



Travel to South Africa Starting to Feel Effects of Ebola Scare



By Joe Pike | October 17, 2014

Agents and operators are beginning to see a wait-and-see approach from clients who are having second thoughts about traveling anywhere even remotely associated with the deadly virus.

Filed under : mobile-feature, South Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa



The South Africa tourism industry is beginning to see a major dip in advance bookings to the destination due to the Ebola scare.

The span between Ebola-affected **West Africa** and Ebola-free **South Africa** is just about the same distance as between the **United States** and London.

But agents and operators are still beginning to see a wait-and-see approach from clients who are having second thoughts about traveling anywhere even remotely associated with the deadly virus.

In this case, it appears as though South Africa's tourism industry will suffer simply for having "Africa" in its name.

The Tourism Board

South African Tourism North America President **Sthu Zungu** says the virus is "a concern" for the country, and emphasized that despite the distance between effected and noneffected areas of the continent, the nation was taking precautions to "keep travelers safe and screen passengers."

Upon arrival in **Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport**, she noted, passengers are screened for fever before they reach customs. "When people travel, they want to be safe," she said. "South Africa is doing everything it can. We want people to understand where the cases are happening...We are doing our best to support our brothers [in West Africa] and make sure the virus is contained." Traveler safety is "a priority" for the country's tourism scene, she added.

Airlift

"Our flights have been quite full over the last few months, but the concern is going forward," says **Todd M. Neuman, executive vice president of South African Airways (SAA)**. "The concern is the impact this will have on advanced bookings and we are starting to see a downward trend year over year as far as advanced bookings go. Usually this is when business starts really picking up (to South Africa) and that's the biggest concern. What will we see three, four, five months down the road?"

Neuman told Travel Agent that SAA has already seen a roughly five percent reduction compared to this time period last year in terms of advanced bookings, but noted that South African Airways will continue to fly to South Africa with no changes in the airline's service patterns or schedule for now.

"We have been getting some cancellations and we've gotten reports from the South African Tourism Board about cancellations as well," says Neuman. "We've also started to hear from people on the ground at South African hotels and safari lodges and they are saying that it is beginning to have an impact on business to the destination."

Tour Operators

Elizabeth Gordon, co-founder and CEO at tour operator-cum-agency **Extraordinary Journeys** (and one of Travel Agent Magazine's top 30 Under 30 agents for 2010), said that her team is spending "a lot of time" talking with clients, "explaining why South Africa is safe and what is in place. Africa is a huge continent." She has even developed a bullet-point list of facts to help calm any concerns:

- The Ebola outbreak is only concentrated in certain countries in West Africa
- Johannesburg is further from the outbreak than London, Dubai, Rome and Rio de Janeiro
- Cape Town is as far away and is closer to Antarctica than West Africa!
- There have been no Ebola cases or arrivals in South Africa in this epidemic
- Since 2010 ALL arriving passengers into Johannesburg have been screened for raised body temperatures
- There are 11 medical facilities trained to isolate any Ebola case that arrives into the country
- South Africa has a sophisticated medical infrastructure to keep our country and sub-continent free of the virus



Gauteng, Johannesburg

"[South Africa's] health system works," Gordon added. "**Liberia** doesn't have one. Or a functional government." Even **Nigeria**, she added, was able to contain the one infected person right away. "They have been very quick to take action."

Still, she had to acknowledge a downturn in business in spite of South Africa's efforts and safety . "Requests are trickling," she said. "Business is slow."

Agents

The impact can also be felt in the U.S., where agents are beginning to see major drops in advanced bookings to South Africa.

"We have been fortunate not to have any cancellations, but new bookings coming in have quieted down," says **Julian Harrison, president of Premier Tours**, a **Philadelphia**-based agency that specializes mostly in trips to East and South Africa.

In fact, Harrison says he has suffered a whopping 50 percent dip in advanced bookings for September/October compared to the same time period last year.

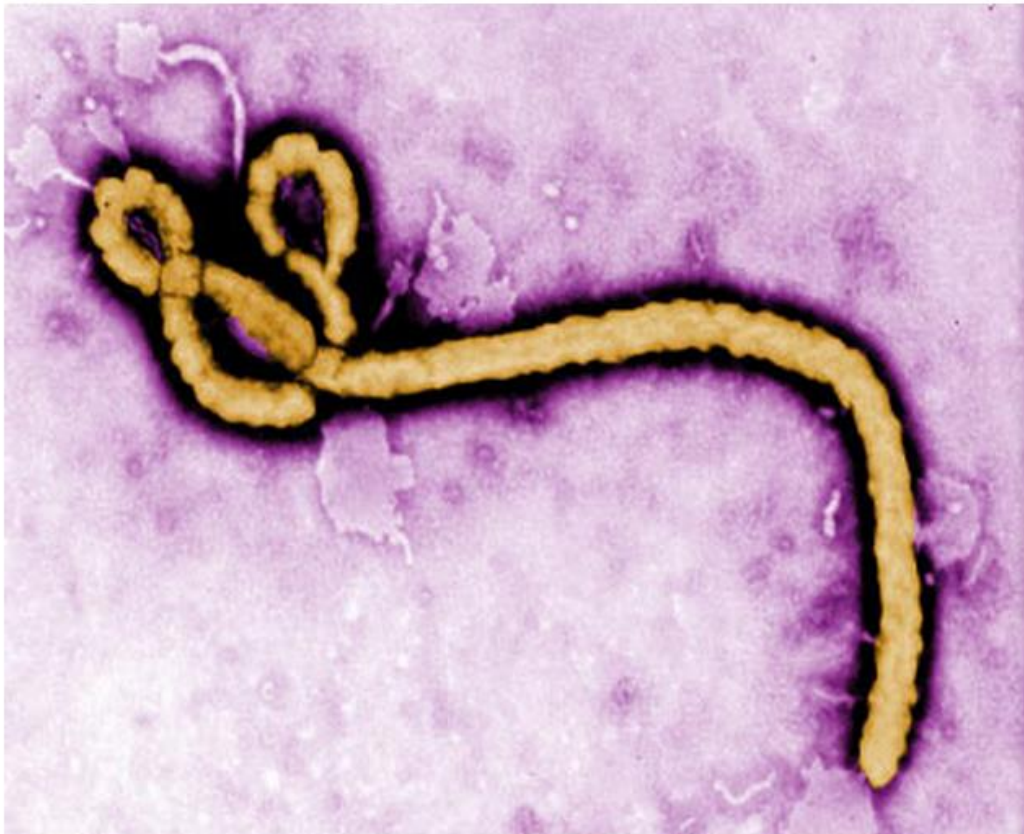
"People are adopting a wait-and-see approach for all Africa stuff now," he says. "We just try and put it in perspective for clients. We tell them that West Africa is actually closer to **Europe** and Brazil than it is from South and East Africa."

Neuman says SAA has been sending periodic correspondence to agents to show them measures the airlines are taking to ensure safety from identifying airports that are conducting screenings to training crew members to be able to identify potentially sick passengers.

"Our role has been to help educate our travel partners and consumers on the situation by providing information on where they can go to get relevant facts," says Neuman. "The biggest challenge is that most Americans don't completely understand the geography of Africa. I don't think a lot of Americans really know how big of a continent it really is, that the U.S. can fit into it two and a half times over.

"The challenge is also with the media too, particularly TV," says Neuman. "This is a serious disease and we certainly recognize that, but we think this is being somewhat sensationalized and creating panic among travelers."

How has the outbreak been affecting your travel business? Let us know what you think in the poll and comments below.



Has the Ebola virus outbreak impacted your travel business?



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