
Tourism KwaZulu-Natal



Zulu Kingdom. Exceptional

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Attention: News Editors and Journalists

TOURISM KZN NEW ACTING CEO TO USHER IN A NEW CHAPTER FOR TOURISM

It is time to approach tourism differently in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), to begin a new chapter that will not only foster development but see the province's many diverse cultures speaking with one voice, says newly appointed Acting Chief Executive of Tourism KwaZulu-Natal (TKZN), Mr Sibusiso Gumbi.

Having hit the ground running ahead of the busiest period on the KZN tourism calendar, Mr Gumbi says he is confident that all plans are in place for a smooth transition into the busy summer festive season.

He sees his role as a strategic one that will unite everyone from the province's unemployed youth, to its leaders and even captains of industry. "I strongly believe that tourism is at the centre of the economy, of infrastructure development, improving our beaches and our heritage sites. If we can concentrate on these, we will be able to turn things around. KZN has massive tourism potential, yet we seem to be dealing with a lot of negativity. It is time for a new narrative and for us all to join together to be ambassadors for tourism," he says.

After 28 years in the public sector, Mr Gumbi is confident that the province has the right ideas when it comes to infrastructure, economic development and growth. But the time for interpretation of ideas has passed and the time for implementation has arrived, he believes.

Born and bred in KZN, Mr Gumbi is a family man who says he has a spiritual connection with the beautiful landscape and the mountains of KZN, especially when it comes to the district of uMkhanyakude, the northernmost of the 11 districts in KZN and home to some of its most beautiful tourism spots, including the Isimangaliso Wetland Park, the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi, Ndumu and Mkhuze game reserves, Sodwana Bay, Kosi Bay and Lake Jozini.

His family is part of the Gumbi tribe. Dispossessed of their land during the 1880s, the Gumbis finally had their land returned to them more than 100 years later. It is here that the highly successful community owned Thembe Elephant Park has been established.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Mr Gumbi believes that we have completely underestimated just what can be achieved via tourism in this province.

He grew up in and matriculated in Tongaat and went on to complete both his degree and Honours at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Westville campus before starting work with the provincial Department of Transport in 1996. He was tasked with dealing with one of the biggest challenges of the time - the restructuring of the province's taxi industry.

"The message was that, despite the many killings in the industry at the time, it remained the backbone of the province's economy. We had to deal with those issues, restore order and formalize it," he recalls.

He went on to specialize in policy formulation and integrated planning related to public transport and infrastructure before moving on to the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) to study transport management. On his return to KZN, Mr Gumbi played a strategic role in the realignment and the integration of public transport, administering the subsidisation of buses. In 2012, he was appointed the Department of Transport's Head of Department, a role that spanned everything from road safety to rail and freight and equipped him for his role as TKZN's ACEO.

Mr Gumbi points out that tourism and transport are closely entwined. "In every aspect of tourism, you will find an element of transport. To attract travelers to a province, you need to have effective and good road infrastructure. Points of attraction need to be accessible. To achieve that, you have to work hand in hand with the Department of Transport so that, in their development plans, they prioritise roads that are leading to attractions," he explains.

In 2019, he exited that department to take as HOD for the Department of Community Safety, another role that he feels will be invaluable when it comes to tourism. Concerns around safety are a major hindrance when trying to attract tourists to KZN and he believes his ability to interact with law enforcement agencies will help achieve quick turnarounds.

From there, Mr Gumbi moved to the Premiers office where the insights into infrastructure challenges that he gained have equipped him for the many infrastructure related challenges that are impacting on the tourism sector at present.

Asked to describe his leadership style, Mr Gumbi says he is sober-minded, calm and fair, a man who believes in leading by example and plays a role much like that of a choir master in encouraging the team at TKZN to fulfill their mandate and achieve its full potential.

Starting out, he says he is doing a lot of listening and looks forward to steering policy implementation, staff development and adherence to good governance within the organisation.

Beyond that, he says the bigger picture is seeing how tourism can play an important role in job creation, economic recovery and transformation.

“I’m very open minded about the critical role that tourism has to play in the socio-economic sphere. As a community, KZN needs to understand itself first. Without that, how do you move on and attract others from other provinces and sell the province abroad as well? That’s why I am saying that we need to start internally. Let everyone understand the importance of KZN from a cultural perspective, as a province that is the seat of the Zulu monarchy, as one which has both the beaches and the mountains and is home to the big five.”

On the ground, he says transformation has been slow because there has been little support and capacitation for locals to run successful businesses.

“Transformation is just a concept. What we need to do is to build a base of knowledge so that everyone can play a role in the tourism industry. We need to capacitate, educate and support people. We need to put in place principled and professional implementers and then we will see things change,” he concludes.

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