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The first round impacts of COVID-19 for rural tourism in South Africa

Abstract. Although the impacts of COVID-19 have been extensively debated there is only limited writings and research on the geographical implications of the pandemic. The aim is to investigate the immediate or 'first round' impacts of COVID-19 on the South African tourism space economy with specific focus directed at its ramifications for small town and rural tourism. The study utilises a local tourism data base which tracks information concerning the tourism performance of all local municipal authorities in the country. The results reveal that during 2020 a noticeable change emerged in the spatial patterns of tourism. The trend for the concentration of tourism development upon the country's leading cities was halted and seemingly put in reverse by the impacts of COVID-19. Evidence exists of a weakening of the previously dominant position of (in particular) the major metropolitan areas in South Africa's tourism economy. Instead, there is recorded a relative upturn in the fortunes of tourism in small town and rural areas of South Africa as a whole.

Keywords: South Africa, COVID-19 impacts, tourism geography, rural tourism, small towns

JEL Codes: L83, Z32, Z38

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1. Introduction

Geographers highlight that the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic shows how local worlds connect to and revolve around the axis of the global one as well as demonstrate “the significance of and evolving nature of place” (Nurse-Bray, 2020, p. 1). By upending established geographies of globalisation COVID-19 has brought crippling impacts upon the international tourism industry (Brouder, 2020; Cheer et al., 2021; Connell & Taulealo, 2021; Martin, 2021; Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022). Immediate responses implemented across several countries included a suite of non-pharmaceutical measures such as social distancing and lockdowns which severely compromised the operations of the hospitality and tourism industry (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Gursoy et al., 2021). The “boundless contamination” associated with COVID-19 makes it a game-changing phenomenon with massive knock-on effects for global mobilities (Castree et al., 2020, p. 411). Arguably, it remains a (if not *the*) critical change agent in the global tourism economy (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021) and most especially in the setting of Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). For some observers the pandemic must be viewed as an “extensive geographical event” which requires a substantive research response in order to understand a range of pressing issues (Andrews et al., 2021, p. 1).

Tourism geographers have responded energetically to the challenges around the pandemic and made a series of useful contributions. More specifically, tourism geography scholars have addressed adaptation issues (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a; Adams et al., 2021; Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson, 2021), the challenges of rural firms (Giddy et al., 2022; Rogerson & Sixaba, 2022), undertaken ramification research (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b, 2022; Gössling et al., 2021) as well as engaged vigorously in debates concerning ‘transformation’ and the future (re)shaping of tourism (Benjamin et al., 2020; Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Stankov et al., 2020; Cheer, 2021; Stankov & Filimonau, 2021; Lew et al., 2022). Two contrasting schools of thought in international tourism geography scholarship have evolved (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2021). First, is a ‘resilience school of thought’ which stresses the historical capacity of the tourism sector to cope with or adapt to shocks and the sector’s capacity to return to pre-crisis growth paths. For example, applying an historical lens Butler (2022, p. 262) stresses that notwithstanding “all the chaos and misery stemming from Covid, and despite the many innovations that will inevitably appear in the future, based on past experiences, tourism will continue much as it has for the last few centuries.” By contrast, the second school is a ‘readjustment school of thought’ which interprets the pandemic as a chance to rethink, restart, reset, and reinvent tourism in a more sustainable manner (Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022;

Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). Olsen and Timothy (2020, p. 170) point out that this “would be done by off-setting the resumption of unsustainable tourism practices based on transforming institutional logics and systems of tourism based on capitalism, old business models, growth-paradigms and trajectories” which dominated recent years and in part are responsible for the current crisis.

In the recent integrative review of COVID-19 research in hospitality and tourism which has been conducted from a range of perspectives Zopiatis et al. (2021) make no mention of geographical issues concerning the differential spatial impacts of the pandemic on tourism economies. Only limited focus in extant international tourism geographical writings is given to detailed examination of the spatial variations of the pandemic’s impact within countries. This gap is remarkable as a decade ago Hall (2012) asserted that spatial analysis constituted a critical research tool for tourism geographers. One recent investigation in Greece demonstrates regional variations in resilience and tourism recovery to shocks such as from the pandemic (Gaki & Koufodontis, 2022). The value of a geographical lens is highlighted by findings that COVID-impacts in some cases can amplify existing inequalities between regions, between rural and urban areas, and between different forms of urban settlements (Visagie & Turok, 2021).

Against this backdrop the aim is to conduct a geographical study of the immediate or ‘first round’ impacts of COVID-19 on the South African tourism space economy. In this paper our specific focus is directed at the ramifications of COVID-19 for small town and rural tourism in South Africa. Maclaren and Philip (2021, p. 267) maintain that the “COVID-19 pandemic offers a lens through which to consider strengths and weaknesses of contemporary rural society” and not least surrounding the state of rural tourism. In a broad literature context this research must be located as an aspect of tourism and change in the Global South (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021). It contributes also towards a vibrant tourism geographical scholarship which exists on South Africa (Rogerson & Visser, 2020). Two sections of material follow. Next, the study is contextualised within existing literature and debates on rural tourism as a whole and more specifically of COVID-19 debates about the implications for rural tourism. Attention then turns to the empirical analysis of the geographical impacts of the pandemic for small town rural South Africa.

2. COVID-19 and rural tourism scholarship

According to Maclaren and Philip (2021) rural places are defined by their assemblage of material assets and immaterial qualities (such as subjective experience of being a rural space). Rosalina et al. (2021, p. 144) characterize rural tourism as

a “fluid phenomenon, evolving with time and place characteristics.” Rural tourism is both the result of rural change or rural restructuring and is also “a contributor to (potentially profound) rural change” (Frisvoll, 2014, p. 41). For an enhanced understanding of rural tourism Lane (1994) suggests applying the concept of a ‘rural-urban continuum’ in order to differentiate forms of leisure pursuits which are specifically rural (such as canoeing, climbing or landscape appreciation), an intermediate category of activities which may be rural or urban based (cultural festivals, general heritage, camping), and those which are usually specifically urban-based (such as shopping, city sightseeing, urban heritage). Embracing a spatial lens Lane (1994) maintains that ‘rural tourism’ exists as a concept, is diverse and includes ‘pure’ rural tourism as well as a continuum from the urban fringe to peripheral regions which offer opportunities for other more traditional or ‘pure’ rural tourism activities. According to Wiest and Bortoletto (2020, p. 12) rural tourism has been evolving during past years and “constantly increasing attention has been devoted to it.” Several overviews of international academic research concerning rural tourism have been undertaken (Page & Getz, 1997; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001), including a number of ‘state of the art’ reviews during the past decade (Dashper, 2014; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Ruiz-Real et al., 2021; Karali et al., 2021; Rosalina et al., 2021; Siddiqui et al., 2021).

This burgeoning literature on rural tourism shows that it “has been a key research area over the last few decades” (Karali et al., 2021, p. 1). The ramifications of COVID-19 for rural tourism destinations inevitably emerged as an issue of vibrant debate in recent international scholarship. With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic many everyday human mobilities were brought to a standstill and others radically reorganised (Kock et al., 2020). Among others Villacé-Molinero et al. (2021, p. 1) aver that COVID-19 has altered travellers’ risk perceptions and travel behaviour. Zheng et al. (2021) write of the ‘travel fear’ evoked by COVID-19 and of people’s coping responses. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a paradigm shift in the psyche of tourists linked to risk perceptions around safety, health and travel (Kock et al., 2020; Matiza & Slabbert, 2021, 2022). One outcome has been a growth in consumer demand for open spaces and rural destinations (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c; Butler et al., 2022). For example, based upon the experience in Nordic countries Helgadottir and Dashper (2021, p. 66) stress that the “Covid-19 era poses many challenges for the tourism sector, yet rural tourism may become more appealing as tourists seek escape to remote areas, engaging with nature and keeping away from densely populated urban centres.”

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic provide a potential springboard for a regeneration of rural tourism destinations in Europe and many other parts of the world (Kastenholz et al., 2022). This potential is an outcome of the changed demands of urban consumers away from ‘crowdedness’ and instead towards a search for open spaces, nature, and the tourist offerings of rural areas (Kinczel

& Müller, 2022). Traanman (2021) draws attention to the perception of rural regions as 'healthy spaces' and to the importance of 'therapeutic landscapes' or spaces of psychological healing. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) is unequivocal that the role of tourism in rural development is more relevant than ever in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that tourism in rural areas offers critical opportunities for recovery as with changing demands tourists look for less populated destinations as well as open-space experiences and activities.

Several academic studies already point to the fact that the pandemic provides new opportunities for rural tourism (Buckley, 2020; Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Craig & Karabas, 2021; Juschten, & Hössinger, 2021; Vaishar & Štastná, 2022), most especially in protected and conserved areas (Niezgoda & Markiewicz, 2021; Spalding et al., 2021). Rural tourist destinations have benefited by channelling urban tourist flows towards rural areas (Stankov et al., 2020). Silva (2021, p. 1) argues that "scholarly literature has stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive effect on rural tourism due to the "increase of tourists seeking for a safe/low-risk destination in scarcely populated areas." Li et al. (2021, p. 730) maintain that in relation to rural tourism as "the pandemic has created high tourism demand for health and relaxation ... rural tourism that is close to nature has excellent potential for development and will have benefits for human mental health." Quendler et al. (2021, p. 22) contend that the farm holiday has the "potential to rebound faster following the COVID-19 pandemic than many other forms of tourism." The explanation is grounded in two elements which are abundant in the location of holiday farms and reinforce competitive advantage, namely fresh air and sunlight. These can enhance actual and perceived salutogenesis which is an approach to human health that stresses the factors contributing to human physical and well-being.

As demonstrated by Butler et al. (2021a, 2021b) a leading factor underpinning the increased demand for rural tourism is self-drive tourism. Studies conducted in Australia reveal the impacts of COVID-19 on tourist mobilities and activity choice (Butler et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022). One clear message is of the marked shift in consumer preference towards particular forms of mobility and especially the utilisation of private vehicles, including cars, campervans and motorcycles, which "provide users with opportunities for freedom and control in ways that other modes of transport simply cannot" (Butler et al., 2021a, p. 2). Several advantages of private vehicles as compared to other forms of mobility are identified. In contrast to more rigid forms of travel that are structured around pre-determined locations self-drive tourism enables "drivers and their passengers to realise demands for autonomy by allowing them to choose which routes to take, where to stop and where to stay" (Butler et al., 2021a, p. 3). Self-drive tourism underlines the experiential benefits of private vehicles which allow people to feel, pause and reflect as they move through unfamiliar and often rural settings (Butler et al., 2021b).

The private vehicle also is a sanctuary and protective bubble and positioned as a safer mode of travel. Butler et al. (2021a, p. 4) argue that the benefits of private vehicles relate not only to the destinations they go to but also “self-drive tourism has often been observed as a form of travel that permits drivers and passengers to temporarily retreat from the banality and constraints of everyday life” (Butler et al., 2021a). The rising importance of drive tourism in the leisure mobilities of Australians is shown as a boosting factor for local rural tourism (Butler & Szili, 2020; Butler et al., 2021a, 2021b). The research conducted in South Australia by Butler et al. (2022) shows how engagements in tourism have been modified by the pandemic as people visited nature-based settings in pursuit of health benefits.

Beyond the pandemic Laesser et al. (2021, p. 8) consider there will be both “an increasing interest in remote/uncontested destinations, avoiding crowded places and valuing nature experiences” as well as “a general desire for new experiences/living dreams especially related to nature, and shifting preferences for accommodation types securing social distance, which is clearly visible in a dramatically increased interest in camping and 2nd homes.” Rural tourism offers a major opportunity to satisfy the demands of post-pandemic tourists who seek stress-relief and rejuvenation within a nature-based environment or engagement with physical and psychological well-being activities (Cooper & Buckley, 2021; Lewandowicz & Bac-Bronowicz, 2022). Nature-based areas can be viewed from the perspective of mental health as “mental sanctuaries” and from the perspective of physical health nature-based environments (including conservation areas) are seen as ‘risk-averse’ environments (Butler et al., 2022). As a result of changes in risk perceptions it is anticipated for the Global North that remote and rural destinations will become more attractive to domestic tourists. Other ramifications of the pandemic might create an extra attraction for rural destinations. Moerman (2021, p. 4) pinpoints that lockdown restrictions have resulted in people feeling “emotionally claustrophobic at home and that these emotional and psychological effects are mostly present among populations resident in dense urban agglomerations.”

Serbia provides one example of many destinations where, with the implementation of strict COVID-19 prevention measures, there is evidence of an upturn of interest in rural tourism and new sustainability options for many of the nation’s villages (Cvijanović et al., 2021; Lukić et al., 2022). Outdoor recreation, leisure visits to agritourism farms, rural cottages and second homes have been growing as they are perceived as safe by domestic tourists in Poland (Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al., 2020; Roman & Grudzień, 2021; Uglis et al., 2021; Lewandowicz & Bac-Bronowicz, 2022). In the Czech Republic COVID-19 has been a stimulus for rural tourism with domestic tourists seeking out natural, gastronomic and local attractions (Vaishar & Štastná, 2022) For the Netherlands studies by Moerman (2021) and Traanman (2021) indicate how the pandemic influenced domestic travellers behaviour with an upturn in rural holidays. The advantages of tranquil-

lity, clean air, beauty of natural landscapes and of local heritage assets have been demonstrated by Coroş et al. (2021a, 2021b) to boost the potential for rural tourism in Romania. Also in the case of Romania Popescu and Plesoianu (2021) show how agri-tourist guest houses recorded a higher rate of tourist arrivals than the national rate as they were viewed as safe destinations. Robina-Ramirez et al. (2022, p. 3) point to findings that in Spain it was recorded that “half of the rural accommodations increased their demand compared to the pre-pandemic figures once the alarm state was lifted.” Using evidence from the province of Huelva, Vargas-Sanchez (2021) charts opportunities for developing Spanish rural tourism in a post-viral scenario. Importantly, in terms of strategic management for rural small firms attention is drawn to issues of safety and hygiene, creativity and innovation, and of ensuring support from local residents. For Portugal Marques et al. (2022) document that low tourism density areas in rural areas were preferred destinations by domestic travellers in the COVID-19 environment. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on wine route related rural tourism are complex, however, with some producers opting to close their tourism activities and instead focus on wine production (Kastenholz et al., 2022).

The most compelling demonstration of the positive potential of COVID-19 for rural tourism destinations in the Global North is from research which applies ‘big data.’ In a study conducted in Spain de Aldecoa Fuster (2021) analysed geographical patterns of usage of credit cards in terms of three sets of destinations, namely urban, rural and coastal destinations. The research disclosed that the loss of tourism business in the ‘less urban’ regions of Spain has been far lower than in traditional coastal destinations or cities. In certain rural regions overnight stays in rural tourism accommodation exhibited minimal change in an annual comparison. These findings lead to the conclusion that “rural destinations have emerged as the most attractive choice after the outbreak of the pandemic” (de Aldecoa Fuster, 2021, p. 1). In particular, the research confirmed that rural areas were a major alternative for those (mainly domestic) tourists wanting to travel whilst still maintaining a social distance.

For the Global South the evidence from several Chinese studies on changing consumer preferences in the COVID-19 environment signals again the mounting popularity of rural destinations (Li et al. 2021; Wen et al., 2021). Zhu & Deng (2020, p. 1) assert that within the context of the pandemic “rural tourism is expected to be the top choice for Chinese residents for relaxation and enhancing parent-child relationships.” In China it has been recognised in the COVID-19 environment that “improving infrastructure construction and service quality became a requirement for the upgrading of rural tourism” (Li et al., 2021, p. 729). In parts of South-east Asia a significant crisis response has been the emergence of creative and innovative tourism programmes focused on local heritage and culture attracting increasing numbers of domestic tourists to visit rural areas “for their

psychological and physical recovery, workcations, and cultural/heritage exploration while enjoying activities such as nature and pilgrimage walks, food tourism and mindfulness retreats among others” (Cheer & Choe, 2021, p. 1). Such trends have invigorated rural livelihoods as well as create entrepreneurial confidence and cultural revitalisation. These innovative programmes mostly have been initiated by individual local entrepreneurs and small businesses rather than by governments as part of economic recovery planning (Adams et al., 2021). Research conducted in Indonesia provides further evidence from the Global South of the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on consumer intentions to give a greater preference to rural destinations (Utomo et al., 2020).

The uneven potential geographical impacts of the pandemic for tourism in South Africa have been flagged in a national study of vulnerable spaces (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b). Signs of an upturn in demand for rural tourism products in South Africa have emerged out of recent research on COVID-19 impacts on domestic consumer travel preferences (Matiza & Slabbert, 2022). As in other parts of the world COVID-19 is responsible for a shift in the psychographic profile of domestic tourists in South Africa (Matiza & Kruger, 2021). The perceived physical risk induced by the pandemic is leading to an increase in outdoor recreational pursuits with a corresponding upturn in demand for rural tourism (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021). Over the past decade government policy in South Africa has targeted rural tourism for promotion in several areas of the country that might be termed ‘left behind’ places particularly in small towns, villages and ‘dorpies’ (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021d). Several niche forms of tourism in these rural spaces are viewed as having potential for leveraging (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021e). It is against this backdrop of international scholarship on COVID-19 impacts for changing consumer preferences as well as mounting policy interest in rural tourism by governments in several parts of the world that attention now narrows to South Africa with an examination of the first round impacts of the pandemic.

3. COVID-19 and tourism impacts in South Africa

In common with the rest of the world South Africa’s tourism economy was devastated by the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. The impacts for tourism were immediately evident following the declaration of a National State of Disaster on 15 March 2020 by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. Lockdowns, the closure of South Africa’s international borders and temporary travel restrictions on internal inter-provincial travel were among the policy responses introduced by national government (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a, 2021b). The National

State of Disaster in South Africa remained in force for more than two years being lifted only on 5 April 2022. The severest curbs on international and local travel were those which impacted the tourism sector during 2020 as a gradual easing of restrictions occurred during 2021. Adaptive responses to the pandemic's impact on reduced tourist flows were enacted by tourism enterprises including as reaction both to shifting consumer travel preferences and the imperative for tourism businesses to pivot towards the domestic market (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson, 2021; Giddy et al., 2022).

The uneven ramifications of the pandemic for the South African tourism economy during 2020 are the focus of analysis in this section. The data utilised in this investigation is extracted from the local data base maintained by the private sector consultancy IHS Global Insight (which in 2022 was merged to become part of S & P Global). The data base records information concerning the tourism performance of all local municipal authorities in the country, *inter alia*, data on the number of tourism trips differentiated by primary purpose and origin of trip; bednights by origin of tourist (domestic or international); calculation of tourism spend; and, of the contribution of tourism to local gross domestic product (GDP). In the context of the absence of any official data on tourism at the local municipality scale the IHS Global Insight data base is widely used as a base for local economic development planning in South Africa. As detailed by Rogerson and Rogerson (2021b) the data is collated regularly from a range of official and non-government sources and the primary data re-worked to ensure consistency across variables through the application of national and sub-national verification tests in order to ensure that the model is consistent for measuring business activity.

The time period under scrutiny for this study is between 2019-2020 and represents an examination of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on South African tourism and the tourism space economy. Table 1 provides a picture of the hollowing out of the national tourism sector during 2020 as a consequence of the pandemic and the restrictions imposed upon both international and national (inter-provincial) travel mobilities. Across 15 indicators relating to origin of travel (domestic vs international), purpose of travel (leisure, business, visiting friends and relatives [VFR] and other [mainly religious and health]) and tourism spend it is demonstrated that all segments of South Africa's tourism sector were devastated with the net effect that tourism's overall contribution to national GDP was slashed from 5.6% (2019) to 1.7% (2020). Using data for tourism trips the downturn is apparent for all forms of purpose of tourism, namely leisure (-64.3%), business (-70.3%), visiting friends and relatives (-67.5%) and other (-67.1%). Equally, it is evidenced for both domestic (-66.9%) and international tourism (-66.8%). Nationally, the largest absolute declines in trips and bednights are recorded in terms of purpose of travel for VFR and by origin for domestic tourism (Table 1). Overall, however, it is shown that the largest *relative* decline was for the category

Table 1. COVID-19 Impacts on South African Tourism 2019-2020

Indicator	2019-2020 Net Change (-)	Loss (%)
Total Tourism Spend (R'000s)	199 752.0	70.2
Total Trips ('000s)	30016.1	66.9
Total Bednights ('000s)	16887.8	68.2
Leisure Trips ('000s)	6845.5	64.3
Leisure Bednights ('000s)	44785.5	64.5
Business Trips ('000s)	2283.9	70.3
Business Bednights ('000s)	15469.7	70.6
VFR Trips ('000s)	18260.1	67.5
VFR Bednights ('000s)	96201.7	69.8
Other Trips ('000s)	2626.6	67.1
Other Bednights ('000s)	12420.9	67.7
Domestic Trips ('000s)	23521.1	66.9
Domestic Bednights ('000s)	96347.9	69.1
International Trips ('000s)	6495.1	66.8
International Bednights ('000s)	36629.0	67.3

Source: own elaboration based on IHS Global Insight.

of business tourism which shed over 70% of both trips and bednights in the period 2019-2020 (Table 1).

Attention turns now to focus upon a macro-scale view of the geographical impact of the pandemic. An analysis is undertaken of the first round effects of the pandemic on different types of settlement in terms of the urban hierarchy. Specifically, a differentiation is made between three levels of settlement. First, are the country's eight recognised metropolitan areas which are mapped on Fig. 1. The largest of these metropolitan areas in terms of population are the inland centres of Johannesburg, Tshwane (Pretoria), Ekurhuleni and the coastal metropolitan areas of eThekweni (which is centred upon the city of Durban) and the City of Cape Town. Smaller metropolitan areas are Buffalo City with East London its axis, Mangaung with Bloemfontein the heart, and Nelson Mandela Bay with Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth) its major centre. The metropolitan areas – especially those in Gauteng – constitute the 'core regions' of the national space economy. The next tier in the settlement hierarchy is comprised of the middle group of secondary centres – often called secondary cities. Although the precise definition of these places is contested 22 centres are generally acknowledged as forming South Africa's network of secondary cities. Together the metropolitan areas and the secondary cities make up the basis for what would be referred to as 'city tourism' in South Africa. As is shown elsewhere, city tourism destinations have dominated tourism flows and the tourism space economy in South Africa for at least the past two decades (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014, 2017, 2019).

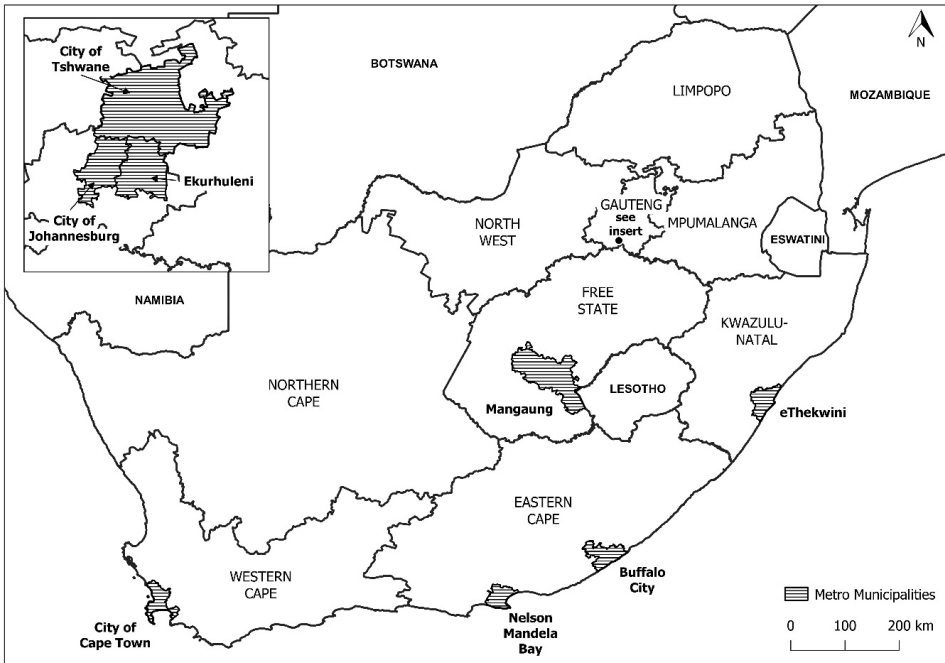


Figure 1. South Africa’s Nine Provinces and Eight Metropolitan Areas

Source: own elaboration.

Beyond the eight metropolitan areas and the 22 secondary cities is small town and rural South Africa. This category covers the largest area of South Africa. It incorporates nearly the entire provinces of Limpopo and Northern Cape as well the majority of local municipalities in all other provinces (Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, North-West, Western Cape) with the exception of Gauteng, the national urban-economic heartland. Over the past two decades much of the space of small town and rural South Africa has experienced massive economic restructuring and social change as a result of a post-productivist transition associated with agricultural restructuring and the closure of mining operations. Accordingly, across much of small town and rural South Africa, which includes some of the country’s most economically distressed areas, interest has expanded in the potential of the tourism sector for driving local economic development and change (Kontsiwe & Visser, 2019). For certain parts of small town South Africa – most notably the coastal resorts of the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Eastern Cape province – tourism has been a long-established sector. For other small towns and rural areas, however, the turn to tourism over the past two decades has been a necessary local response to economic decline. The expanded promo-

Table 2. South Africa's settlement hierarchy: Key Tourism Indicators

Indicators	South Africa		Metropolitan Areas		Secondary Centres		Small Towns and Rural Areas	
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020
Total Trips	44860.1	14843.9	16907.8	5094.1	10435.9	3482.2	17516.4	6267.6
%	100	100	37.7	34.3	23.3	23.5	40.0	42.2
Total Bed-nights	247520.8	78643.0	109833.6	32691.6	70832.7	23605.8	66854.5	22343.6
%	100	100	44.4	41.6	28.6	29.3	27.0	29.1
Total Spend (R)	284628.1	84876.1	165118.4	45039.4	43092.0	13955.0	76407.7	25881.7
%	100	100	58.0	53.0	15.1	16.4	26.9	30.6

Source: own elaboration based on IHS Global Insight data.

tion of tourism in these parts of small town and rural South Africa has become an explicit policy goal of the national Department of Tourism.

Table 2 presents three different indicators of the tourism economy of South Africa for 2019 and 2020 relating to total tourism trips, total bednights and most importantly, total tourism spend. Despite the common association of South Africa as a tourism destination associated with nature tourism in rural settings (such as Kruger National Park) the three indicators show that the tourism space economy in pre-COVID-19 times is weighted towards city destinations – the metropolitan areas and secondary cities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). In 2019 city tourism destinations accounted for 60.0% of tourism trips, 73.0% of bed-nights, and 73.1% of total tourism spend. South Africa's metropolitan areas are the most significant single category and for national total spend the eight large metropolitan areas account in 2019 for 58.0% national tourism spend. Nevertheless, it is observed also that pre-outbreak of the pandemic small towns and rural areas were the destinations for 40% of tourist trips in 2019. The largest share of these trips is accounted for by VFR travel to rural areas, in particular to the former Homelands which were created under apartheid as labour reservoirs and remain post-apartheid as South Africa's most economically depressed regions (Todes & Turok, 2018). It should be appreciated that the category of bed-nights includes both commercial and *non-paid* accommodation much of which is accounted for by large flows of domestic travellers who stay at the homes of friends or relatives (Rogerson, 2018).

The one year impact of COVID-19 on tourism mobilities in South Africa is revealed by a comparison of 2019 with 2020 data. Across all components of the settlement hierarchy – metropolitan areas, secondary centres and small towns and rural areas – the COVID-19 pandemic caused absolute declines in indicators of total trips, bednights and spend. In the context of South Africa's small towns and rural areas the declines are 64.2% for total trips, 66.6% for bednights and 66.1% for total tourism spend. Nevertheless, what is observable concerning the relative

performance of different areas in the period 2019-2020 is that small towns and rural areas as a whole have performed considerably better as tourist destinations than South Africa's metropolitan areas. Indeed, the metropolitan areas record the worst performance as tourist destinations in the pandemic year of 2020. The net effect is that the balance of South Africa's tourism space economy experienced a shift during 2020 as a consequence of COVID-19 induced change. It is shown on Table 2 that in relative terms the small towns and rural areas of South Africa have increased their importance in terms of the tourism system through attracting a higher proportion of trips, bednight stays and correspondingly a relatively greater share of tourism spend. Within the period 2019-2020 the small towns and rural areas of South Africa record an upturn from accounting for 26.9% tourism spend in 2019 to 30.6% by end-2020. These findings signal a short-term but potentially notable shift towards the reduction of metropolitan area dominance and instead a trend towards polarization reversal of the tourism space economy. Arguably, this change is essentially COVID-19 induced and is not a reflection of the (relatively weak) interventions introduced by national government to engineer such a shift in the geographical spread of tourism.

Table 3 provides further findings of the relative spatial shift taking place in South Africa's tourism space economy as a consequence of COVID-19 impacts. The reduced attractiveness of metropolitan areas and changing consumer preferences for open-spaces and rural experiences underpin the results reported

Table 3. Small Town and Rural South Africa: Proportion of National Total

Indicators	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
Total Tourism Spend	26.9	30.6
Total Trips	40.0	42.2
Total Bednights	27.0	29.1
Leisure Trips	42.8	46.5
Leisure Bednights	41.4	44.3
Business Trips	34.6	35.3
Business Bednights	30.9	31.6
VFR Trips	45.3	47.8
VFR Bednights	39.6	41.8
Other Trips	38.0	39.7
Other Bednights	33.2	35.2
Domestic Trips	44.7	48.1
Domestic Bednights	43.0	47.3
International Trips	38.0	38.1
International Bednights	33.4	33.8

Source: own elaboration based on IHS Global Insight.

in Table 3. Across all indicators relating to origin and purpose of travel, small town and rural South Africa has improved its position in the tourism system. Of particular significance is that from 2019-2020 the relative proportion of leisure trips to small town and rural South Africa expanded from 42.8% to 46.5% and domestic tourism as a whole from 44.7% to 48.1%. As a whole therefore this data provides evidence that small towns and rural tourism destinations have been (at least in relative terms) beneficiaries of the impacts of COVID-19 at the expense of city tourism destinations in South Africa. As confirmed in a parallel investigation, for South Africa “COVID-19 has triggered a short-term *de-polarization* of the tourism space economy as the dominance of the metropolitan areas has been markedly reduced during the period 2019-2020” (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022, p. 7). Several factors can be suggested to explain these COVID-19 geographical impacts on South Africa’s tourism economy. Arguably, the competitiveness of the metropolitan areas as tourism destinations has been eroded by the effects of lockdown restrictions and international border closures, domestic consumer resistance to travel to metropolitan areas as COVID-19 ‘hotspots’, shifts in urban consumer travel preferences to avoid crowded areas in search of open space and nature, the closure (partial or temporary) of many leisure tourism attractions in cities, and the shifts in the dynamics of business tourism towards virtual rather than in-person meetings.

Finally, in reviewing these findings relating to the first round geographical impacts of COVID-19 on the South African tourism economy it is necessary to add the caveat that the spaces of small town and rural South Africa are far from homogeneous. For example, major differences exist between the group of small towns and rural areas that under apartheid historically formed part of ‘white’ South Africa as opposed to those spaces that were part of the former Homelands (Todes & Turok, 2018; Visagie & Turok, 2021). One legacy of apartheid that remains little changed nearly 30 years after democratic transition is that the former areas are more economically prosperous and have an infrastructure (roads, electricity, services) which is better suited for tourism development than the spaces of economic underdevelopment and disadvantage that characterize former rural Homelands areas. Another related layer of differentiation relates to geographical location. Rural geographers point out that often ‘rural’ is viewed homogeneously simply as places outside of cities or, if differentiated, as places which are ‘remote’ (and sometimes exotic) as opposed to ‘fringe’ (Koster, 2019). As a result of their location relative to major urban centres the tourism opportunities for these types of rural spaces are markedly different. In addition, Carson (2018) draws attention to a third category of ‘non-tourism places’ which are rural areas ‘in between’ places that are not attractive enough to establish tourism as a self-contained sector of the local economy.

In South Africa recent research has demonstrated the particular challenges for tourism development of ‘in between’ rural spaces and of remote rural spaces and their small towns because of their infrastructural shortcomings which, in turn, are a function of local government mismanagement and often of corruption (Giddy et al., 2022; Rogerson & Sixaba, 2022). The full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on these different rural spaces remain to be researched. The initial evidence coming from the IHS Global Insight data is clear, however. The best performing local areas for tourism development in South Africa during 2019-2020 were rural fringe areas with close access to metropolitan areas for domestic tourists. The local spaces that recorded the best performance (or, more correctly, experienced the least decline) with the immediate impact of COVID-19 were a group of rural localities situated close to South Africa’s major metropolitan areas. Three examples can be given. First, is Theewaterskloof Local Municipality in the Cape Winelands which offers a range of outdoor and open space opportunities for residents of Metropolitan Cape Town. Second, is Madibeng Local Municipality in North West province; this includes Hartebeespoort Dam and its surrounds, a recreational space, popular for second homes, and part of the ‘pleasure periphery’ for the major cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria. Third, is the Midvaal Local Municipality in Gauteng province which assumes a similar function with its recreational open spaces of Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve and the Vaal River. Overall, in South Africa during 2020 these three rural fringe spaces were the best performing local areas for tourism.

4. Conclusion

As argued by Butler et al. (2022, p. 1) “the Covid-19 pandemic continues to shape tourist mobilities and practices”. It is a challenge for re-orienting the research agendas of tourism scholars, including of the community of tourism geographers. The objective in this article was to investigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic on the geography of tourism flows in South Africa. The research was contextualised against the international backdrop of COVID-19 changing consumer demands which are directed at experiences of open spaces and nature and underscore potential opportunities for the advance of rural tourism destinations. Using the case of South Africa this research is one of the first investigations to empirically examine geographical patterns of change in national tourism space economies.

The results reveal that during 2020, a year which will forever be remembered for the COVID-19 shock and turbulence, a noticeable change occurred in the spatial patterns of tourism. The trend for the concentration of tourism development upon the country’s leading cities was halted and seemingly put in reverse by the ramifications of COVID-19. Evidence exists of a weakening of the previously

dominant position of (in particular) the major metropolitan areas in South Africa's tourism economy. Instead, there is recorded a relative upturn in the fortunes of tourism in small town and rural areas of South Africa as a whole. This said, further research is merited to unpack the impacts of COVID-19 on different kinds of rural spaces and small towns in South Africa. Preliminary evidence points to the growth momentum being focussed mainly on attractive 'rural fringe' locations which derive benefits from their close proximity and access to the domestic markets of large metropolitan areas. In addition, future research must interrogate whether the trends observed in this study are a short-term phenomenon or represent a turning point with medium and long-term opportunities for small town and rural South Africa as tourism destinations.

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Bezpośrednie skutki pandemii COVID-19 dla turystyki wiejskiej w RPA

Streszczenie. Choć skutki pandemii COVID-19 były szeroko omawiane, istnieje dość ograniczona liczba publikacji i badań dotyczących geograficznych skutków pandemii. Celem artykułu jest zbadanie bezpośredniego wpływu pandemii COVID-19 na gospodarkę przestrzeni turystycznej w RPA, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jej konsekwencji dla turystyki w małych miastach i na obszarach wiejskich. W opracowaniu wykorzystano lokalną bazę danych turystycznych, w której gromadzone są informacje dotyczące działalności turystycznej wszystkich lokalnych władz miejskich w kraju. Wyniki pokazują, że w 2020 r. nastąpiły zauważalne zmiany przestrzenne w aktywności turystycznej. W wyniku pandemii rozwój turystyki, który do tej pory obejmował głównie wiodące miasta kraju, zatrzymał się i zaczął przejawiać oznaki recesji. Istnieją dowody na osłabienie dotychczasowej dominującej pozycji (w szczególności) głównych obszarów metropolitalnych w gospodarce turystycznej Republiki Południowej Afryki. Widoczna jest natomiast względna poprawa koniunktury w turystyce w małych miastach i na obszarach wiejskich całej RPA.

Słowa kluczowe: Republika Południowej Afryki, skutki COVID-19, geografia turystyki, turystyka wiejska, małe miasta



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