



**MINISTER
TOURISM
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**MINISTER PATRICIA DE LILLE'S REMARKS AT THE OPENING OF THE G20
TOURISM MINISTERS' MEETING IN SKUKUZA, MPUMALANGA, SOUTH AFRICA,
ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2025**

G20 Tourism Ministers, Guest countries and Heads of Delegation
Delegates Present here today
Secretary-General of UN Tourism, Mr Zurab Pololikashvili
Deputy Minister Ms Maggie Sotyu
Member of the Parliament, Ms Alitia Hlongo
The Premier of Mpumalanga, Mr Mandla Ndlovu
MEC for Economic Development and Tourism, Ms Jester Sidell
Guests and members of the media

Welcome to South Africa—land of rhythm, resilience, and remarkable beauty.

We gather here in Mpumalanga, the “place of the rising sun,” where nature speaks in ancient tones and every sunrise reminds us of renewal. Let me begin with an African proverb: “When the roots are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind.”

This reminds us that strength lies in unity, in shared purpose, and in grounded values.

There's a story told in our villages—of a time when drought struck the savannah. The elephant, the lion, and the zebra all argued over who should lead the search for water. But it was the humble meerkat who suggested they dig together, each using their unique strength.

The elephant cleared the trees, the lion guarded the group, and the zebra found the softest soil. Together, they uncovered a spring. That is the spirit of this meeting—collaboration, creativity, and collective action – the foundation of multilateralism and the power of the G20.

South Africa is proud to host this G20 Tourism Ministers Meeting under the banner of Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability.

Tourism is not just an industry—it is a force for good. It creates jobs, drives economic growth, and fosters cultural connections. It uplifts communities and protects heritage. And when done right, it leaves no one behind.

Let me share the scale of this impact: Globally, tourism contributes \$2 trillion in export revenues, supporting 371 million jobs and accounting for 10.3% of global GDP. In Africa, international arrivals grew by 9% in Q1 2025, outpacing global averages.

Here in South Africa, tourism contributes 8.5% to our GDP, with over 880,000 visitors in July alone—a 26% year-on-year increase.

The sector supports over 1.5 million jobs directly and indirectly, from urban hotels to rural homestays. This is not just about numbers—it's about livelihoods, families, and futures.

It is my privilege to share with you the four priorities that guide our work under the G20 Presidency in the field of tourism. These priorities reflect our collective vision of a sector that is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and forward-looking.

1. DIGITAL INNOVATION TO ENHANCE TRAVEL AND TOURISM START-UPS AND MSMEs

Digital tools are transforming the way travellers plan, book, and experience their journeys. Yet many small enterprises—the very backbone of our sector—struggle to keep pace with these rapid changes. By equipping entrepreneurs with digital literacy, supporting incubators and networks for start-ups, and ensuring inclusive and ethical adoption of technology, we can open new opportunities.

Digital innovation is not about replacing people, but about empowering people—helping small businesses thrive in an increasingly competitive environment.

The Action Plan of the G20 Presidency this year acknowledges that “Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of the global tourism economy, providing employment opportunities, fostering innovation, and contributing to the attractiveness of local destinations. MSMEs must undergo a digital transformation to remain competitive and future-ready.

2. TOURISM FINANCING AND INVESTMENT TO ENHANCE EQUALITY AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Tourism is a powerful engine of growth, but its benefits are not always shared equally.

By mobilising public and private capital, reducing risks for investors, and ensuring that funds reach community-based ventures and micro-enterprises, we can create jobs, reduce inequality, and build a fairer sector.

Investment must also support sustainability—whether in green infrastructure, eco-lodges, or low-impact services—so that growth today does not compromise the prospects of tomorrow.

Financing for development and investment in tourism is inherently cross-cutting and closely linked to other G20 tracks, particularly the G20 Finance Track and, under the Sherpas' Track, the Infrastructure Working Group has highlighted the importance of innovative financing models and public-private partnerships to mobilise capital for sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including connectivity. This area is essential for tourism.

Tourism can be a powerful driver of sustainable development when supported by adequate public financing aligned with national development priorities.

We must reduce barriers, strengthen institutional frameworks, and provide the targeted enabling conditions for inclusive and sustainable growth through development finance.

We also must mobilise private investment for long-term sustainability, inclusion, competitiveness, and resilience. This requires creating an investment environment which is transparent, predictable, and aligned with sustainability principles.

This week, we hosted the inaugural South African Tourism Investment Summit in Cape Town, to which some of you were able to attend. We appreciate this support as we intend to build it into a legacy project of our G20 Presidency by fostering close collaboration between private investors, public finance entities, and national, provincial, and local governments.

I want to reiterate the role of UN Tourism in developing the Tourism Doing Business Guide for South Africa and the Tourism Doing Business Guide for Africa.

3. AIR CONNECTIVITY FOR SEAMLESS TRAVEL

Air connectivity plays an essential role in facilitating international tourism, including within the G20. Without efficient, affordable, and sustainable connections, our destinations remain islands unto themselves.

We must increase regional and international air links, streamlined visa and border procedures, and cleaner aviation technologies to boost tourism, stimulate trade, and cooperation. We must make travel smoother, more accessible, and more sustainable for all.

As indicated in the G20 Tourism Report on Air Connectivity, G20 members, which account for 68% of all international tourist arrivals, 71% of international tourist exports, and 68% of all passenger fares, are well-positioned to play a leading role in advancing this transformation in support of global mobility, equity, and prosperity.

Advancing air connectivity for seamless travel requires a holistic approach – linking infrastructure, policy, technology, sustainability, and governance- to ensure that air connectivity supports tourism's contribution to socio-economic development while promoting inclusion, development, and environmental goals.

4. ENHANCED RESILIENCE FOR INCLUSIVE, SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Tourism is highly vulnerable to shocks—from pandemics to climate events to economic downturns. Our sector must be equipped with risk assessment tools, contingency planning, and rapid-recovery mechanisms.

We must diversify tourism products, safeguard jobs, and protect the environment. A resilient tourism sector protects livelihoods and communities, while adapting to the challenges of an uncertain future.

The G20 Action Plan for Enhanced Resilience in Inclusive, Sustainable Tourism Development sets out a strategic roadmap for strengthening the tourism sector's ability

to withstand and adapt to environmental, health-related, economic and geopolitical shocks, while promoting equity and long-term sustainability.

Key proposals include:

Community-centred models, universal design, and targeted support for vulnerable Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) ensure that the benefits are shared widely and that social cohesion is strengthened.

Diversification strategies, ranging from niche heritage trails to off-season promotion, create multiple revenue streams and protect destinations against shocks. Institutionalised stress-testing, integrated health and emergency frameworks as core components of resilient tourism systems.

Public–private partnerships, multilateral standards and mutual recognition schemes to provide the coordination needed to scale up best practices and sustain recovery.

Tourism is one of the world’s most powerful industries—bridging cultures, creating jobs, and opening doors to new experiences. But as it grows, so too does our responsibility. We must recognise that tourism, if not carefully managed, can place immense pressure on the very environments and communities that make it possible.

To secure the future of our industry, we must chart a new course: one that is green-conscious, sustainable and community-based and respectful of the natural world we depend on.

Nowhere is this balance more critical than in our natural treasures such as the Kruger National Park. This iconic reserve is more than a tourist destination—it is a living testament to the richness of our biodiversity, a sanctuary for endangered species, and a vital cornerstone of ecological preservation. It embodies the essence of sustainable tourism: where conservation, community, and commerce intersect. Protecting Kruger means protecting not only the animals and landscapes within its borders, but also the global ecological systems that sustain us all.

Its success demonstrates how tourism can be a powerful ally in conservation, provided it is managed with foresight and care. We must encourage tourism that engages with local supply chains, supports communities, and adopts low-impact travel practices that preserve cultural and ecological heritage, promoting regenerative tourism.

By integrating sustainability into every stage of the tourism journey, we can strike a balance between economic growth and environmental stewardship.

We have already begun this journey by committing to having this very event audited for sustainability, to establish a roadmap to more sustainable events in tourism, as one of the legacy initiatives of the G20.

Taken together, these four priorities—Digital Innovation, Financing and Investment, Air Connectivity, and Resilience—are not stand-alone themes. They are interconnected pillars of a stronger global tourism system. They speak to the spirit of our G20 Presidency’s guiding values: Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability.

HACKATHON AND EMPOWERING THE YOUTH

And now, let me turn to the future.

Over the past few weeks, 48 brilliant students from 21 institutions came together for the G20 Tourism Hackathon. They tackled real-world challenges using AI, design thinking, and human-centred innovation. Their solutions ranged from immersive heritage platforms to offline learning kiosks and innovative safety tools.

These young minds remind us: tourism is not just about travel—it's about transformation. It's about empowering the next generation to build a sector that is inclusive, sustainable, and tech-savvy.

Let us celebrate their creativity and commit to nurturing it. Because when we invest in youth, we invest in the future of tourism.

Colleagues, the world is watching. Let us lead with courage, collaborate with purpose, and build a tourism sector that truly leaves no one behind.

Thank you.

Enkosi. Siyabonga. Re a leboga.

END

