



MINISTRY
TOURISM
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Private Bag X 424, PRETORIA, 0001, Tourism House, 17 Trevenna Street, Sunnyside, PRETORIA, 0002, Switchboard: +27 (0)12 444 6000, Fax: +27 (0)12 444 7000, Website: www.tourism.gov.za

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF TOURISM, MS MAGGIE SOTYU, AT THE 2ND ANNUAL COASTAL AND INLAND WATERWAYS TOURISM INVESTMENT SUMMIT 9 SEPTEMBER 2026, GARIEP DAM, FREE STATE

**Programme Director: Mr Chris Mashilo
Leadership of the Africa Coastal Marine and Maritime Tourism Alliance,
Representatives of the Free State Provincial Government,
Leadership of the Xhariep District and our local municipalities,
Representatives of national departments and public entities,
Development finance institutions and investors,
Members of the tourism and maritime sectors,
Tourism entrepreneurs and product owners,
Representatives of academia and training institutions,
Members of our local communities,
Members of the Media,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

Good morning. Dumelang.

It is a pleasure to return to the Coastal, Marine and Inland Waterways Tourism Investment Summit for its second annual gathering. Last year, we met at Hartbeespoort in the North-West. This year, we meet here at Gariep Dam - and that movement from one water-based destination to another is itself an important reminder of the scale and diversity of the tourism opportunity that exists across South Africa.

Our country is known internationally for its coastline. But our tourism opportunity does not end at the ocean. It extends to our rivers, dams and inland waterways; to the towns and communities surrounding them; and to the accommodation establishments, restaurants, guides, transport operators, event businesses, artisans and entrepreneurs who can form part of the visitor economy around them.

That is why the theme of this Summit - ***“Unlocking Investment, Innovation and Sustainable Growth in Coastal, Marine and Inland Waterways Tourism”*** - is timely. The Summit has been deliberately designed not simply as a discussion forum, but as an investment-to-implementation platform linking project preparation, finance, innovation, skills, and market access. And that distinction matters. Because tourism is economic activity.

A dam may begin as water infrastructure, but when it is responsibly developed, packaged, and connected to the surrounding destination, it can also become economic infrastructure. It can attract visitors. It can support accommodation. It can create new experiences. It can generate

demand for restaurants and local food. It can create opportunities for guides, boat operators, transport providers and event organisers. It can open markets for craftspeople and local producers. It can also create careers in safety, hospitality, maintenance, conservation, digital marketing, and tourism services. This is what we mean when we speak about the visitor economy. The water may be the attraction, but the economic opportunity extends far beyond the water. Gariep as a destination, not simply a stop.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We should ask ourselves how to turn Gariep Dam from a place travellers may pass through into a destination where they stop, stay, experience, spend, and return. That means thinking beyond a single attraction. It means connecting water-based experiences with accommodation, conferencing, food, heritage, community experiences, recreation, events, nature and surrounding routes. It means creating bookable itineraries instead of isolated products. And it means recognising Gariep's position as a potential connector between tourism experiences in the Free State, Northern Cape and Eastern Cape.

The Summit concept specifically identifies the potential for cross-provincial routes and partnerships around Gariep, as well as opportunities in waterfront infrastructure, boating, recreation, accommodation and community tourism. That is how a destination economy grows.

We don't want visitors to come only to look at the water. We want them to spend the night. We want them to eat locally. We want them to buy locally. We want them to experience the stories, culture, and people of the area. And we want more of the money generated by tourism to circulate within the communities surrounding the destination.

Programme Director,

Tourism creates jobs where people live. That principle is especially important when we speak about rural and smaller-town tourism development. But how do we go from tourism potential to investment readiness?

Natural beauty alone does not create a tourism economy. Potential must be converted into projects. Projects must be properly prepared. Infrastructure must be fit for purpose. Safety and environmental requirements must be met. Investors must have confidence. Products must respond to real market demand. Operators must have the necessary skills. And the destination must be able to package, price, distribute, and sell the experience.

That is where Destination Development becomes critical. Our Department's Destination Development Branch is therefore playing an active role in planning and coordinating this Summit, and in ensuring that the discussions align with our destination development priorities and the District Development Model. The objective is to identify practical and implementable interventions that can strengthen Gariep as an inland tourism and economic development zone.

The Department's work on Coastal and Marine Tourism already addresses areas such as routes and events, regulation and permitting, spatial planning, tourism infrastructure, safety and skills development. Inland waterways are part of the next phase of this work. The Department has also developed a concept for using prioritised inland water bodies for tourism development, including identifying tourism activities, supporting domestic tourism, and creating meaningful interaction between visitors and local people, culture, and history.

So this Summit does not stand separately from our broader work. It gives us an opportunity to translate that work into a real destination context.

Distinguished guests,

Government is deeply aware that destinations require functioning infrastructure. The Department has previously supported maintenance and enhancement work at Gariep as part of work undertaken on provincial state-owned tourism assets.

But destination development cannot stop with maintaining buildings. Infrastructure only becomes economically meaningful when people use it, businesses operate around it, experiences are created from it, and visitors spend money because of it. The next step is therefore to move from infrastructure to experience, from experience to enterprise, and from enterprise to sustainable local economic activity. That requires government, industry, communities and investors to work together.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Transformation must be built into the economy. It also requires us to ask a fundamental question: Who owns the opportunities that tourism creates? Transformation cannot be something we add to a project after the investment decisions have already been made. It must be designed into the tourism economy from the beginning. That means asking who participates in ownership. Who gets procurement opportunities? Who has access to training? Who enters management? Which businesses form part of the supply chain? And whether women, young people, and community enterprises can progress from participation to real economic power?

The proposed legacy initiatives associated with this Summit place particular emphasis on youth skills, work experience, enterprise development, market access and pathways towards ownership. I welcome that approach. Because we should not train young people for opportunities that do not exist. We must connect skills to work, skills to enterprise and skills to markets. Our objective should be a pipeline: Learning → Skills → Employment → Enterprise → Leadership and Ownership. That is what meaningful transformation looks like.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One concept before this Summit is a proposed community-based inland cruise enterprise. What is important to me is not simply the prospect of putting a vessel on the dam. The bigger question is whether such a project can anchor a wider local tourism value chain.

The business case itself identifies opportunities before, during, and after a water-based experience - from transport, accommodation, and reservations to catering, performers, guiding, local food, retail, maintenance, security, digital marketing, and training. That is exactly how we should approach tourism development.

The project must not become an island in the visitor economy. It must pull other businesses into the economy. And any project of this nature must proceed responsibly. It requires us to establish regulatory certainty, safety compliance, market demand, viable infrastructure, sound governance, appropriate financing and the capacity to operate sustainably. The business case before the Summit itself recognises that these matters must be resolved before major procurement proceeds. That is the right approach. We must build projects that can survive long after the launch photographs have been taken.

Programme Director,

No single institution can achieve this alone. Water-based tourism touches many mandates: Tourism development; Water management; Transport; Safety; Environmental management; Municipal infrastructure; Land-use planning; Enterprise support; Skills development; Investment finance; and Destination marketing.

This is precisely why the principles of the District Development Model are relevant. Instead of different institutions working alongside each other, we need them working together around one place and one development objective.

National government must bring its programmes. The province must bring destination development and investment support. Municipalities must enable local planning, infrastructure and services. Development finance institutions must help move viable projects towards investment. The private sector must bring operating expertise, markets, procurement opportunities and capital. Training institutions must connect skills programmes to real jobs and enterprises. And communities must participate in planning, ownership, and economic benefits - not simply be spectators.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We should be clear about what success looks like. We will not measure the success of this Summit only by how many people attended or how many presentations were delivered. The real measure will come after we leave Gariep.

Ultimately, we must measure the success of this Summit by what happens after we leave today's event. We must be able to ask what moved from concept to implementation, which investment barriers were resolved, and which projects became more investable. We must assess whether local enterprises entered the tourism value chain, whether young people gained skills and meaningful work opportunities, and whether more local attractions and experiences became bookable and market-ready. We must also measure whether visitors stayed longer, whether local tourism businesses earned more, and whether the partnerships formed here continued beyond the Summit. These outcomes will tell us whether this platform has translated opportunity into real economic impact.

Distinguished guests,

It is particularly fitting that we are having this conversation during Tourism Month as it gives us an opportunity to remind South Africans that tourism does not belong only to our famous destinations.

Tourism lives in our cities and our villages. It lives along our coastlines and in our mountains. It lives around our heritage sites, our rivers and our dams. And it lives wherever communities can turn a place's distinctive character into an experience somebody else wants to travel to enjoy.

This Tourism Month, we should therefore be encouraging South Africans not only to travel, but to explore differently. We must encourage visitors to discover the destinations between the major destinations, spend locally, support tourism entrepreneurs, stay another night and try another experience, because every additional experience creates another opportunity somewhere in the tourism value chain.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen,

As we begin this second Summit, I want to challenge all of us to move beyond simply identifying potential and instead focus on preparing projects, unlocking responsible investment, packaging experiences, opening markets, building skills around real economic opportunities, supporting businesses that can grow, in protecting the natural resources on which tourism depends. And let us ensure that communities are not standing beside the tourism economy looking in - but are participating in it, supplying it, working in it, leading it and owning part of it.

Gariep Dam gives us an opportunity to demonstrate what destination development can look like when we connect place, people, product, investment and partnership. If we get that right,

the legacy of this Summit will not simply be another event at Gariep Dam. It will be a stronger visitor economy around Gariep Dam. Because ultimately, tourism creates jobs where people live - and our responsibility is to turn the assets where people live into opportunities that can change lives.

I thank you.

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For Further Information Contact:

Mr. Sibongile Mbotwe

Head Of Office for the Deputy Minister of Tourism

Email: SMbotwe@tourism.gov.za

Mobile: +27 82 778 3551