

COVID-19 Lockdown and Visiting Friends and Relatives Travellers: Impact and opportunities

Zanele Dube-Xaba*

School of Education, Travel and Tourism Education Discipline, University of KwaZulu-

Natal, Durban, South Africa. Email, dubez@ukzn.ac.za

**Corresponding Author*

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Abstract

Tourism is regarded as a powerful force in the rise of pandemic diseases as the movement of people is seen as a pathway for the spread of such diseases. The sector is thus susceptible to measures to prevent the spread of pandemics. In the wake of COVID-19, unprecedented lockdown regulations relating to travel restrictions and social distancing have had a direct and indirect impact on the tourism industry and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel in particular. More than half of the domestic tourism market comprises tourists who visit friends and relatives in all corners of South Africa. With the restrictions on public gatherings and travel in the country, inter/intra provincial travel largely ceased on 26 March 2020. This paper draws on existing literature, as well as current media sources to review the literature on the legacy of VFR travel; assess the impact of COVID-19 on VFR travel; and finally, to examine the opportunity that might be created by COVID-19 for such travel. It argues that, in the wake of COVID-19, VFR has the potential to fuel the resurgence of the tourism industry in South Africa, especially domestic tourism. Thus, destination marketing organisations might consider a coordinated effort to market this form of travel.

Keywords: COVID-19, lockdown, tourism, visiting friends and relatives (VFR), intra/inter provincial travel

Introduction

Tourism has become an important industry in the past few decades, and its economic impact, including direct, indirect, and induced effects, has been substantial (Pine & McKercher, 2004; Wilder-Smith, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the whole world to a standstill with many countries, including South Africa, implementing lockdown. Early 2020 witnessed unprecedented upheaval in the South African tourism industry as a result of the devastating COVID-19 lockdown. On 26 March, a 21-day lockdown was imposed, which was extended for two weeks. This was followed by a phased gradual easing of the lockdown, with its duration to be determined by risk assessment. While all sectors have been affected by COVID-19, the tourism industry has been heavily impacted and suffered serious losses (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020). Travel has become one of the key contributors to the global spread of the virus, placing tremendous pressure on international and domestic travel and tourism operations (Chinazzi, 2020; Strielkowski, 2020). South Africa's Minister of Transport announced interprovincial travel, which is responsible for most VFR tourists, was not allowed, except to return to work with proof of employment or providing an essential service. Interprovincial travel was not permitted as people were meant to stay at home, other than essential travel for work and to purchase essential goods. No travel to meet friends or family, which falls under the category of VFR travel, was allowed except for a limited



number of people attending a funeral. A VFR tourist is defined as someone whose primary purpose of engaging in tourism is to visit friends and relatives (Darar & Ismail, 2016). In the literature, VFR travel is used interchangeably with VFR tourism (Backer & King, 2017; Capistrano, 2013), however this paper uses the term VFR traveller. VFR travel contributes to tourism through various activities such as funerals, weddings, births or visiting a place that is connected to one's past, shopping, sightseeing and urban entertainment that people partake in during the course of the visit (Backer & King 2015; Rogerson, 2017).

Against the background of the lockdown restrictions in South Africa, and given that there is limited research on the VFR travel during and post-pandemic crisis in South Africa, this opinion paper, which is based on an extensive review of existing literature on VFR and published reports on the COVID-19 pandemic has three interrelated objectives. The first is to critically review the literature on the legacy of the VFR traveller internationally and nationally; the second is to assess the reported impact of COVID-19 on VFR; and the third is to examine the possibility that VFR could serve as a target segment for the recovery of domestic tourism, particularly in South Africa.

The legacy of VFR

Despite the importance of the VFR in many countries, including South Africa, there is limited literature on VFR travellers. Such tourists include those who travel to a place other than their place of residence for family reasons or social links (Hendel-Paterson & Swanson, 2011). Backer and Ritchie (2017) identified three types of VFR travellers: those who visit friends and relatives and stay in their houses for the duration of their visit; those who stay in commercial accommodation while visiting friends and relatives; and those who stay with friends and relatives while sightseeing. In other words, for a VFR traveller, the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives. This means that such a traveller could have a primary or secondary motivation for travel (Hu & Morrison, 2002). It is evident that they do not stay exclusively with friends and/or relatives, with some opting for commercial accommodation for various reasons (Backer & King, 2017). Yousuf and Backer (2015) noted the growth in new trip patterns which include a combination of business, leisure, and VFR travel in one trip as being another source of VFR travellers.

Although the exact size of global VFR travel is unknown it is widely agreed that it constitutes a “huge form of travel throughout the world” (Backer & Morrison, 2017: 395). There has been a considerable increase in the number of VFR travellers in most countries. For example, people visiting relatives and friends make up approximately 37% of total tourism trips in Europe (Eurostat, 2017). By 2011, VFR had become the most popular travel type among Norwegians who spend at least one night away from home during the summer holidays (Thrane & Farstad, 2011). According to Backer (2012), VFR travel constitutes a substantial 48% of the tourism market in Australia. In Shanghai, it accounts for nearly 20% of all intercity trips (Ying-Xue, Bing, Lin-Bo & Zhi, 2013), while in Canada, visitors who stay with a friend or relative make up approximately 14.5% of total visitors (Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016).

Rule, Viljoen, Zama, Struwig, Langa, and Bouare (2004) note that VFR travel is becoming South Africa's most popular form of domestic tourism. The relative importance of VFR travel has expanded for both international and domestic travel; however, domestic travel dominates in South Africa (Rogerson, 2015). According to South African Tourism (2013), the volume of domestic VFR travel was estimated at 18.4 million trips, which represented 72% of all domestic tourist trips in 2012. The average length of VFR trips was 4.8 nights with an average spend per trip of R642. More than half the trips taken during January and December 2017 (55, 6%) and 2018 (60, 2%) were to visit friends and relatives. In 2018, the



volume of VFR was estimated at 24.0 million trips with total expenditure of R2.5 billion (Statistics South Africa, 2019).

The largest number of VFR travellers originated from Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo with KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng receiving an influx of VFR travellers (Rogerson, 2017). The common factor among these regions is relatively high population density. This is logical as people would visit friends and relatives where they are geographically concentrated. Minibus taxis, trains and private cars are the most frequently used mode of travel by VFR travellers in South Africa. Although VFR generally reflects low spending habits, their average length of stay is twice that of a leisure tourist, and nearly three times that of the average business tourist (South African Tourism, 2013). VFR tourists who stay at least one night in commercial accommodation tend to spend more on food and beverages, transport, gift and souvenir shopping, and entertainment than those who stay in the homes of friends and relatives (Lehto, Morrison & O'Leary, 2001).

Impact of COVID-19 on interprovincial travel by VFR

The impact of this deadly virus is severe and it had spread to 200 countries with more than 1.9 million infections and over 120,000 deaths by 14th April 2020 (Ranasinghe, Damunupola, Wijesundara, Karunaratna, Nawarathna, Gamage, Ranaweera & Idroos, 2020). To date (June 2020), COVID-19 related illness has not placed undue strain on the South African economy; however, the virus affected virtually all parts of the tourism industry value chain and has placed the sector under enormous financial strain. With no vaccine to prevent the disease and limited medical interventions available to treat it, most countries, including South Africa, responded with a lockdown and social distancing which saw the cancellation of inter/intra provincial travel and social gatherings and a direct impact on VFR travellers.

South Africa's adoption of an indefinite risk analysis strategy to ease the lockdown has left all industries reeling, but the tourism and hospitality sectors have been hardest hit by border closures, travel restrictions and social distancing measures. All domestic flights, tourist trains, commuter rail services, long-distance buses, and mini-buses were shut down for the duration of the hard lockdown as they are regarded as creating conditions for the spread of COVID-19 (Zhen, Chan, Schoonees, Apatu, Thabane & Young, 2020). VFR travelling largely depends on these modes of transport (Le-Klähn, Gerike & Hall, 2015; Page, 2009). Coupled with restrictions on intra and interprovincial movement to attend funerals, family social events and gatherings, the effect has been devastating. While not yet finally assessed, the economic impact of the virus outbreak on tourism in general and VFR in particular is likely to be severe. As noted by Strielkowski (2020), such measures impose a severe negative shock on the economy, with immediate loss of economic activity followed by medium- and long-term economic effects.

Opportunities for VFR presented by the COVID-19 Lockdown

In South Africa, tourism has been identified as a Level 1 activity in the country's risk adjusted strategy for easing lockdown with some operations marginally permissible in Level 2. This implies that the sector will remain inactive for the larger part of the 2020/2021 financial year. Although domestic tourism flows have been heavily affected by restrictions on the movement of people, it is expected to recover quickly once containment measures are lifted. Smeral (2009) reminds us that tourism may recover more slowly compared to other sectors after disasters. Given the fact that international tourism is affected by the restrictions



and strict border controls imposed by many countries (Barker, 2017; Hollingsworth, Ferguson & Anderson, 2007; Wilder-Smith, 2006), the domestic travel market will grow significantly compared to the international tourism market to alleviate citizens' homebound stress. Given the uncertain outlook for international tourism, post-COVID-19, domestic tourism is expected to play an important role in leading the initial recovery of the industry. While South Africa is stronger on international travel than domestic travel (South African Tourism, 2020), this might be an opportunity to build a strong and robust domestic travel industry. Although the sector envisages that the recovery phase will be driven by domestic travel, the focus is mainly on business travel followed by leisure travel (South African Tourism, 2020). I argue that more focus should be placed on VFR travellers as a means for immediate recovery.

Opportunity to drive tourism recovery

COVID-19 presents an opportunity for VFR to becoming a booming market given that it is the largest element of the domestic tourism sector in South Africa (Rule et al., 2004). Demand for VFR post-COVID-19 will show significant growth compared to the leisure segment. The lockdown and restrictions on travel mean that millions of South African citizens are suddenly unable to travel, with many separated from their families and friends for months. Therefore, when restrictions are lifted, reconnecting and catching up with friends and family through intra/ interprovincial travel will be an immediate priority for many. Backer and Ritchie (2017) argue that families are drawn together after isolation caused by a crisis, in this case, the COVID-19 lockdown. Senbeto and Hon (2020) note that VFR tourism is more resilient when a crisis occurs and that there were increases in both short- and long-haul VFR visits after the 2003 SARS and the 2015 Avian flu outbreaks. Similarly, COVID 19 could thus present an opportunity for VFR to emerge quicker when the lockdown eases, particularly in provinces such as Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal who shows VFR inbound and outbound travel. Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) in South Africa should thus design modified packages for VFR travellers which can function within the constrained environment and encourage them to spend money in grassroots businesses (such as cafes, shops, and wineries) that underpin the tourism sector in order to compensate for the closure of other forms of tourism (Backer & Ritchie, 2017; Fernández-Morales, Cisneros-Martínez & McCabe, 2016).

Opportunity for coordinated marketing

Destination marketing organisations have not focused on marketing strategies for VFR travellers due to the assumption that such travellers do not participate in tourism activities (Backer & Morrison, 2015). Post COVID-19 and the lockdown might present opportunities for coordinated marketing to VFR travellers. This is an ideal opportunity to rebuild demand for services such as accommodation, attractions and transport among VFR who seek to re-establish social connections. Destination marketing organisations should devise strategies that encourage VFR to shop locally, connect visitors to local activities such as the arts and music, and (if the virus is still prevalent) host visitors with minimum health risks. Such activities will benefit local economies. Offers on inexpensive accommodation and eating houses and restaurants are among such strategies. Gift-giving associated with African VFR travellers (Yousuf & Backer, 2015) opens up opportunities for informal traders, particularly in the vicinity of minibus taxi ranks to target VFR tourism. Given that VFR might not need expensive marketing techniques, mass media has a major role to play in terms of domestic tourism promotion as well as community level engagement (Rogerson, 2017). Tourism operators and DMOs can influence VFR travellers by advertising local attractions and



activities to residents who will, in turn, recommend them to visiting friends and relatives. As noted by Yousuf and Backer (2015), friends and relatives play a major role in the information process of VFR even when their interest in the destination is a major motivation. They are not only regarded as trustworthy sources of information regarding personal matters but also as important experts on the destination. These new marketing strategies may also allow a new structuring of the VFR market.

Conclusion

Post COVID-19, it is unlikely that the entire tourism industry will return to the pre-pandemic situation. This could open opportunities for VFR, which is likely to be a much stronger segment in the early stages of recovery, to drive the recovery of the sector post-pandemic. Given the nature and extent of VFR travel in South Africa, it could be regarded as a better travel option amidst the epidemic control phase as it will facilitate social reconnection. It is also a sustainable model that supports seasonality. After the lockdown people will be aware of the situation with regard to the pandemic in their friends and families' areas of residence and will be more confident to engage in tourism-related activities with them. Destination marketing organisations could play a central role in promoting VFR travel by educating local residents about tourism attractions in their area and encouraging them to pass this information on to their friends and relatives. Mass media can be harnessed to communicate such information, which could also include tips on infection prevention and safety measures that VFR should adopt when visiting friends and relatives as well as tourist sites. This will reduce perceptions of risk. Taken together, all these measures could enable VFR travel to drive the recovery of the tourism industry.

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