

AFRICAN TOURISM FIGHTING EBOLA AND MEDIA COVERAGE



After years of low sales from the US market largely due to the great recession, business has over the recent past been remarkable good for Alluring Africa a leading tour operator in East & South Africa. Then came the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

The unfortunate fatalities and the media circus over the event have dealt African tourism a potent blow. Andre Steynberg, the VP of sales for Alluring Africa said that the global interest in the West African

Ebola epidemic has affected major financial setbacks for many tour operators. "I would estimate that around thirty two US tour firms have suffered losses that amount up to \$32 million due to cancellations over the few weeks that have passed." He went on to assert that for the same reasons, his firm, Allure Africa, may have lost \$350,000 in just under the past 5 days. The devastation doesn't end there however.

Tour d'Afrique, a 4-month cycling expedition across the continent (Cairo - Cape Town) confirmed that they are expecting only 25 participants out of the usual 40. Shanny Hill, the marketing chief of the firm that runs this tour was quoted that they could lose several thousand dollars if things don't brighten up. "A serious setback for a company with a fulltime staff of 8".

However, many operators are unanimous that the apprehension of traveling to unaffected areas of Africa is uncalled for. Hill was categorical in saying that there are more confirmed cases of the disease in the US than all the 10 nations his firm works in. Craig Beal, the owner and operator of Travel Beyond, also has the same feelings. He says, "If you want safety from Ebola, South Africa is definitely the place to be. You'll be more isolated than you could ever be in the US."

Julian Harrison, owner of Premier Tours, a firm that has been in the business (East & South Africa) for almost 28 years believes the major threat to Africa tourism isn't the outbreak, but the negative publicity surrounding it. He states, "It is the uncertainty and gross misconception of the disease that affects Africa." However, he is optimistic that the media focus will shift, as something else is bound to happen.

In related news, Eric Duncan, the 1st confirmed Ebola patient in the US passed away in Dallas. It is thought that he got the virus in Liberia before visiting his family in Texas He was rushed to hospital 4 days after his arrival with symptoms of the disease. Apparently, test results from the screening of persons he came in contact with, including his fellow passengers, were all negative. Ebola can only be transmitted after direct contact with the blood, sweat or bodily excretions of any infected person. Following Duncan's arrival there has been a growing wave of fear over flying, and to allay these concerns the US government reported that they have initialized health screening at 5 major US airports - JFK international airport in New York, Dulles International in Washington, O'Hare International in Chicago, Hartsfield-Jackson International in Atlanta, and Newark Liberty International Airport. These screenings are particularly focused on travelers from the Ebola-hit West African states, whose temperatures will be taken and asked to fill a questionnaire on probable contact with the disease. **Subsequently the CDC has issued travel advisories for Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Congo. With no other warnings for unaffected areas.**

Nevertheless, many tourists are exhibiting a "wait and see" attitude. Steynberg is worried about the prolonging of this state of affairs. "It is estimated that approximately one tourism worker supports about 10 family members," he says. The US tourists' dollars go a long way in supporting the national parks and reserves and the surrounding populations. It has been difficult for other stakeholders like Harrison to gauge how much money they have lost. He says the phone rings less often, though he is

optimistic things will turn around. "The tourism business is cyclic, it doesn't matter whether it is terrorism, disease or the economy, things will pick up."

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