

Tourism industry is in for a major boost

MBOMBELA - The Department of Economic Development and Tourism has announced that construction on the Graskop Gorge Lift is expected to start next month.

The provincial government has declared 2017 the "year of tourism" in Mpumalanga, and expressed a renewed focus on tourism infrastructure and attractions along with it.

MEC for the department, Mr Sikhumbuzo Eric Kholwane, said in a statement that they would also embark on an aggressive marketing campaign of Mpumalanga as a tourist destination. This follows after the province was named the host of World Tourism Day on September 27.

"Tourism carries significant weight in South Africa's and Mpumalanga's economy, and is one of the leading elements of international trade," Kholwane said. "Concrete steps will be taken to address the issues of routes' development, investment in anchor products, training and skills development, improving safety measures and the promotion of small, medium and microenterprises."

The Graskop Gorge Lift is one of the "new and iconic" tourist attractions planned in the area. Visitors will be lowered 51 metres into the gorge in a glass elevator. At the base of the gorge, an extended boardwalk network will provide access to indigenous forest walks, crossings over suspension bridges, birdwatching and tree-identification spots. The project will include shops and a restaurant, and is expected to open for business before Christmas.

Kruger Lowveld Tourism (KLT), the



God's Window in Graskop.

tourism division of the Kruger Lowveld Chamber of Business and Tourism, welcomed the news. Ms Lisa Sheard, the executive director and marketing consultant of KLT, said they were hopeful that existing tourist attractions operated by the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks

Agency (MTPA) would be getting a much-needed facelift and upgrade.

"This could make a huge difference to the number of visitors to the region," she pointed out. She added that KLT expected to see continued growth in international visitors this year, following the 2016

rebound from the 2015 visa debacle.

"KLT is tentative about domestic tourism though, due to the tough economic environment, but we are optimistic that a travel culture is developing and that travel is becoming more accessible to more people," she said.

Mr Xolani Mthethwa, head of tourism at the MTPA, agreed that fewer local people go on domestic trips due to the tough economic conditions. "Those who take a trip for leisure purposes, take a shorter one compared to in 2013/14," he said.

"This year we will see the domestic market continue to strain due to the economic climate, but international visitor numbers are growing due to the weak rand."

He pointed out that the average occupancy rate for Mpumalanga products over the festive season was 60 per cent.

Ms Anne Briggs, chairman of the SATSA Mpumalanga Chapter, is optimistic that the Kruger Lowveld area will have a busy 2017.

"We've already had bookings for 2018 and our tour and transfer stats for December 2016 were higher than those in 2015, over the same period," she said.

According to Kholwane, the province intends to further leverage its existing memorandums of understanding with Swaziland, Mozambique, Angola, China and Russia for developing packages, investment in infrastructure and training of tourism operators. Concluding its Air Transport Strategy, through cooperation with Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport is also on the cards.