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FIONA WAKELIN
GROUP EDITOR



Standard Bank



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Best Western Hotels & Resorts has a rich history of over 70 years in hospitality, with a current portfolio of 16 brands and a presence in nearly 100 countries. It also operates a growing network of properties in Africa and a year ago established a presence in Ethiopia for the first time. The Best Western Plus Addis Ababa recently celebrated its first birthday.

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I'm a sucker for an interesting study and UK-based Hayes & Jarvis have come up with one that caught my eye.

They are long-haul specialists and have been offering holidays worldwide for over 65 years.

The other reason this study grabbed my attention is my dislike for people burying themselves in their smartphones, to the detriment of actual human interaction, particularly when it comes to leisure time.

In this instance, specific holidays or actual leisure trips.

Hayes & Jarvis decided to research what they've called the world's "Top 20 Destinations for A Digital Detox", with the study highlighting the number of wi-fi hotspots and 4G availability (where less is better) in a country, as well as the percentage of parks you can explore.

By looking at the number of wi-fi hotspots, the percentage of the population that have access to the internet, and more, this study claims to find the best places to avoid the internet and relax.

Interestingly, the country coming out on top was Costa Rica. That's due to 66% of the population having access to the internet and the country's 4G speeds of around 5.82 Mbps, whilst Costa Rica also has a high percentage of parkland at 25%, higher than any other destination on the list.

Chile, Iceland, Colombia and Peru rounded off the top five, making South America a serious contender for a 'digital-light' holiday. Throw in Argentina at number seven and Ecuador at number eight, and that argument is strengthened further.

Closer to home, South Africa is the highest-ranked African country at number 12, with low 4G speeds of approximately 15.42 Mbps and many natural parks, whilst over 40% of residents are disconnected from the internet.

A couple of other interesting findings stood out:

- **Canada:** Only 0.11% of the land in Canada is built on, making it perfect for an escape from technology
- **Australia:** With 4G speeds of around 32.5 Mbps and 685 national parks, rather opt for the unique wildlife and insects, as opposed to surfing the net
- **Ireland:** Although Ireland only has six national parks, there are many hikes you can take to get away from densely-populated areas and technology

"It is vital for both our mental and physical health for us to get the full rest we need," said Helen Adamson, Hayes & Jarvis Brand & Commercial Director. "Digital devices like phones or tablets can at times hinder our ability to turn off and truly relax, which is why we conducted research into locations where the internet is limited or unavailable."

Well said and well done!

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MSC Adds Second Ship to SA Season

MSC Cruises will be bringing two ships to South Africa's shores for the 2020/2021 cruise season. This will mark the first time that two different class MSC Cruises ships (Lirica and Musica Class) will be deployed in the country simultaneously. From December 2020 to March 2021, MSC Opera, which will be homeported in Cape Town, will join MSC Musica, homeported in Durban. MSC Opera, which can host approximately 2,500 guests and was completely refurbished in 2014, will offer 22 cruises next season alongside MSC Musica. MSC Musica can cater for approximately 3,200 guests and will offer 40 cruises. The ships will alternate routes, providing South African cruisers with a wider choice of options. MSC Cruises is the world's largest privately-owned cruise line with seasonal itineraries that include Northern Europe, the Atlantic Ocean, South America, Southern Africa, China, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and India.

BCD a Finalist in Standard Bank Top Women Awards

BCD Travel has been nominated in the Top Gender Empowered Organisation: Tourism category in the annual Standard Bank Top Women Awards, which recognises those organisations and individuals whose efforts are uplifting women in business and society. BCD Travel has placed a focus on providing opportunities for women in the workplace and says it is pursuing a consistent commitment to driving gender parity. As a finalist, BCD Travel is encouraging its travel industry peers to support this initiative in order to drive sustainable development.



BON Hotels Enters Kruger National Park

Overlooking the Sabi River, Leopard Sands River Lodge by BON Hotels is set to launch in the latter part of 2019. The lodge is located in the prime area of the Kruger National Park, only minutes from the Kruger Gate entrance. The lodge has 18 luxury units, all equipped with private plunge pools. It also boasts an elevated restaurant that gives guests a unique view of the park. Leopard Sands is the group's second Halaal-certified offering in the area, with the other being Buckler's Africa Lodge.

FCTG Embarks On New Tech

South African travellers will soon have access to a seamless all-in-one travel shopping experience when Flight Centre Travel Group South Africa launches its new technology initiative, across its network and websites. The new web-based technology will allow online customers to book a wide range of travel content, from tours to accommodation, on a single platform featuring the best direct rates. FCTG travel experts will be the first to benefit from the tool's ability to deliver dynamic and static inventory, early next year, after which it will be rolled out to online travel customers through the Flight Centre website and mobile app. A new dedicated project team has been formed to roll out the first-to-be-seen technology in South Africa.

Marriott and Emirates Strengthen Partnership

Marriott International and Emirates have relaunched Your World Rewards, a partnership between Marriott Bonvoy and Emirates Skywards. The partnership allows registered members to elevate their earnings and benefits when they fly with Emirates or stay at Marriott International hotels around the globe. Marriott Bonvoy Gold Elite, Platinum Elite, Titanium Elite and Ambassador Elite members earn three Marriott Bonvoy points for every USD or its foreign equivalent spent on all eligible Emirates flights (in addition to Skywards Miles). Marriott Bonvoy Platinum Elite, Titanium Elite and Ambassador Elite also enjoy in-airport benefits, including priority check-in and boarding. Emirates Skywards Silver, Gold and Platinum members earn one Skywards Mile for every USD or its foreign equivalent spent (in addition to points) on all eligible stays at Marriott Bonvoy hotels and resorts worldwide. Emirates Skywards Gold and Platinum members also enjoy additional benefits at Marriott Bonvoy hotels, including 16h00 late check-out, access to the Elite check-in and complimentary in-room internet access.

SAA Beefs Up Presence in Ghana

South African Airways is strengthening its presence in Ghana by increasing weekly frequencies from nine to 10 flights between Johannesburg and Accra, and by launching a daily service between Accra and Washington DC, with effect from 5 September. All services to Washington DC commence in Johannesburg with a short stopover in Accra. SAA is also examining new opportunities to connect Dakar (Senegal) services through its Accra base. Whilst these plans are finalised, SAA will temporarily suspend services between Johannesburg and Dakar, with effect from 5 September.

Best Western Celebrates a Year in Addis

The Best Western Plus Addis Ababa hotel has celebrated its first birthday, marking a successful introduction to the Ethiopian hotel landscape for the international group. The hotel is ideally located in the heart of the commercial and entertainment district of Addis Ababa and just two kilometres from Bole International Airport. The Best Western Plus Addis Ababa has 160 rooms and suites, and an all-day dining restaurant located on the mezzanine floor that offers a wide selection of cultural and international delicacies. The Lobby Bar & Cafe offers authentic Ethiopian coffee, whilst the Best Western Plus Addis Ababa can also host a wide variety of private functions, including weddings, corporate events, meetings, conferences, and private parties in one of its spacious meeting rooms and halls. Further bolstering the offering is a sports bar on the 10th floor that has a 360-degree view of the city. The hotel also boasts a state-of-the-art gym and a spa that offers bespoke treatments.



Austrian Airlines Expands Flight Service to Cape Town

From the beginning of December, Austrian Airlines will operate one additional flight from Cape Town to Vienna, increasing the frequency to three weekly connections, which will be offered until mid-March 2020. The route will be operated by a Boeing 777-200. The extension of the third weekly flight between Cape Town and Vienna is Austrian Airlines' response to the increased demand on this route. Together with Austrian Airlines' additional connections over the period, Lufthansa offers five weekly flights from Cape Town to Frankfurt and five weekly flights from Cape Town to Munich. SWISS (including Edelweiss) provides four weekly flights from Cape Town to Zurich. From Johannesburg, Lufthansa has seven weekly flights to Frankfurt with SWISS servicing another seven weekly flights to Zurich. This brings the Lufthansa Group's total number of flights to South Africa during the winter flight plan to 31.

City Lodge at Two Rivers Mall Awarded Four Stars

City Lodge Hotel at Two Rivers Mall, Nairobi has been awarded a four-star rating from the Tourism Regulatory Authority in Kenya. The hotel "successfully scored 100% on essential items as required by the East African Community grading procedure", said the report. The 171-room City Lodge Hotel at Two Rivers Mall, Nairobi opened on 15 January 2018 and is the group's biggest development outside of South Africa. Key features include wi-fi, two 20-seater boardrooms, two eight-seater meeting rooms, fitness room, #Café restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and light evening meals, outdoor swimming pool and sundowner bar. The City Lodge Hotel Group has also opened the Town Lodge Umhlanga in KwaZulu-Natal, which is located close to sister properties, the City Lodge Umhlanga Ridge and the Road Lodge Umhlanga Ridge. In other City Lodge news, the group is undertaking a large-scale solar project at 25 of its hotels. This follows a successful pilot study at the Road Lodge Centurion in Pretoria, which has a 50kWp (Kilowatt peak) generation system installed on the roof. The roll-out will result in nearly 4,250 solar panels being installed at 24 hotels in South Africa and one in Namibia, with a combined energy output of approximately 1.45 megawatts of power.

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CITY LODGE HOTEL GROUP





Wayne Troughton
CEO: HTI Consulting

Africa's hotel industry ripe for further growth

Africa's hotel industry has experienced growth over the last two decades. The proliferation of brands across the continent has taken the supply of hotels to the next level and whilst hotel opportunities in Africa can no longer be cherry picked, as in previous years, opportunities in key markets do still abound.

HTI Consulting summarised hotel market performances across 13 African cities for the first half of 2019 as indicated by STR Global, a company providing hotel data benchmarking, analytics and marketplace insights.

OCCUPANCY GROWTH

Addis Ababa led the 13 African cities assessed in terms of hotel occupancy growth. In the Ethiopian capital a growth rate of 9.7 % has been driven largely by the improved economic environment created under a new government actively attempting to create more economic opportunities. Growth has also continued despite the attempted coup in June of this year.

South African markets also dominate in terms of occupancy growth, despite dampened economic conditions in the country. On the sub-tropical east coast, Umhlanga, with an occupancy growth rate of 5.5%, led the South African markets, driven by the development and expansion of this area as a corporate and tourist hub. In Cape Town, overall occupancy growth was 4.1%, with the less price-sensitive five-star market driving growth (this segment experiencing an 8.5% increase YTD July 2019). Rooms sold in the city grew by 6.2%, indicating that the market is gradually absorbing the high levels of new supply that have recently entered the market. As a more affordable domestic destination and event hub, Durban's hotel occupancy rate increased by 1.8%.

Another city worth mentioning, Gaborone, has shown a significant turnaround since the end of 2017, when the city recorded a -6% decline in average occupancy. Here, improved economic conditions combined with limited new supply (prior to the Hilton Garden Inn opening) have seen occupancy levels grow by 4.9%.

OCCUPANCY DECLINE

Lusaka's occupancy performance was the weakest of the cities assessed driven by dampened economic conditions. Growth forecasts for Zambia are at 1.9% for 2019, down from 3.7% in 2018. This, combined with high levels of new supply in the country's capital, saw occupancy rates decline by a substantial 18.1%.

A 5.2% occupancy decline in Pretoria is no real cause for concern, however this can largely be attributed to new supply, including the Protea by Marriott Loftus Park with 152 rooms. In fact, despite

lower occupancy, rooms sold increased by 6.3%, which indicates a growth in demand.

On the other hand, South Africa's contracting economy appears to be the main factor affecting a 2.6% drop in occupancy in business hub Sandton. Government activity in Tanzania continues to constrain investor sentiment and create a knock-on effect on occupancy growth, with Dar es Salaam seeing occupancy drop by 2%.

With the continent strongly influenced by currency fluctuations, none of the markets assessed showed Average Daily Rate growth in USD terms, however the least impacted by currency constraints was Gaborone. In local currency ADR grew by 7.4% in Gaborone, as did Accra (9%) and Lusaka (17.9%).

Of the bottom five ADR markets, South African markets – Sandton, Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria – all showed declines in ADRs in local currency as well as USD. The continued depreciation of the rand combined with increasing competition and increased price sensitivity negatively impacted rate increases in 2019.

FUTURE SUPPLY

With an additional planned 2,455 hotel rooms, Addis Ababa has the biggest pipeline for development under construction, meaning in future years ADR and occupancy rates will come under pressure here. It is encouraging to note that Nairobi and Lagos are experiencing continued growth in rooms sold as markets recover from recessionary conditions (Lagos) and terror attacks (Nairobi). Whilst the high level of new supply in Nairobi has dampened conditions, individual properties in strategic locations are achieving strong, above average performances.

Cape Town will experience a new round of midscale room supply in 2019 with the opening of the 157-roomed Signature Lux, as well as an additional 735 midscale rooms entering the market in 2021 and 2022. This will continue to impact on the occupancy and rates of this segment.

The market to watch is South Africa's Umhlanga node. Occupancy has increased consistently in recent years whilst ADR increased by 2.9% YTD. Whilst this is not a significant increase, given the constraints of the South Africa economy, this is positive. Although new supply is planned in the market (over 400 rooms), this is expected to be absorbed relatively swiftly, particularly if economic conditions in South Africa improve in the medium-term.

As new international brands continue to enter key markets in Africa, conditions are becoming increasingly competitive. However, by finding the right project in the right location, good investment returns are still possible in markets across the continent. ■



Travelling employees value **experience**

The travel industry is under pressure to find new ways to improve the traveller experience. That is being achieved through personalisation and convenient booking options tailored to the needs of the individual traveller and their company.

As a result, ensuring equal focus on the practicality of a travel policy that suits the needs of the corporate and its travellers has become a delicate balancing act for company travel buyers.

To this end, more companies (particularly in the US) are establishing traveller satisfaction programmes, according to research by the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) and HRS.

The study found that although practicality is key for business travellers, they view travel as an experience. Delivering on this

‘experience’ has become the new challenge for travel buyers and travel management companies which also have to deliver on their corporate customers’ KPIs.

But, that’s difficult when travellers increasingly demand to control their own travel experiences – ones that take into consideration quality of life and autonomy during travels.

These modern travellers want to take back control because they believe that outdated travel policies and strict corporate policies not only have a negative impact on their wellbeing, but also inhibit the success of a business trip. For them, good business travel is not just ‘good’ for them, but it also has to be ‘good’ for the company – a win-win.

To strike the right balance, travel buyers and TMCs must offer a balance between a retail experience

to travellers and a robust business travel framework that is easy, appealing and rewarding to follow. It’s not impossible to achieve, but it takes continuous communication between the organisation and its travellers to find that win-win scenario.

This is just one element of corporate travel demand that is being explored in the review of the Association of Southern African Travel Agents (ASATA) 21st Century Travel Agent Study.

The study, to be released in the coming months, will also identify the role our TMC members play in achieving a travel policy that balances the demands of the business traveller and the organisation on whose behalf they travel. ■

Otto de Vries
ASATA CEO



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Tough times

Zimbabwe faces some serious economic challenges, but if it can pull itself out of this hole, it has much to offer business travellers to the country.

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who replaced long-time leader Robert Mugabe after an army coup in November 2017, is trying to repair an economy ruined by hyperinflation and a long succession of failed economic interventions.

Zimbabwe's inflation, the second highest in the world after Venezuela, almost doubled in June to around 175%, courtesy of high fuel and power prices.

Also in June, Zimbabwe made its interim currency the country's sole legal tender, ending a decade of 'dollarisation' and the

multi-currency system, and taking another step towards relaunching the Zimbabwean dollar. The central bank also hiked its overnight lending rate to 50% from 15% as a part of a set of measures to protect the Real Time Gross Transfer (RTGS) dollar introduced in February.

RTGS Dollars is money made up of bond notes, bond coins and RTGS balances (electronic money).

The initial exchange rate when it launched in February was around 3-4 RTGS dollars/US dollar, but it has since slipped to around 11.25/1.

The economy of Zimbabwe is

FACT FILE

Time zone: GMT+2

Plugs: Three-prong square

Dialling code: +263

Currency: RTGS Dollar

Language: English, Shona, Sindebele

largely dependent on agriculture and mineral resources, with the mining industry the largest driver, accounting for almost half of the country's exports. Manufacturing was once a key sector of the economy and the basic manufacturing infrastructure still exists in many cases. However, it needs investment, modernisation and reliable power to get up and running again.



Tourism has been long identified as one of the areas of opportunity for Zimbabwe. Tourism is a foreign currency earner which currently contributes approximately 10% to the GDP.

Zimbabwe has a long road ahead to full recovery, but many are optimistic, although the country needs to get a few key issues right.

CITIES

The capital city Harare is the most populated city in Zimbabwe and the country's primary business travel destination. Set in the natural garden of the Zimbabwe Highveld, 1,500 metres above sea level, Harare is a friendly city of flowering trees and gardens and a temperate climate. Don't miss the Harare gardens, Mbare market and museum on your visit.

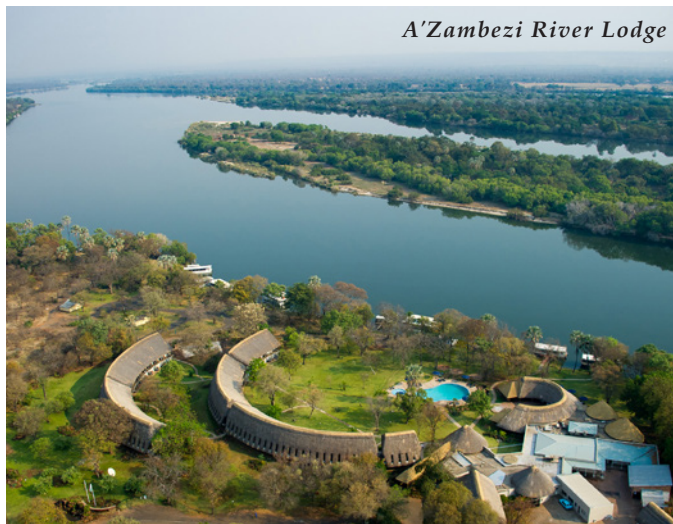
Bulawayo is the second largest



city located south-west of Harare. The Zimbabwe International Trade Fair is located here and is the largest intra-regional trade fair south of the Sahara, providing the largest, most convenient trade hub

in the region.

Zimbabwe's most popular tourist and MICE destination is Victoria Falls, home to the greatest curtain of falling water in the world.



A'Zambezi River Lodge



Cresta Lodge



Rainbow Towers Hotel



Victoria Falls Rainbow Lodge

AIRPORTS

Harare's airport is the largest in the country, situated 10 kilometres from the centre of town. There are shops and small restaurants in the airport. Most of the airlines, including Emirates, SAA, BA (operated by Comair), Kenya Airways, Air Zimbabwe and Ethiopian Airlines do offer airside lounge facilities to their first and business class passengers. The airport security and customs x-ray systems are extremely thorough, though, so remove your belt, shoes, watch and everything from your pockets. Taxis, airport shuttles and transfers by car are the most popular forms of transport to and from the city.

The check-in experience can be long, especially in economy, but immigration tends to be fast. The arrivals hall appears disorganised, but it flows. Having your forms completed, knowing your visa requirements, and having exact change for your visa will expedite

the process.

Fastjet began operations into Zimbabwe in 2014 from Dar es Salaam. The airline set up a Zimbabwean arm in 2015 and currently flies internally between Harare and Vic Falls and Harare and Bulawayo, as well as the Harare-Johannesburg route.

Other airlines that land in Harare include Air Namibia (which also flies to Vic Falls) from Windhoek, Airlink (which also flies to Bulawayo and connects Cape Town with Vic Falls) from Johannesburg, and LAM from Mozambique.

As the country's national carrier, Air Zimbabwe connects Harare, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls. BA (operated by Comair) offers flights to Vic Falls from South Africa, while SAA reaches Bulawayo and Vic Falls in addition to Harare.

The new Victoria Falls International Airport opened in 2016.

“ Zimbabwe's inflation, the second highest in the world after Venezuela, almost doubled in June to around 175%. ”

HOTELS

African Sun is one of the big hotel players in Zimbabwe, operating 11 properties across the country.

The group has three divisions, comprising 'City and Country Hotels', 'Resort Hotels' and 'The Victoria Falls Hotel Partnership'.

Five hotels fall under the City and Country Hotels division, with three of them under franchise from the InterContinental Hotels Group - the Holiday Inn-branded hotels in Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare. The other two properties in this division are the Monomotapa Harare, with its iconic structure overlooking the lush Harare Gardens, and the



Troutbeck Resort in the Eastern Highlands mountains of Nyanga.

African Sun's Resort Hotels are located in all the country's major tourist destinations, such as the Elephant Hills Resort and The Kingdom at Victoria Falls. Hwange Safari Lodge is situated in the Hwange National Park where over 100 species of mammals and nearly 400 bird species have been recorded, whilst the Great Zimbabwe Hotel in Masvingo is located within walking distance of the Great Zimbabwe National Monument, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the largest ancient structure south of the Sahara. The Caribbea Bay Resort is in Kariba, which is among the four largest man-made lakes in the world.

The Victoria Falls Hotel, which African Sun jointly operates with Meikles Hospitality, completes the group's management portfolio.

Cresta Hotels has three establishments in Harare, in the form of the centrally-located Cresta Jameson, Cresta Lodge Harare on the outskirts of the city centre, and Cresta Oasis, which is a hotel that also offers serviced apartments for long-term stays. Cresta also has the Cresta Churchill in Bulawayo and Cresta Sprayview in Vic Falls.

Rainbow Tourism Group

operates six properties across Zimbabwe, with two in Harare – the Rainbow Towers Hotel and the New Ambassador Hotel, which is located in the CBD. RTG also has the Bulawayo Rainbow Hotel – its only property in that city – and two hotels in Vic Falls, in the form of the A'Zambezi River Lodge and the Victoria Falls Rainbow Hotel. RTG's sixth property is the Kadoma Rainbow Hotel, about 140 kilometres from Harare.

Looking at the other main hotels in Harare, the Meikles Hotel is a five-star property set in a prime location in the centre of the city. Local tourist attractions such as Eastgate Centre, African Unity Square and the National Art Gallery are not far from the hotel. Also nearby are the Harare Gardens, Queen Victoria Museum and National Museum. Dining facilities at Meikles include La Fontaine, a good restaurant worth trying. The hotel also offers transportation to/from the airport for an additional fee.

The Bronte Hotel is renowned for its beautiful gardens and collection of Shona sculptures. Centrally located in the Avenues, within walking distance of downtown Harare, the Bronte offers well-appointed rooms and executive suites in a garden

setting. Suited to both the business and leisure traveller, the amenities include complimentary wi-fi, two swimming pools, a fitness centre, complimentary breakfast buffet, secure on-site parking and fine dining at Emmanuel's Restaurant.

Radisson Blu entered Zimbabwe when it began construction of the Radisson Blu Hotel Harare in 2018, with doors expected to open sometime this year, if everything goes according to plan.

CARD ACCEPTANCE

Major international credit cards (Visa and MasterCard) are now accepted in most of the larger hotels, restaurants and shops, but many smaller establishments still do not have credit card facilities. Diners Club and American Express are often not accepted.

VISAS

Travellers from the following African countries do not require visas to enter Zimbabwe: Botswana, DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, and Zambia.

African countries whose nationals are granted visas at the port of entry on payment of the requisite visa fees (\$30 – single entry): Egypt and Seychelles.

All other African passport holders need to apply in advance.

HEALTH

Malaria is prevalent in large parts of the country, so do take the necessary precautions.

Private medical centres offer excellent healthcare, especially in Harare, where quality treatment is available 24/7. There are also several ambulance companies who can undertake medical evacuation where necessary.

There are also a number of emergency clinics offering good healthcare after hours, if you prefer avoiding a hospital.

Drinking tap water is not advisable, although Victoria Falls does have its own water purification plant.

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Face of the Future

The use of facial recognition at airports is set to become an accepted method and just part of the way we travel.

The use of biometrics by airlines and airports (not to mention banks, tech firms and governments) is soaring.

International Air Transport Association President Gloria Guevara recently called it the “future of travel”, with 71% of airlines and 77% of airports currently investing in biometric programmes.

Recent years have seen big advances in facial recognition technology, meaning it’s more accessible and effective than ever before – promising numerous new conveniences and impressively futuristic systems, but also raising concerns over privacy and data protection.

Here, we break down what’s going on, and what you should know about it.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

‘Biometric’ refers to the analysis of biological data, which could apply to fingerprint matches, iris scans, voice recognition or other measurements of physical characteristics. However, it is facial recognition which is really taking off, and which you’re likely to start encountering more and more.

You’ve probably already used e-passport gates when entering a country – these match the picture in your passport against the face staring into the camera, and read the other information contained in it, such as your nationality. It usually takes between six and ten seconds to do this and requires you to hold your passport into a scanner to obtain the information, sometimes failing to read it as you do (to the frustration of many a passenger).

New departure systems will work differently, theoretically allowing you to walk through check-in, bag-drop, security and aircraft boarding without showing a passport or boarding pass once (in practice, no airlines are currently offering this, not least because it’s best to check passengers have a passport so they don’t show up in a new country without one).

It works because a database already contains your picture,

whether obtained through documents like visas, by submitting it online in advance, or via a booth at check-in. That database must be able to communicate with others, chiefly those that know which passengers should be on which flight, and those that snap pictures of passengers as they move through the airport checkpoints.

The picture is stored as a ‘template’ rather than an actual photograph, creating a kind of map using numerous points on a face. When the picture is taken at the airport, it creates another such template and cross-references it with the flight database. If it hits the threshold for a match – 90%, for example – the passenger is approved. The whole thing happens very quickly, usually in less than two seconds and you barely have to glance at the camera for it to capture your image.

Who manages the database will depend on the systems used in each airport or country – it could be the airline, airport or a government agency such as the Transport and Security Administration. How long it is stored for will also vary – some airlines will allow the images to be deleted as soon as you leave the airport. Others plan to keep it stored for months or even a year.

WHAT WILL IT BE USED FOR?

Initially you will likely see it in arrival and departure systems as described above, with biometrics used at check-in, bag-drop, security and boarding as well as at immigration on entry.

But there are wider applications. There are already airports in China with screens that scan your face in order to provide information about your flight.

Business Traveller saw several examples of such technology at the Passenger Terminal Expo in London earlier this year, including an eye-level screen displaying gate numbers that highlights yours as you look at it and a wheelchair that uses facial recognition to identify your gate, drive you there, and then drive itself back to a parking spot.

One attendee mentioned even further uses, for example in advertising or to locate passengers late for their flights – though these would likely fall foul of regulatory hurdles, at least for now.

Following tests at Amsterdam Schiphol, KLM’s Chief Executive Pieter Elbers said he has considered using facial recognition technology in airport lifts so that staff can prepare for a passenger’s arrival.

WHERE CAN I FIND THESE SYSTEMS?

In as little as five years’ time, it will probably be easier to say where you can’t find them.

The technology is being introduced across the US. In November 2018, Delta launched the country’s first end-to-end biometric terminal for international departures at Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. It worked for several years with the US Transport and Security Administration on the system, which obtains the photographs from a Customs and Border Protection database. Images are stored for a year, officials said, and the system is currently opt-out.

Business Traveller visited the airport on the launch day and the process was remarkably smooth, approving passengers almost instantly as they glanced at the camera.

Delta plans to make McNamara Terminal in Detroit end-to-end at some point this year and it has run tests at JFK, Minneapolis-Saint Paul International and Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

The US Department of Homeland Security says Customs and Border Protection is working toward implementation of biometric exit technology to cover more than 97% of departing commercial air travellers within the next four years. The government sees it as a key way to “support the homeland security, defence, and justice missions”. For airlines, it’s a way to provide added convenience for passengers.

San Jose Mineta International Airport, Orlando Airport, Miami

▼ FEATURE: AIRPORT FACIAL RECOGNITION



International, LAX and JFK are just some of the other places introducing their own systems with various airline partners.

There is plenty going on outside of the US, too.

Tokyo Narita aims to introduce a new “One ID” process sometime in spring 2020 that will provide passengers with an end-to-end automated experience, with facial data captured at a self-service kiosk on arrival.

Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru has launched a biometric roll-out and India’s Civil Aviation Ministry wants other airports to follow suit to tackle long queues.

In Qatar, Hamad International is introducing an end-to-end biometric system, while Dubai International has been working with Emirates on a ‘smart tunnel’ that will allow passengers to pass through immigration checks in 15 seconds.

Cathay Pacific is trialling

biometric boarding at Amsterdam Schiphol, while Heathrow says it will roll out facial recognition at “each point of the departing passenger’s journey” this year and Gatwick has partnered with easyJet on its own trial.

We could go on. There are several websites entirely devoted to tracking the latest updates in biometric technology.

SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT ALL THIS?

There are certainly valid concerns about the proliferation of facial recognition technology.

On the one hand, we already acknowledge that we will be closely monitored and give up personal information in order to travel by air. When asked by Business Traveller about possible privacy concerns, a senior US Customs and Border Protection agent pointed out that the only information being given up to these cameras is your face, which

is arguably less exposing than showing your flight details and personal data to various individuals.

However, some say that your face is a particularly sensitive piece of data as it cannot be changed and the growth of biometric systems mean you could start to be identified at any point and for any purpose.

As Matthew Brennan, a writer on tech in China, summarised it in a recent Twitter post: “Your face is a unique identifier, it’s the real-world equivalent of an email address, passport or phone number that can be used to track and identify someone. But it’s much more powerful than any of these traditional identifiers as it can never be changed (without surgery) and it doesn’t require the person’s consent. The moment you are on camera is the moment you can potentially be identified by your face and profile data started to be stored

about your behaviour.”

Campaigners have argued that the public has not been consulted on the growing use of such technologies, and warn of dystopian consequences.

The Georgetown Law Centre on Privacy and Technology in Washington DC is one organisation with concerns about its growing use. In a 2018 report, it called biometric airport screening a “solution in search of a problem”, arguing that government agencies had failed to justify its introduction while there were still flaws in the technology.

It also argues that such

programmes stand on “shaky legal ground.”

“Congress has repeatedly ordered the collection of biometrics from foreign nationals at the border, but has never clearly authorised the border collection of biometrics from American citizens using face recognition technology,” it states.

The debate taps into a broader one about facial recognition. Because of course, it is not just in airports where this technology is on the rise – serious concerns have been raised about China’s use of the technology to create an unprecedented nationwide

surveillance system that can monitor practically every move of a citizen, including persecuted ethnic minorities. While most governments are still relatively secretive about their use of facial recognition in activities such as crime prevention, in China it is used in everything from vending machines to large screens that name and shame jaywalkers.

And it is not just China under the spotlight. Last year, India’s Supreme Court put limits on a government programme that was seeing biometric information being increasingly required to access public and private services, from welfare collection to banking.

Campaigners have also called Amazon’s facial recognition services, which are sold to US police forces, “perhaps the most dangerous surveillance technology ever developed”.

There are huge debates at play here – biometrics may well change the way we pay for things, provide ID, get into buildings and events, check in at hotels and more.

Its introduction in airports will be less of a sea-change. They are a setting where we already have a fairly low expectation of privacy and will bring tangible benefits for passengers.

But many passengers will no doubt still be glad that many of the new systems are opt out. It remains to be seen whether they will stay that way. ■



BIOMETRICS IN NUMBERS

15 seconds – How long Dubai airport says it will take to pass immigration using biometrics

10 minutes – The time BA takes to board 240 passengers using biometric scanning – half the usual time

40% – Reduction in airport waiting time in Delta’s Atlanta biometric terminal

63% – The number of airlines that expect to be using biometrics within the next three years

100% – The number of smartphones and tablets that are forecast to be using biometric technology by 2020

10.4 million – The number of people that pass through airports daily. Expected to double in the next 20 years

\$231 million – Estimated revenue of airport biometrics market in 2019



THE BLUE TRAIN

BACKGROUND: The luxurious Blue Train has its origins in the Union Limited and Union Express, which carried passengers between the mail ships of Cape Town harbour and the goldfields of the Witwatersrand over a hundred years ago. After being refurbished and modernised in the 1970s and 1980s a new Blue Train was introduced in 1997. In the following year a second identical train came into service, allowing The Blue Train to add Hoedspruit and Port Elizabeth to its destinations. In November 2018 The Blue Train launched its new brand repositioning, “augmenting the brand to meet the evolving needs of the discerning traveller” and its MICE offering for businesses.

ROUTES: The Blue Train’s main route is between Pretoria and Cape Town, but corporates on a private charter can travel to any other destination in the country where there is a working railway line. The Blue Train is ideal for board meetings, strategy sessions, office celebrations, annual executive conferences etc. Corporates can also hire the train for private charters on ‘A Trip to Nowhere,’ as well as on the Pretoria to Sun City route and on the Pretoria to Durban route. Other routes include Pretoria-Hoedspruit, Pretoria-Kruger Park, and the Garden Route. On A Trip to Nowhere, corporates can charter the train for 80 people for a lunch or dinner

experience in Pretoria or Cape Town. This typically lasts six to eight hours and guests are treated to a five-course meal, open bar, and hand-made Cuban cigars, whilst onboard entertainment can be arranged.

CHECK-IN & LOUNGE: This was scheduled to start at 14h30 and we arrived at Cape Town station around 14h50. There we missed the main entrance (not great signage) and instead went around to the platform inside the station where we were met halfway down by one of the train’s butlers, who took our bags and directed us to the lounge. Tip: go round the back of Cape Town station and look for the signs directing you to “long distance” trains. There you’ll find a carpeted entrance to the lounge. There we checked in and were handed our tickets, before taking a seat and running an eye over the food available – mostly delicious-looking savoury treats. We ordered coffee and water and were a little disappointed with the cold instant coffee. Am sure The Blue Train could invest in a coffee machine for its Cape Town lounge.

BOARDING: Around 15h30 we were welcomed by the train’s manager and about 15 minutes later boarded and found our way to our suite. We were told that a butler would be round to orientate us, and in the meantime we unpacked our clothes and explored the various

nooks and crannies. After some time I arranged a later time with the executive manager and my wife and I went off to grab a prime spot in the observation car, which has a nice, big window looking out the back of the train.

ROOMS: Your options are De Luxe (4m x 2m) or Luxury suites (5.1m x 2m) and we were accommodated in the former. By day it was a lounge with couch, side table, chairs and large window, and by night a double bed, with the conversion handled by The Blue Train staff when we weren’t in our suite. It seems some suites have double beds and some twin beds, and I would put in a request up front. Our double bed, with high thread count linen, was comfortable, but I seemed to roll around with the movement of the train, so I’d like to try the twin option to see if it’s more ‘contained’. In the same lounge space there was a cupboard with hanging space, shelves and a safe, further storage space above, and a TV that we didn’t make use of, whilst there was also air-conditioning, under-floor heating and a land line next to the bed, mainly for calling the butler. The bathroom was small, but beautiful done out in opulent marble and gold fittings, with a comfortable shower, basin and toilet, plus monogrammed towels and slippers. Some of the suites have baths instead of showers. We made use of the complimentary wi-fi in the room and had no problems.



THE TRIP: We were scheduled to depart at 16h00, but the train only got going around 16h45, which was a little bit of a shame as it was dark by the time we reached the Cape Winelands mountains, which we were told was one of the best views from train. Once it got dark, we grabbed a shower before dinner. Post-dinner we made our way to the smoking car towards the front of the train for a nightcap. After a lie-in, we were up for breakfast the next morning, followed by some reading and a mid-morning sleep, before heading back to the dining car for lunch. As per the schedule, we arrived in Kimberley around 14h00 and all piled into a mini-bus with tour guide. What followed was an interesting tour of the Kimberley mine and viewing of the iconic 'Big Hole', which takes your breath away due its size and scale. Thereafter, we were back on the train by 16h30, but only departed Kimberley station around 19h45, once dinner was underway.

FOOD & DRINK: Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served in the dining car and high tea in the lounge car, which has a bar. Dinner is a formal affair, with guests required to dress formally, but it's worth it for the food alone. Just by way of example, dinner on the first night for me was a salmon and capers salad, followed by pepper-encrusted venison coupled with pistachio lamb cutlet and barley casing, and rounded off with the Swiss chocolate fondant with sorbet. For breakfast I opted for the Eggs Benedict and delicious fresh coffee, whilst lunch saw me wolfing down bobotie and yellow rice, before the next round of three-course dinner, which on night two saw me indulge in baked Scottish salmon with sweet potatoes, Asian vegetables and herb coulis. All of this, of course, in between glasses of quality wine over the two nights, the odd G&T, and me skipping the high tea, due to a rather full stomach!

ARRIVAL: After another lie-in and breakfast, we arrived in Pretoria at around 10h15 on the Monday morning. After disembarking, we had a short wait in the lounge, before our luggage was brought through and we were on our way.

VERDICT: Definitely a luxury experience and a real treat, with the food and dining service a particular highlight. There were just a couple of small details, such as the late departure and a few service elements that I feel could be brushed up and improved, to do further justice to the five-star experience. ■

Dylan Rogers

FACT FILE

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Kevin Clarence
Director: Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo Conference Centre

Ever evolving

Birchwood Hotel & OR Tambo Conference Centre is one of South Africa's most comprehensive conference venues, but it has had to move with the times and adapt its offering, as the market and its needs have changed. Here, Birchwood Director Kevin Clarence talks through some of those changes with Business Traveller Africa.

Q: What are your thoughts on the current state of the SA conference industry?

A: It's incredible to watch our conference industry evolve. We're continuing to see the standard conferencing paradigm be challenged and changed as demands and requests become more unique. The modern conference group wants something different – an experience rather than 'just another day at the office'.

Q: How is Birchwood keeping up with the trend of offering 'something different'?

A: We've expanded our product offering to enhance a multi-day stay or conference. This year we launched our Food Truck. This incredible installation sees our chefs live in action serving some favourite classic meals with a Birchwood twist around our pool and decking area. In the last year, we've completely revamped and renovated two of our most utilised conference centres. Continuing with the 'something different' theme, we've created two dedicated holding rooms, with luxurious furniture, and packages for groups with VIPs in their parties.

Q: What's the most unusual request you've received from a customer in the past year or so?

A: Hospice East Rand recently held a Polar Plunge event where brave individuals dived into our pool in the middle of winter. While our pool area has just been relaunched, we didn't expect it to be utilised in July.

Q: Have you picked up on any global conference trends that you feel are worth mentioning?

A: It's rare to find a conference requirement that doesn't require heavy bandwidth for their event. With streaming services, cloud-based file sharing and event mobile apps becoming a standard,

venues are having to ensure that their connectivity infrastructure is ready to handle this. We've managed to create a service offering where we can tailor-make a network for your group with customisable bandwidth, privacy, speed and even a personalised SSID. You will feel that the wi-fi was created, just for you.

Q: Birchwood was previously heavily reliant on the public sector for business, but have you managed to broaden your client base, and if so, how?

A: We are incredibly appreciative of public sector patronage and continue to have them as a part of our clientele. Birchwood however, is a product offering that should spark the interest of any individual traveller, conference group or travel agent/PCO. The way that we've created this is by creating distinct and dedicated package offerings that are tailor-made for the market in mind. The business traveller is welcome to use our complimentary Airport Waiting Lounge. Larger conference groups are able to make use of the accommodation rooms near the bigger venues.

Q: Have you been successful in changing the perception that Birchwood only caters to large-scale conferences?

A: Absolutely. We took the feedback from our clients to heart and developed our service and product offering to create what we have available today. Birchwood is a hospitality hub which has something for everyone. This has been validated by not only the incredibly positive feedback we've received from our guests, but by the numerous awards that we've received – most of which are based on public opinion and votes.

Q: How have you positioned Birchwood as a serious player in the standard corporate travel, as

opposed to conference, space?

A: The development of our award-winning Silverbirch product offering as well as the creation of ample and distinct dining options means that we are not just a conference venue. While conferencing is at our core, you will not find a venue that can offer you what Birchwood can in terms of meeting facilities and accommodation offering. The additional options such as the Mangwanani Boutique Spa, our newly launched pool area, as well as our free high-speed wi-fi, on-site restaurants, business centre and the in-house expertise of our various teams, means that we are a one-stop-shop in a location that is incredibly convenient.

Q: How are you employing technology to enhance the delegate/guest experience?

A: Our digital signage facility welcomes you with your company logo and event name on a high definition digital screen outside the venue. We invite clients to be as creative as they'd like for these devices, or alternatively, our marketing team can put something together. Our wi-fi infrastructure received a large investment to offer an unrivalled network facility whether for basic browsing, heavy-streaming, video-conferencing or cloud-based file sharing.

Q: Where would you like to see Birchwood in 10 years' time?

A: We want to continue to be an ever-growing and versatile venue that is the premier conference and accommodation offering in Southern Africa. If I had to look 10 years in the future, I'd like to have Birchwood positioned as a property and offering that has been moulded using client feedback and business trends as a foundation and platform to build and improve. ■



Techno-centric

Despite the state of the economy, corporate travel is a necessity for many businesses and it's not about to slow down. At the same time, technology is playing an increasingly bigger role in how TMCs are servicing their clients, making for an interesting time in the evolution of the TMC-business traveller relationship. General Manager of FCM Travel Solutions, Nicole Adonis, talks to some of these pressing issues.

Nicole Adonis
GM: FCM Travel
Solutions

Q: What's your view on the state of the SA corporate travel market?

A: In South Africa, the corporate and government travel market is worth an estimated R25 billion. (\$1.6 billion). Demand for business travel in SA is expected to remain strong. FCTG's corporate brands all foresee healthy growth ahead in the entire corporate sector, from small to medium and large enterprises.

Q: What was the thinking behind the new FCTG technology offering?

A: When FCM Travel Solutions introduced its travel chatbot, Sam, it was designed to incorporate the most important features a business traveller needs. The travel bot makes recommendations and performs actions relevant to the individual traveller's trip, assisting business travellers with everything from itinerary management, flight updates and local weather forecasts to security notifications, taxis and transfers and city guides and destination information. However, Sam is not a fixed mobile application and FCM is continuing to evolve its features to meet users' requirements and match AI/chatbot technology developments.

Q: Does FCTG believe it needs to move in this direction to remain relevant and attractive to customers?

A: Technological innovation has become a non-negotiable requirement in today's corporate travel. However, although technology plays an increasingly important role, the corporate travel landscape is also about to get a whole lot more 'human'.

Q: What's your view on the rate of technology adoption in the SA corporate travel industry?

A: Technology adoption in the workplace has been fragmented across the generations. Research shows that more than 74% of millennials believe new technology makes their lives easier, compared

to 31% of Generation X and just 18% of Baby Boomers. Technology's rapid evolution has led to a surge of digital tools in every area of a corporate's life. In travel, these tools can not only enhance the travel and booking experience for the traveller, they can also lead to lower transaction fees for the company. However, although companies are often keen to drive tech adoption among their employees, this can create friction. Some employees are simply more tech-ready than others.

Q: What are your thoughts on traveller-centric versus cost-centric programmes?

A: Booking cheap airfares and adopting a cost-centric travel programme might be to the detriment of the corporate traveller. In fact, the less travel friction experienced by a business traveller before, during and after the trip, the more productive the journey and the greater the return on investment from that trip. Important savings are rarely achieved by forcing employees to use discount airlines and cheap hotels.

Q: There's currently a lot of talk about a personalised travel experience. What is FCTG doing to implement this in the corporate travel space?

A: In corporate travel, technology and data can reveal patterns, trends and business insights to help profile the corporate traveller. By interpreting Big Data, FCM has significantly reduced traveller friction. By identifying how your travellers behave in the travel decisions they take, you'll be able to forge a closer connection with them and help reduce traveller friction and increase compliance with the travel policy. FCM uses data to gauge booking class usage, low-cost carrier preferences, hours in the air, single flight leg trends, travel over weekends and other metrics. It also considers cost increases around these factors and what changes occur when

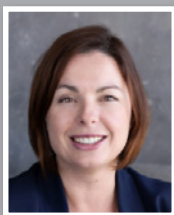
new ideas around traveller welfare are implemented. Predictive functionality presents only the choices that are going to be most pleasing to that individual traveller, speeding up the process of planning and booking and even further cost savings.

Q: How are you finding the integration of IATA's New Distribution Capability in the TMC space?

A: FCM Travel Solutions is accelerating the global NDC technology drive with Amadeus. FCM Travel Solutions SA will enter a testing phase with the new graphical NDC-enabled user interface within Amadeus Selling Platform Connect. The design incorporates FCM's feedback and creates an intuitive user experience that caters to the diverse booking needs across different markets. NDC will increasingly become a reality, but our goal has always been to balance the short-term priorities of NDC with building a long-term, workable solution with our technology partners at Amadeus.

Q: Do you feel there's a place for the sharing economy in the world of corporate travel?

A: From a travel perspective, the sharing economy has been responsible for one of the industry's biggest shake-ups, impacting international, domestic business and leisure travellers. The most successful disruptors to date – Uber and Airbnb – have become household names and other suppliers are constantly emerging to challenge the status quo. As the sharing economy becomes more prevalent in corporate travel, modern road warriors expect these suppliers to be featured in their solutions. However, the peer-to-peer product should be handled the same way as any other travel transaction, with travellers able to claim back or track costs by uploading receipts through an integrated mobile app. ■



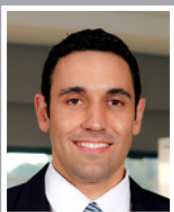
Sales & Marketing Director
Marriott International has appointed **Stacey Hopkins** as the new multi-property Director of Sales and Marketing for The Westin Cape Town

Hotel and AC Hotel by Marriott Cape Town Waterfront. Hopkins completed her schooling in Durban, before she moved to Cape Town to take up an internship at the Mount Nelson Hotel. Hopkins spent a decade at the hotel, working her way up to the position of Assistant Director of Sales. She moved to The Westin Cape Town in 2009, to take up a position as Sales Manager. She was promoted to Director of Sales in 2013, also assisting the Sheraton in Addis Ababa.



Sales & Marketing Director
Minor Hotels has appointed **Anna Gauthier** as Director of Sales and Marketing, Sub-Sahara Africa. Gauthier

is responsible for leading the sales and marketing teams working on the company's Anantara, AVANI and HN brands in Southern Africa and Indian Ocean islands. She joins Minor Hotels from her role as Director of Sales and Marketing at Hyatt Regency in Johannesburg and has extensive experience in driving sales for some of the biggest MICE hotels in the South Mediterranean region. She achieved exceptional results during her 13-year tenure as the Director of Sales at the InterContinental in Athens, Greece.



Commercial & Partnership Manager
The Flight Centre Travel Group has appointed **Carlos Luis** as Commercial & Partnership Manager. Luis was formerly Flight

Centre's Travel Procurement Leader. He joined the FCTG in 2003 as a retail accountant. Luis holds an Honours Degree Equivalent from the University of Stellenbosch Business School and a Bachelor's degree in Accounting and Management from Technikon Witwatersrand. He has worked in the industry for 16 years. His new role will entail exploring new opportunities and partnerships for FCTG, leading to profit, growth and change.



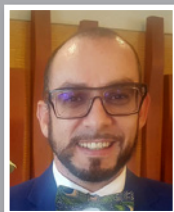
Corporate Marketing Leader
The Flight Centre Travel Group has appointed **Louise Harty** as the new Corporate Marketing Leader. Harty previously held the

position of Corporate Brands Marketing Manager at FCTG. She joined the company in February 2017. Harty holds an IMM Diploma in Marketing (NQF 6) and has over 12 years of B2B marketing experience. In her new role, she is responsible for managing the marketing strategies of FCTG's corporate brands FCM Travel Solutions South Africa, Corporate Traveller and Flight Centre Business Travel, continuing to position each corporate brand in their unique way to their audiences and growing market share in South Africa.



General Manager
The City Lodge Hotel Group has appointed **Clifford von Richter** as the General Manager of Road Lodge Kimberley. He was previously Assistant General

Manager at City Lodge Hotel Sandton, Katherine Street in Johannesburg. He joined CLHG as Assistant General Manager at Road Lodge Cape Town International Airport in 2009 and was promoted to Assistant General Manager at Town Lodge Midrand. He recently successfully completed a stretch assignment assisting with pre-opening processes at the City Lodge Hotel Maputo.



General Manager
The City Lodge Hotel Group has appointed **Wentzel von Wielligh** as the General Manager of City Lodge Hotel V&A Waterfront, after just under a

year at City Lodge Hotel Pinelands. In 2000, he completed a cultural representative programme at Walt Disney World Resort, Orlando in the US and joined CLHG as a receptionist in 2002. During the past 17 years he has held various positions within the group and furthered his studies. He obtained a City & Guilds Diploma in Accommodation Services in 2015 and qualified as a Certified Hotel Administrator through the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute in 2017.



General Manager
The City Lodge Hotel Group has appointed **Etienne Grobler** as the General Manager of City Lodge Hotel Pinelands. He has over 20 years' experience in the

hospitality industry, joining CLHG in December 1998 as receptionist and night auditor at Town Lodge Bellville and having held various management positions at Town Lodge Bellville, City Lodge Hotel GrandWest and City Lodge Hotel V&A Waterfront since. He was promoted to General Manager of Road Lodge Cape Town International Airport in September 2014 and completed two stretch assignments at Town Lodge Bellville as General Manager in 2017 and in 2018/2019.



General Managers
Tintswalo Lapalala has appointed **David and Tanja Jacobs** as its new General Management couple. David started his career with two

years in hospitality service in the UK, and on his return to SA qualified as a trail and tracking guide. An avid birder, he comes with extensive experience gained as ranger at various Big 5 game reserves in KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. Tanja began her career as part of an emergency response team, followed by the corporate arena where she worked as a buyer and running logistics, before she moved to the bush with her husband. She has completed a qualification in Game Lodge Management and is currently studying towards qualifying as a wine sommelier.



General Manager
The Radisson Blu Gautrain Hotel has appointed **Nikola Jelenovic** as its new General Manager. Before joining the Radisson Hotel Group, Jelenovic

amassed a wealth of experience in the hospitality industry and performed a variety of roles, such as Rooms Division Manager at InterContinental Sandton Towers hotel, Deputy General Manager at Crowne Plaza Johannesburg – The Rosebank, and Hotel Manager at Holiday Inn Sandton, Rivonia Road.

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KEEP CLIMBING



DELTA



The image shows A330 seats. Smartphone is required for free messaging. Availability varies by aircraft and route; check your listing for details. Terms apply, visit delta.com/wifi. All information correct at time of printing. © 2019 Delta Air Lines, Inc.

Filling the gap



Gidon Novick
FOUNDER:
LUCID VENTURES

More well-known as the founder of kulula.com, **Gidon Novick** spent 12 years in the airline industry before leaving to head up Discovery Vitality. Now he's back in the hospitality space via his Lucid Ventures project, and he was kind enough to treat editor Dylan Rogers to lunch at Home* Suite Hotels Bristol Rosebank, the subject of this particular discussion.

Well, it's not just this individual property, but a growing group of hotels, with, in the short-term, two more Home* Suite Hotels properties planned for Johannesburg and one for Cape Town.

Those three hotels are due to open in the next 18 months, so, for now, it's just the Rosebank property in the Home* Suite portfolio.

I say "hotel", and whilst in appearance that's what we have here, Novick has an interesting take on just where the Home* Suite offering sits.

"Somewhere between Airbnb and what you get from a traditional hotel," he says.

Let's unpack that further.

"Airbnb has been a monumental disruptor and influence in the hotel and hospitality industry, and a very positive one," says Novick. "But there's many imperfections about what that typical Airbnb has to offer."

How about fitting into a standard corporate travel policy and dealing with issues such as duty of care, which require a few more checks and balances than Airbnb can accommodate?

For Novick, that means Airbnb doesn't have it all worked out, just yet, when it comes to corporate travel, but so then don't the 'traditional' hotels and groups, according to him.

"The traditional guys have stayed traditional and some just haven't moved with the times and invested in the innovation of their product," he says. "At the same time, their travellers have moved along and are looking for something more

personal, warm and less 'corporate', with fresher design, beautiful coffee etc."

For Novick, it's about getting the little things right, such as not skimping on the quality of beds, training for his baristas to make sure the coffee is top-notch, forsaking traditional check-in and rather just sending a 'room key' to a guest's phone.

That'll make Home* Suite Hotels attractive to a more tech-savvy audience, which, according to Novick, one mustn't assume is a younger or 'millennial' audience.

"Some of them are middle-aged, like me, but they appreciate the use of technology," he says. "The other thing we've gone for is Google Chromecast, which plugs into the TV and provides easy access to multiple streaming services. We haven't invented it and it's available technology, but you've just got to implement it."

What he's also implemented is the same design philosophy that was behind the popular SLOW Lounge concept, to the extent that Novick is working with the same guys – Tonic Design – on Home* Suite Hotels.

"From a design point of view, it's really about capturing people's imagination," he says.

Beyond that, I'm interested in Novick's view on the state of the South African hotel industry.

Where are we?

"I think Cape Town has done a lot better job of creating memorable, beautiful hotels, whilst Jo'burg has missed that opportunity," he says. "In the research we did, we asked people

which hotel in Jo'burg they aspired to stay at. No-one really had one, other than maybe the Saxon and the Four Seasons Westcliff, which most people can't afford. So, the conclusion was that a Jo'burg hotel had become a functional thing."

"When corporate travel hotels become distribution-driven businesses, where they've secured the distribution through the TMCs, OTAs etc, I think there's a laziness that sets in, in terms of the actual product and what guests are actually experiencing," says Novick. "So, I think there's a gap to do that well."

Lastly, I'm curious as to how Novick is finding the hotel business, having spent so many years in the aviation industry. How do the two compare?

"I'm finding it more interesting due to the opportunities to differentiate," he says. "One of the frustrating parts of the airline industry is that you can differentiate on service, brand and distribution, but on actual physical product, it's hard. In the hospitality space, it's a lot more intimate and an emotional experience - you're showering, sleeping, eating and meeting with us. The opportunities to create an experience are a lot greater and there's more potential to build a brand that people value."

That's what Novick's good at – he's proved it with kulula.

Looking forward to seeing what else is rolled out, once Home* Suite Hotels really hits its straps. ■

Dylan Rogers

RIVONIA



It's hard to believe you're in Jo'burg



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