframing of urban tourism” (Koens, 2021).

Urban tourism scholarship on the Global South has not addressed the detailed ramifications of COVID-19 (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). The COVID-19 impacts on urban tourism in South Africa are analysed here utilising the data base which is maintained by the private sector consultancy IHS Global Insight. The tourism data base is a subset of the IHS Global Insight Regional eXplorer which is a consolidated platform of integrated data bases that, given the limits of official establishment and enterprise surveys, provides the most useful data for planning in South Africa at a sub-national scale, including down to municipal scale (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2004). Data is collated regularly from a broad range of sources (both official and non-government) with the primary data re-worked to ensure consistency across variables and by applying national and sub-national verification tests in order to ensure that the model is consistent for measuring business activity (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c). For tourism researchers IHS Global Insight gives details about the tourism performance of all local municipal authorities in the country, *inter alia*, data on the number of tourism trips differentiated by primary purpose and origin of trip; bednights by origin of tourist (domestic or international); calculation of tourism spend; and, of the contribution of tourism to local gross domestic product (GDP).

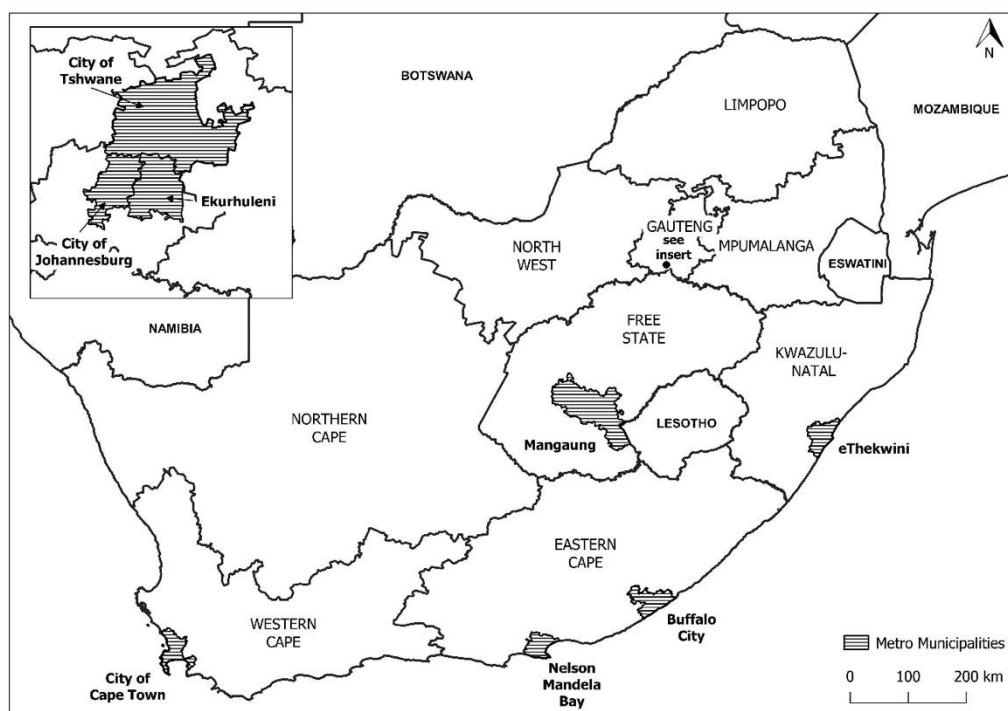


Fig 1. The Location of South Africa’s Eight Metropolitan Areas Source: Authors

The national level data demonstrate that during 2020, as occurred elsewhere in the world, the tourism sector of South Africa was ravaged by the pandemic. Initial indicators of decline show that between 2019 and 2020 total trips fell by 66.9%, total bednights by 68.2%, total tourism spend by 70.2%, and tourism’s overall contribution to national GDP plummeting from 5.6% to 1.7%. The collapse was evidenced across all forms of purpose of tourism, namely leisure (-64.3%), business (-70.3%), visiting friends and relatives (-67.5%) and other (-67.1%). Correspondingly, it was manifest for both the categories of domestic (-66.9%) and international trips (-66.8%). Although the largest absolute falls in trips and bednights were recorded nationally in terms of purpose of travel for VFR and by origin for domestic tourism it is observed that the greatest relative decline was for the category of business tourism.

Table 1: Metropolitan Areas as a Whole: COVID-19 Impacts 2019-2020

Indicator	2019-2020 Net Change	% Loss
Total Tourism Spend (R'000s)	120 079	72.7
Total Trips ('000s)	11813.7	69.9
Total Bednights ('000s)	77142	70.2
Leisure Trips ('000s)	2863.8	68.7
Leisure Bednights ('000s)	19795	67.6
Business Trips ('000s)	1100.7	71.2
Business Bednights ('000s)	8253	71.2
VFR Trips ('000s)	6870.2	70.3
VFR Bednights ('000s)	43188	71.4
Other Trips ('000s)	979.0	68.7
Other Bednights ('000s)	5905	69.5
Domestic Trips ('000s)	8973.7	70.8
Domestic Bednights ('000s)	40514	73.1
International Trips ('000s)	2840.0	67.0
International Bednights ('000s)	36629	67.3

Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight

Table 1 shows the analysis of COVID-19 impacts during 2020 for the metropolitan areas as a whole. It discloses a consistent trend across all 15 indicators of a massive hollowing out of the tourism economies of South Africa’s metropolitan areas (Fig.1).The negative impacts represent a loss of nearly 73 percent of tourism spend and correspondingly slashing the contribution of tourism to urban economies. In terms of economic impacts, the greatest financial losses derive from the 68.7% downturn in leisure travel and 71.2 % cut in business trips. The estimated downturn for domestic trips was in the order of 70.8 % and 67% for international trips, the majority emanating from regional African destinations.

Table 2: Metropolitan Areas as a Whole: Proportion of National Total

Indicator	% 2019	% 2020
Total Tourism Spend	58.0	53.0
Total Trips	37.7	34.3
Total Bednights	44.4	41.6
Leisure Trips	39.1	34.2
Leisure Bednights	42.1	38.4
Business Trips	47.6	46.1
Business Bednights	52.9	51.9
VFR Trips	36.1	33.0
VFR Bednights	43.9	41.5
Other Trips	36.4	34.7
Other Bednights	46.2	43.6
Domestic Trips	36.1	31.8
Domestic Bednights	39.7	34.6
International Trips	43.6	43.3
International Bednights	50.4	41.6

Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight

Table 2 shows the collective contribution of the eight metropolitan areas to the national totals across a range of different indicators concerning trips, purpose of trip, origin of trip, total bednights, purpose of bednights, origin of bednights and - most revealing of all - total tourism spend. It is demonstrated that the major consequence of COVID-19 for the metropolitan areas as a whole has been to reverse an established trend observed (with only minor variations) for almost two decades for these areas to capture an ever-increasing share of national tourism in South Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014, 2017, 2021c). COVID-19 has triggered a short-term *de-polarization* of the tourism space economy as the dominance of the metropolitan areas has been markedly reduced during the period 2019-2020. The diminished share of the metropolitan areas is across all 15 indicators on Table 2 with the most significant being the marked downturn in share of total spend from 58.0% in 2019 to 53.5% by 2020. Other important signals of decline for metropolitan areas are the demise in the share of total trips from 37.7% to 34.3%, total bednights from 44.4% to 41.6%, and in the segment of leisure travel from 39.1 % to 34.2% in trips and from 42.1% to 38.4 % for leisure bednights.

It is observed, however, that despite the major national decline in business trips brought about through the impacts of the pandemic the actual share of the metropolitan areas of total business trips was only marginally down from 47.6% to 46.1% and for business bednights from 52.9 % to 51.9%. This finding emphasizes the continued dominance of South Africa’s largest cities as business tourism destinations even in the context of a diminished business tourism sector as a whole which has been occasioned by COVID-19. In terms of origin of trips the most striking finding is that the share of (the usually most lucrative segment) international bednights accounted for by the metropolitan areas has eroded from 50.4% to 41.6%. Arguably, several factors underpin these COVID-19 negative impacts on South Africa’s metropolitan areas. These would include, *inter alia*, the immediate ramifications of lockdown restrictions and border closures, consumer reluctance to travel to metropolitan areas as COVID-19 ‘hotspots’, shifting consumer travel preferences to avoid crowded areas in search of open space and nature, the closure (partial or temporary) of many leisure tourism attractions in cities, the reduction of VFR travel, and the radical transformation of business tourism towards virtual rather than in-person meetings.

Table 3: Individual Metropolitan Areas: Ranking by Select Key Indicators

Rank	Total Spend Absolute Decline (R'000s)	Leisure Trips Absolute Decline (‘000s)	Business Trips Absolute Decline (‘000s)	Total Trips Absolute Decline (‘000s)	Total Bednights Absolute Decline (‘000s)
1	Johannesburg 29 649	Johannesburg 825	Johannesburg 360	Johannesburg 3 279	Johannesburg 21 310
2	Cape Town 22 506	Cape Town 506	Tshwane 188	Tshwane 1 915	Cape Town 13 855
3	eThekwini 20 828	eThekwini 492	Cape Town 148	eThekwini 1 674	Tshwane 12 615
4	Tshwane 18 171	Tshwane 419	Ekurhuleni 127	Ekurhuleni 1 669	Ekurhuleni 10 872
5	Ekurhuleni 16 526	Ekurhuleni 327	eThekwini 126	Cape Town 1 668	eThekwini 9 454
6	Mangaung 4 940	Mangaung 148	Mangaung 70	Mangaung 718	Mangaung 3 677
7	Nelson Mandela Bay 4 660	Nelson Mandela Bay 78	Nelson Mandela Bay 52	Buffalo City 524	Buffalo City 2 917
8	Buffalo City 2 798	Buffalo City 66	Buffalo City 30	Nelson Mandela Bay 366	Nelson Mandela Bay 2 441

Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight



Disaggregating the analysis to the level of the eight individual metropolitan areas certain differences can be discerned in the COVID-19 impacts on tourism during 2020. Table 3 shows, however, a consistent pattern that the major absolute losses were experienced by the five largest metropolitan areas of Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekweni, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni. In examining the ranking of metropolitan areas on Table 3 it must be noted that total trips are weighted by the category of VFR travel. This also affects the category of total bednights which Rogerson (2018) stresses does include both commercial and unpaid bednights; the latter is constituted by the majority of VFR travel. Overall, total tourism spend is the best single indicator to show the impacts of COVID-19 across different South African metropolitan areas.

Table 4: COVID-19 Impacts on Tourism Contribution to GDP

	2019 %	2020 %
<b>SOUTH AFRICA</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>1.7</b>
Johannesburg	5.2	1.4
Cape Town	6.3	1.7
eThekweni	5.9	1.7
Tshwane	5.1	1.5
Ekurhuleni	6.3	1.7
Mangaung	6.8	2.1
Nelson Mandela Bay	4.8	1.4
Buffalo City	5.1	1.4

Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight

As a consequence of the decline in total tourism spend the contribution of tourism to local GDP was markedly reduced as is indicated on Table 4. It is demonstrated that the massive reduction of COVID-19 to the economies of South African metropolitan areas is reflected in the collapsed contribution of tourism to the respective local economies with the most dramatic falls recorded for the metropolitan areas of Cape Town and Mangaung. Once again this is a signal of the COVID-19 impact of de-polarization of the tourism space economy and a lessening – at least in the short-term- of the trend towards a strengthening dominance of the metropolitan areas in South African tourism. Of the eight metropolitan areas only Mangaung records a proportionate share of tourism to GDP in 2020 which is higher than the national contribution.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 outbreak is having significant influences on many facets of the urban economic and landscape (Florida et al., 2020). Early research findings point to critical impacts variously on urban food supply chains, city tax revenues, small and medium-sized businesses, migrant workers, the informal economy, as well as the tourism and hospitality sector (Russo, 2020; Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020; Koens, 2021). The necessity for cities to evolve sustainable and resilient strategies against COVID-19 impacts is stressed by D'Orazio et al. (2021).

Arguably, COVID-19 has impacted tourism and hospitality “in multiple ways” (Walters & McKercher, 2021: 1171). Zenker (2022) argues that the crisis represents an important change for researchers of urban tourism. This study contributes to the literature on the ramifications of COVID-19 for urban tourism. This study contributes to the literature on the ramifications of COVID-19 for urban tourism. It reveals in the case of South Africa’s metropolitan areas the pandemic’s corrosive impacts for tourism flows and correspondingly the diminished role of tourism in urban economies. A significant finding is that South Africa’s metropolitan areas have experienced a greater decline in tourism than the national rate of decline. The result is a reduction during 2020 in the relative share of metropolitan areas in the South African tourism economy. In turn this implies a reversal of established trends towards polarization and increasing city dominance that have been observed over the previous 20 years.



The major burden of the collapse of urban tourism has fallen upon the five largest metropolitan areas which have been severely impacted by government regulations to halt the pandemic and resultant changes in consumer preferences for travel. A key question for future researchers is to examine whether these results are merely a short-term change or represent the beginning of a ‘new normal’ for tourism in South Africa’s large city destinations.

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