

The Evolution and Pandemic Recovery of Africa's First Creative City of Gastronomy

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Abstract

Research issues around tourism development in small town South Africa have generated a growing scholarship. With the announcement in May 2023 by the World Health Organisation of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic the paper reflects both on the pandemic experiences for tourism in South African small towns and of relevant initiatives for revival at the beginning of the post COVID-19 era. Specifically, the aim in this paper to extend the literature on tourism in small town South Africa by focusing on the context of small town recovery from COVID-19 analysing the example of the Overstrand, Africa's first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy. The study shows that under certain circumstances amenity-rich small town localities can be resilient to external shocks such as the pandemic. For the resilience and recovery of small-town tourism destinations it is argued that place-based responses are critical.

Keywords: small town tourism; resilience; COVID-19 impacts; pandemic recovery

Introduction

Over the past two decades research issues around tourism development in small town South Africa have generated a growing scholarship (Donaldson, 2007; Rogerson, 2016; Donaldson, 2018, 2021). Among the most prominent research themes are those concerning local economic development impacts, inclusion, niche product development and route tourism (Ferreira, 2007; Mograbi & Rogerson, 2007; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014; Butler & Rogerson, 2016; Donaldson, 2018; Drummond & Snowball, 2019; Kontsiwe & Visser, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2020a; Ferreira, 2020; Donaldson, 2021; Drummond et al., 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a; Mhlabane et al., 2023). Although most writings centre on contemporary and policy-related issues there are a handful of recent historical research investigations on tourism's past in small towns of South Africa (Rogerson, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b; Drummond et al., 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2023). Several studies document that the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the tourism sector in South Africa including the economies of small town tourism destinations (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020c; Booyens et al., 2022; Giddy et al., 2022). Importantly it has been revealed in tourism geographical research that COVID-19 was a catalyst for certain shifts in the tourism space economy as uneven geographical impacts were recorded (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022a, b, c).

With the announcement in May 2023 by the World Health Organisation of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic it is essential now to reflect both on the pandemic experiences for tourism in South African small towns and of relevant initiatives for revival at the beginning of the post COVID-19 era. Against this backdrop it is the aim in this paper to extend the literature on tourism in small town South Africa by focusing on the context of small town recovery from COVID-19. The specific case study is the Overstrand Local Municipality in South Africa's Western Cape province. This is a destination centred around Hermanus which would be described as an 'amenity-rich' small town coastal area. In terms of organisation, following a review of contextual literature and methods, the paper moves to a brief overview of the

evolution of this small town tourism destination before turning to pandemic impacts and the directions of post-pandemic recovery.

Contextual literature

In scholarship on urban places small towns are described as a “generally underappreciated urban type” (Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022a: 1). Indeed, it is only over the past decade that small towns have appeared on the radar-screen of policy-makers as well as on the agenda of increasing numbers of researchers (Bański, 2022; Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022a, b). One trend observed in the Global North has been that with the decline of resource-based industries (such as agriculture and mining) many small towns have recognised the potential benefits of tourism and sought to acquire a share of the industry. Among others Rabbiosi and Ioannides (2022: 107) argue that tourism scholars “regularly extol the merits of tourism as a tool for economic diversification” for small towns and in particular for those with a narrow economic base with problems of high unemployment. Across the international experience tourism has been shown to be a critical factor for the sustainable development of small towns (Liubitseva et al., 2017). Small towns in China are a distinctive focus in the literature on tourism in small towns with much attention directed at the process of tourism-driven urbanization as a local strategy for small town development where distinctive tourism attractions are located (Qian et al., 2012; Yang, 2019). The international literature underscores the diversity among tourism small towns. These include mountain resorts, places with rich historical heritages, spa towns and coastal localities (Rabbiosi & Ioannides, 2022). Examples of niche products used for leveraging sustainable tourism and the growth of small towns are slow tourism (Pecsek, 2016), event tourism (Liubitseva et al., 2017), archaeological tourism (Ramsey & Malcolm, 2018), food or gastronomy tourism (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b) and cultural heritage resources (Drummond et al., 2021). In particular, the use of intangible cultural heritage as a resource for building small town tourism destinations is widely highlighted in several countries (Beznosiuk et al., 2021; Rabbiosi & Ioannides, 2022; Yang & Wall, 2022).

A critical theme on the international research agenda for tourism small towns is the contemporary challenge of economic revival and recovery following the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022b; Donaldson & Majiet, 2023). Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic exerted uneven geographical impacts and for different-sized urban places, including for tourism in small towns. In small town New Zealand Nel and Stevenson (2019: 179) make the important distinction between the group of amenity-rich and well-situated small towns which have been able to benefit from a tourist appeal and proximity to large urban centres on the one hand and the situation “for the greater number of remoter centres, lacking touristic potential and experiencing vulnerability to shifts in what is often their situation of mono-economic dependence and marginalization” on the other hand. For some observers the pandemic crisis contributed to further marginalise the economic prospects of many peripheral small towns (Fuerst-Bjeliš et al., 2022). Other researchers highlight, however, that at certain well-located small towns with amenity resources COVID-19 offered potential opportunities during the uncertain times of the pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). As Rabbiosi and Ioannides (2022) point out small towns can be gateways to the countryside, open spaces and to natural parks. They are potentially attractive destinations in a post-COVID-19 environment as an alternative to often overcrowded major tourism cities. Powe et al. (2022) stress the successful revival and reorientation of small towns can be the outcome of tapping amenity-based strategies and this has been particularly the case for small towns favourably located to larger urban centres. Perkins and Mackay (2022) report the dramatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the manner in which it stimulated a re-imagining of tourism and development in certain small towns leading to new and more

effective administrative arrangements and place promotion initiatives for tourism recovery. The impacts and recovery measures in a South African destination with high amenity resources are now under scrutiny.

Methods

The historical analysis is based on a desk review of extant literature and of source material accessed at the National Library depot of Cape Town. The material and discussion relating to pandemic impacts and recovery draws upon local press reports and most importantly a set of 20 qualitative interviews which were conducted in the period January-February 2021 with key private sector tourism product owners in Hermanus. The interviewees included the organiser of a country market (1), adventure tourism operators (2), wine estates (3), a craft brewery (1), tours and transfers (1), restaurants (2) and cross-section of accommodation providers from high end five-star accommodation, four and three-star guest houses, bed and breakfasts, farm stays and backpackers (10). Fifteen of the interviewed tourism enterprises had been in business for ten years or more. The interview schedule sought to determine the issues of COVID-19 impacts and of enterprise responses, challenges and opportunities. Interview material was analysed through thematic analysis which Christou (2022) emphasizes is an extremely valuable tool for qualitative studies.

Findings – The evolution of the Overstrand as a tourism destination

The initial settlements in the Overstrand area were associated with a local economy engaged in fishing and whaling (Hunt, 2017). The transition from fishing village began during the late nineteenth century (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b). By the time the Union of South Africa was established in 1910 Hermanus was an emerging destination for leisure travellers. Of note were the area's "unrivalled attractions to the Holiday Maker" such as "unrivalled sea and lake, mountain and woodland scenery", "magnificent beach", "good surfing" on the Klein River Lake (Cape Times, 1911: 101). Over and above these attractions the area was increasingly lauded for its popularity for sea angling. In 1913 reports which appeared in *Motoring in South Africa* showed that Hermanus was starting to be a popular drive tourism destination for travellers from Cape Town. The description given of the town was as follows: "Hermanus is a quaint little fishing village built almost on the edge of cliffs overlooking the South Atlantic Ocean. There is a comfortable hotel, the Marine, as well as several boarding-houses, and during the holiday season the place is full. It is popular with artists, on account of its many beautiful seascapes" (Anon, 1913: 28). During the 1920s and 1930s Hermanus was likened to the French Riviera due to its picturesque scenery and pristine beaches (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b).

The area continued to grow as a leisure destination throughout the 1940s. The apartheid era solidified the area's status as a coastal resort which served mainly white domestic tourists (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b). A watershed moment for the areas' tourism fortunes was the return of the Southern Right whales to the Overstrand coastal region during the 1980s, after being almost hunted to extinction during the early part of the twentieth century. This return led to a boost to the local tourism economy and the reinvention of the local region as an ecotourism destination which subsequently became (re-) branded as the 'Whale Coast'. The arrival of the whales fortuitously corresponded with the demise of apartheid and return of international visitors to South Africa and the Western Cape in particular which opened-up greater possibilities for the Overstrand region in the post 1994 era (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Since the democratic transition the Overstrand has strengthened its status as one of the country's leading destinations for coastal and marine tourism and as a pleasure resort for both local and international tourists (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2020d).

Post-2000 there has occurred considerable innovation within the local tourism economy. This has been characterised by the growth and product development of the local wine routes, restaurants, local markets and farm stalls which has coalesced into the movement towards gastronomic tourism. Within this context the local municipality of Overstrand submitted an application for status as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy. Although the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (which was launched in 2004) includes certain metropolitan areas and large cities Rabbiosi and Ioannides (2022) point out that it also encompasses many lower order urban places and many small towns especially in the categories of crafts, folk art and gastronomy. On 30 October 2019 66 new cities were granted Creative City status by UNESCO. Among the ten designated as Creative City of Gastronomy was Overstrand, the first in Africa. The Overstrand application to join this international network was instigated by the person who was responsible for Durban being designated as Creative City of Literature as well as a number of enthusiastic local champions including winemakers, restaurateurs and tourism marketers. The Overstrand application for UNESCO recognition strongly emphasized issues of sustainability and of local farming operating in a sustainable way in terms of field to fork supply chains (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). A week after the UNESCO designation the Overstrand tourism office announced a substantial programme of food events starting December 2019 into 2020 to celebrate the award. All the planned events to maximise impacts from the UNESCO designation were derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns imposed in South Africa from March 2020 (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b).

Findings – Pandemic impacts and recovery

In common with the rest of the world, the tourism sector of the Overstrand experienced the radical impacts of COVID-19. As the fourth most tourism-dependent municipality in South Africa the pandemic dealt a devastating blow to the local economy which is heavily based on tourism small firms (Booyens et al., 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022a, b, c). The Overstrand cluster's tourism economy is heavily leisure-based with the majority of visitors being domestic tourists, albeit with critical reliance on international tourists for tourism spend and support of the commercial accommodation services.

The qualitative interviews conducted in 2021 revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected all tourism establishments in the Overstrand. Common words and phrases used to describe the impact on business included: “*devastating*” “*less of everything*”, “*survival is the bottom line*”, “*eye opening*”, “*unless BEE [Black Economic Empowerment] compliant can't survive*” “*unpredictable*”, “*it's been crippling*”, “*totally decimated*”, “*destroyed the South African market*”, “*disastrous for the most part of 2020*”, “*horrific*”, and “*quite painful but not devastating*”. All interviewees experienced a change in demand since the onset of COVID-19. In a number of cases there was a hope that demand for their tourism products would increase from domestic tourists. In many cases, however, this has not been translated into actuality largely as a consequence of the wider impacts of COVID-19 on the South African economy with reduced discretionary expenditure. Of significance also is that certain respondents identified “the fear” factor of travel as another factor in accounting for laggard domestic demand. One interviewee responded “*Less demand as most domestic guests are affected financially, so weekends away are now considered a luxury. And the threat of COVID making potential domestic guests wary of communal facilities and interacting with strangers*”. In common with trends observed in other parts of South Africa, price-cutting was a supply-side response to the crisis for nearly all of the tourism enterprises. Businesses had to lower or freeze their rates to entice domestic tourists in order to ensure that their offerings were perceived as desirable and affordable. The voices of the accommodation establishment operators illustrate these issues: “*Responded by decreasing rates. More focused on the local market. Always had*

a 'local is lekkker' rate drop of 20% now it is 30% and previously was mainly applied in the low season when internationals were not around. There is business over the week-ends but during the week very quiet with discounts up to 45% and still many days there are no guests. Hopeful that it will pick up". In addition to reducing rates such tourism businesses as wineries and upmarket accommodation establishment sought to maximize domestic visitor numbers by adjusting and diversifying their offerings to make them more family- friendly and in some cases also pet-friendly.

The major challenge for all business owners was to keep the business open and to survive. With minimal support from government these (mainly small) businesses necessarily had to be self-reliant in their crisis responses and address a range of organizational challenges (Booyens et al., 2022). Critically, during the December and January holiday period (2020-2021) the government-imposed alcohol and beach bans put additional strain on already struggling tourism businesses in the Overstrand and environs to avoid closure of their operations. *"The challenge is that the business imperative is simply survival. There is no room for the introduction of innovative new products. The business survival is critical to the staff and also the community work the business drives"*. Arguably, the local tourism economy showed considerable resilience during this difficult period. Many businesses were more flexible with late bookings and cancellations, cut staff hours rather than retrenching them, and others sought to diversify and create new products or adjust existing offerings to increase their attractiveness to domestic tourists whilst also focusing on marketing and an improved social media presence. Restaurants simplified their menus and some added frozen meals to their businesses. At two winery restaurants frozen meals could be purchased at the premises and one of the wineries instituted a delivery service for meals as far as Cape Town. Given the need for businesses to survive during this unprecedented period 19 of the 20 interviewees highlighted the need for inter-enterprise co-operation in the form of joint marketing, information sharing or referrals. It was stated: *"We co-operate within the group and do more joint marketing with a range of Hermanus businesses to encourage visitors to visit the town"; "Always referred to other accommodation suppliers and recommended places to eat and visit. Need more formal linkages through joint advertising for Hermanus as a whole and individual businesses as well"*.

The responses of interviewees to government regulations focused on the alcohol and beach bans as well as the curfew especially for the restaurant businesses which particularly impacted those in the night-time tourism economy. The interview responses highlighted the devastation caused to coastal tourism businesses. *"When the new regulations came into force on 27 December the whole area 'packed up and left"; "Very negatively. Understandably, the closure of our international borders to stop the spread but interestingly the closure of beaches and the alcohol ban of late December 2020 was more of a blow as this was our peak season and an opportunity to make a little money. We had so many late cancellations that the peak dates over New Year saw empty rooms, where previous years we'd had waiting lists - traditionally the Christmas/New Year dates are almost entirely domestic tourism"; "When beach ban came in we had a lot of cancellations. We were full for part of December but the beach ban meant cancellations and lower occupancy"*.

In terms of future business prospects all interviewees were optimistic that they would still be operational by 2022. Typical responses were as follows: *"The rest of this year will be a slow uptick which is a long and slow process. We are here for the long-haul"; "No matter how many or few guests be welcoming and do the hospitality job to the best of your ability. It is a head-game to keep motivated. We need each other there is still great value in getting up and going to work and meeting colleagues. We are looking to survive but not sure what shape or form we will be in 12 months' time. As the Overstrand tourism economy comprises many well established hospitality enterprises the vast majority survived the COVID-19 crisis. An*



important factor in local survival has been geography and that the area is located within a one-and-a-half-hour drive of the metropolitan city of Cape Town. Other research has illustrated the importance of location of these smaller centres to the markets of the large metropolitan areas in explaining their performance during COVID-19 times. The best performing non-metropolitan coastal local municipalities in South Africa were those which could be easily accessed from metropolitan markets such as Ray Nkonyeni close to eThekweni as well as Overstrand (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022b, c). Domestic tourism was the catalyst for the initial recovery of the local tourism sector and in relative terms it was the smaller coastal centres which increased their share of coastal tourism indexed by total spend, proportion of leisure trips, and especially share of domestic trips (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022a). The key to success of these coastal towns was their proximity to home with their situation a short drive from the city and offering open spaces, a beautiful natural environment and a feeling of safety due to few crowds.

As COVID-19 lessened its grip on people's ability to move and the success of the vaccinations eased the fear of crowds and built-up spaces it was assumed that the pandemic would produce a more responsible, environmentally-aware tourist (Mkono et al, 2022). In the international literature it was expected consumers would reassess their travel behaviour and that this would be a generational chance to rethink tourism and witness the rise of the conscious traveller more discerning about the journeys they take (Brouder, 2020). This said, Mkono et al. (2022) findings from Australia provide a cautionary tale for sustainability thinking as it appears that whilst many tourism scholars assumed an environmentalist silver lining that may not exist. It was recognized that whilst people may express strong support for and concern about environmental issues that does not necessarily transform into action (Mkono et al., 2022). Overall, tourists still focus on self-interest (cost, discovering new places, safety) as opposed to more environmentally aware and ethical considerations.

In terms of recovery it must be appreciated that the Overstrand witnessed a diversification of its tourism products during the pandemic in order to attract mainly Western Cape-based domestic tourists. Many new products were outdoor and nature-related such as hiking, running and mountain bike trails that were newly established at many wineries. Accommodation offerings which catered to individual families such as converted farm cottages, camping and glamping sites expanded the attraction to pandemic-fearing visitors. Further new initiatives were yoga retreats, walks in the fynbos with botanists, frozen meals and restaurant take aways. During 2020 and 2021 all Overstrand's festivals were cancelled including the iconic Whale Festival. However, as society began to normalize during 2022 the area re-energised its tourism offerings to almost pre-pandemic levels such that by the end of 2022 it was evident that the tourists had returned. New and diversified tourism offerings continued to grow, new restaurants and cafes opened and events were continually being added to the calendar. In addition, international acclaim was garnered as Hermanus was ranked 18 in the world on the Tourism Index Score. The local newspaper reported that in December 2022 the Overstrand recorded 348 events a 59% increase on 2021 levels" (*Village News*, 20 January 2023). These included food and wine festivals, music festivals, visitors flocked to the lighthouses, nature reserves and botanical gardens as well as the numerous markets and sporting events. The critical overseas market showed signs of return and the South African domestic source market expanded beyond the Western Cape to include many visitors from the Northern Cape and especially Gauteng (*Village News*, 20 January 2023).

Other changes sparked by COVID-19 are impacting the changing Overstrand tourism economy. Most significant is the new geographical flexibility in workspaces and that decentralised locations are becoming acceptable. For Hermanus one impact has been to accelerate semigration, the movement of people from larger metropolises to smaller towns and

peripheral areas. It is argued that the desire to improve living conditions while participating in work-from-home or hybrid work is reshaping South Africa's cities and towns and the Overstrand is a beneficiary of this search for a better work-life balance. The desire for a safe, relaxed and idyllic lifestyle along the whale coast coupled with the ability to work from home and the Hermanus area offering similar amenities and attractions to the city were the main reasons driving movement to the Overstrand from other parts of the Western Cape and Gauteng in particular (Willemse, 2023). In consequence, a large cohort of working age people are attracted to settle in the area which represents a demographic shift from the pre-pandemic trend of the area enticing mainly retirees (Willemse, 2023). The fact that the Overstrand has a well-managed municipality that is consistently rated as number one or two in the country, experiences reduced crime levels, dependable service delivery and high-quality infrastructure coupled with a slower paced lifestyle is a critical additional factor attracting semigrants from Gauteng. Semigration is not only occurring as a permanent relocation from cities to the Overstrand but due to the large number of second homes that has for decades been a feature of the Overstrand tourism economy, those home-owners are now spending protracted periods of time at their former holiday homes. It is now a post-pandemic trend for holiday home-owners to spend months at their Overstrand residences instead of just the family holiday over the festive period. These semigrants are mainly of working age and are spending months in the Overstrand and either working remotely from their home office or else renting space in short term office facilities (Liversage, 2023). Most short term office renters are from Cape Town or Gauteng and spend periods of time in Overstrand whilst still commuting and maintaining a house in the city. Thus far there is little evidence that the Overstrand has attracted international digital nomads. However, given the explosion of this nomadic working lifestyle in Cape Town in particular it is yet another post-COVID recovery strategy that the Overstrand is looking to build upon.

Conclusion

In a recent overview of international research progress on small towns it was argued that research on small towns in recent years “has come a long way” (Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022b: 195). Arguably, the amount of research on tourism in small towns has also witnessed a welcome upturn in recent years. This paper has contributed to debates around the recovery of tourism in small towns in a post-COVID environment. The case study location of the Overstrand represents one of South Africa's most tourism-dependent localities where the local tourism businesses had to respond to the impacts of the pandemic with minimal national government assistance. The evidence from Overstrand is that under certain circumstances amenity-rich small town localities can be resilient to external shocks such as the pandemic, a finding which aligns with evidence from studies conducted in other countries (see Nel et al., 2019; Nel & Stevenson, 2019; Perkins & Mackay, 2022). It is evidenced that the area's tourism assets have been re-assessed in light of the shifting local and international environments. For the resilience and recovery of tourism destinations this study highlights that local innovation, good governance and place-based responses are critical and most especially in the environment of coastal small towns.

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