

TRADE UPDATE



SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM

JOINT STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM BOARD AND THE TOURISM BUSINESS COUNCIL OF SOUTH AFRICA RE: NEW COVID VARIANT- Omicron

29 November 2021

South African Tourism (SA Tourism) and the Tourism Business Council of South Africa (TBCSA) have noted the latest reports on the new Covid-19 variant (now called Omicron) discovered by South African scientists and the subsequent placing of our country on various countries' red lists, effectively banning travel from South Africa to these countries.

We applaud the diligence of our globally renowned local scientists who discovered the variant through collaborative efforts with laboratories and the Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa and acted swiftly to inform the rest of the world, in compliance with their international obligations. Our country's epidemiological reputation is world-class and South Africa prides itself on this. This important discovery was also noted and commended by Secretary of State in the US, Antony Blinken who praised South Africa for quickly identifying the new COVID-19 strain and sharing this information with the world.

While the South African scientists correctly and proactively informed the world in contributing to the global efforts to alleviate the spread of the new variant, this did not mean that the variant originated in South Africa. The announcement of the new variant by our scientists has unfortunately had unintended consequences resulting in many countries closing their borders for travellers from South Africa. Post South Africa's discovery of this new variant, it has emerged that the Omicron variant has been detected in various other countries around the world including Britain, Belgium, Botswana, Germany, Italy, Hong Kong, Israel and the Czech Republic.

“SA Tourism's short term strategic initiatives and trade engagements in key source markets were starting to pay off as we saw an increase in bookings with more and more travellers wanting to visit South Africa again. Over the last few months, we also witnessed increased optimism and confidence towards our country with more airlines reinstating direct flights to South Africa and more strategic partners engaging with us in the promotion of the South African tourism sector. We were truly on the right trajectory to save jobs in our industry. This latest development is certainly going to have a devastating effect on our tourism industry, airlines and business partners,” says South African Tourism, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Sthembiso Dlamini.

“We would like to emphasize that our country remains open for all those travellers who wish to visit. We also encourage all South Africans to continue with their plans to go out there to explore and enjoy travelling within South Africa, while observing guidelines laid out by the national command centre from time to time. The resilience of domestic tourism is key to the recovery of South Africa’s tourism sector and to the economy as this help avoid any further job losses,” adds Dlamini.

“The latest travel bans on South Africa are extremely disappointing and premature considering the limited information we have about this new variant. Whilst we cannot control the international market, we can control how we handle the crisis domestically, and will support the government to amplify vaccination opportunities and protect lives and livelihoods that depend on the tourism industry. Further restrictions will exacerbate an already devastated and ailing tourism industry and will negatively affect various other industries in South Africa.” said Tshifhiwa Tshivhengwa, CEO of the Tourism Business Council of South Africa.

Although there is currently limited data on the new variant as has been noted by WHO, our scientists are working around the clock, using established surveillance systems to understand the new variant and to allow for the most effective interventions. We welcome government’s response and will support all efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19 and to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

We have complete confidence in the country’s health sector, which has demonstrated resilience, competence and excellent expertise since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020. Over and above this, South Africa’s businesses have provided safe tourism products, venues and establishments by implementing and adhering to globally benchmarked health and safety protocols and norms and standards. We would like to encourage these businesses to continue enforcing these protocols. The importance of non-pharmaceutical interventions such as the compulsory wearing of masks, maintaining social distancing and regular washing of hands as well as socially distanced limited gatherings in well-ventilated spaces remain in place. The safety of South African residents and all visitors to the country remains of the utmost importance.

We would like to also remind South Africans of the importance of getting vaccinated. As a country, we know that our biggest weapon against COVID-19 at this stage is vaccination and observing of the non-pharmaceutical safety practices and standards.

We are hopeful that we will remain able to welcome visitors from across the world. The tourism sector is important to the South African economic value chain and its recovery is of utmost importance to us.

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