

DAILY SOUTHERN AFRICAN TOURISM UPDATE

Here's a novel way to help Knysna recover: Go there and 'do' tourism

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This past week I learnt the people in Knysna are as tough and resilient as the indigenous fynbos that put the "garden" into the world-famous Garden Route. Following the devastating wildfires that led to tragic loss of life and extensive damage to property, they are resolutely mopping up and carrying on, declaring their town "open for business".

Determined to pick itself up and carry on, the town has declared itself ready to welcome visitors, with almost all tourist activities fully operational. It is going ahead with various signature events that, every year, give a boost to the Knysna tourism economy in the traditionally slow winter season, by creating work and generating income for residents.

Truly their capacity for courage and reinvention is inspiring.

Equally, South Africans have an immense capacity for compassion, which is demonstrated every time their fellow citizens are down on their luck.

Corporates and ordinary citizens have rallied around to collect money, medical supplies, blankets and other provisions for those affected and displaced by the runaway fires. The Knysna-Plett tourism sector has been nothing short of amazing, helping travellers find alternative accommodation, putting up emergency workers and helping to distribute aid. The unprecedented outpouring of support for our fellow citizens and tourists in need has been heart-warming.

Sometimes tragedy can devastate us so much that we are at a loss of how to help. And sometimes the thing to do is so simple. In this instance we can all show our support for Knysna, its residents and its economy by making our way to the town and "do" tourism.

Let me explain. Our recently launched domestic tourism marketing campaign, I Do Tourism, asks all South Africans to embrace tourism in their everyday lives – since each of us has a vital role to play in making South Africa a tourist-friendly country.

Tourism is already a massive revenue generator for our economy, driving inclusive growth and creating much-needed jobs. It's a sector that's poised for lift-off even as other areas of our economy struggle.

But here's what we have discovered: our people are as great a tourism asset as our country's natural beauty and its array of pulse-quickening attractions and soul-soothing experiences. They are the differentiating factor that makes South Africa not just a good tourist destination, but a great one. They help turn a mere encounter into an enduring memory.

So, how does this relate to Knysna? Well, while the painstaking process of assessing the damage and rebuilding is underway, the locals need your support more than ever to help them recover from this calamity. The area is heavily dependent on tourism, and residents would be dealt an additional – and unfair – blow if their tourism economy were to take a knock.

Here's how you can "do" tourism in Knysna and the surrounding areas: don't cancel your Garden Route holiday. In fact, even if you hadn't planned to, why not book an impromptu breakaway there?

The Pick n Pay Knysna Oyster Festival from 7 to 16 July, the Momentum Knysna Cycle Tour on 8 and 9 July, and the Momentum Knysna Forest Marathon on 15 July are incredible events to participate in every winter too, so there is much to do.

Go and visit the town and show your support – even if it's just by having lunch, taking a walk through the indigenous forest or relaxing on one of the gorgeous beaches. Every cent you spend will contribute to a sustainable livelihood for suppliers all the way down the value chain and will help put food on the tables of Knysna's most vulnerable residents.

For example, last year Oyster Festival patrons spent close to R110 million (excluding festival tickets), and more than 2000 job opportunities were created by the event.

If the establishment where you were planning to stay was damaged, look for another that will take you in. There are many places in Knysna that have not been affected by the fires, and the Garden Route remains one of the most naturally beautiful places in the country – if not the world.

All of the town's upcoming events deserve to be well patronised and represent a golden opportunity for us to again rally around and wrap the Knysna community in a comforting embrace.

I would like to urge South Africans, who have already demonstrated boundless generosity, to again show your love for Knysna by doing tourism – by going there and seeing, experiencing, supporting, empathising, eating, drinking, running, cycling, making merry and having a glorious time in South Africa's very own Eden. You won't regret it!