

VFR TRAVEL AND COVID-19 IMPACTS: THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: COVID-19 had major negative consequences globally for travel for visits to friends and relatives (VFR), which is an under-researched segment of tourism. This paper responds to the need for extended research on VFR travel by examining the impacts of COVID-19 on the VFR sector and its spatial imprint in South Africa. VFR travel sector was second only to business travel in terms of the negative impacts of COVID-19 restrictions imposed in South Africa. An uneven geography is observed of the impact of COVID-19 on VFR travel mobilities. Using data on VFR trips and bednights the analysis discloses the greatest absolute declines in VFR travel occurred in South Africa’s major metropolitan areas. By contrast, in terms of the relative decline and local impacts for destinations of the COVID-19 hollowing out of VFR travel a different pattern emerges. The worst affected spaces were remote, mainly rural localities which are in South Africa’s poorest and most economically distressed areas.

Key words: VFR travel, COVID-19 impacts, ramification, Africa tourism, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic wrought significant changes across many dimensions of public life, including of tourist behaviour (Kock et al., 2020; Korinth, 2020; Kowalska and Niezgodna, 2020; Bama and Nyikana, 2021; Gössling et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Afroz et al., 2022; Dogramadjieva and Terziyska, 2022). Adey et al. (2021: 1) point out that the pandemic resulted in “many everyday human mobilities brought to an abrupt halt, while others were drastically reorganized”. Among its most visible consequences has been the shift in consumer preferences away from mass tourism and towards particular types of niche tourism, for drive tourism holidays and travel for visits to friends and relatives (VFR) (Bieger and Laesser, 2020; Chebli and Said, 2020; Seraphin and Dosquet, 2020; Zenker and Kock, 2020; Perić et al., 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a; Zentveld et al., 2022a).

It is stressed that, at least in the short to medium-term, the importance of VFR travel will become more visible to policy-makers as “people staying away from loved ones for a long time and not being able to establish physical contact with them will greatly increase the effort to satisfy this emotional need in future travels” (Koç, 2021, p. 300). In many countries it is suggested also that because many people lost jobs, livelihoods or experienced a decrease in overall income during the pandemic that those with weakened purchasing power may opt for VFR travel on grounds of cost considerations as well as one of the modes of travel posing the least health risk. As Zentveld et al. (2022b, p. 385) aver “people unable to see friends and family due to lockdowns are focused on reconnecting”.

The cessation of international travel occasioned by COVID-19 resulted in “huge emotional impacts for diasporas in the COVID-19 era” (Kelly, 2022, p. 635). Within countries COVID-19 lockdowns and travel curbs impacted cultural obligations attached to VFR travel (Zentveld et al., 2022a). In terms of tourism recovery VFR travel has been identified as a suitable “first-mover” market segment (Backer and Ritchie, 2017; Zentveld et al., 2022a). Indeed, it is significant as “a naturally occurring form of social tourism that has important policy implications” (Backer and Morrison, 2017, p. 396). Whilst other types of tourism are considered as a luxury and have been paused with the pandemic, the desire to reconnect with friends and relatives has become a priority for many individuals and households. For example, in Turkey Koç (2021) maintains that longing for friends and relatives has spurred a growth in the demand for VFR travel following the country’s relaxation of lockdown and travel restrictions. According to Tham et al. (2022) VFR hosts are critically positioned as potential destination ambassadors for strategically launching post-COVID-19 tourism recovery.

In common with the experiences recorded for the rest of the world, the tourism sector in Africa was devastated by the ramifications of COVID-19 lockdowns and government-mandated travel constraints (Rogerson and Baum, 2020; Bama et al., 2022; Musavengane and Leonard, 2022). It was observed that COVID-19 represents “a trigger event which is changing the complexion of African tourism and the directions of African tourism research” (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021b, p 1026). One major strand of African tourism research produced in the uncertain times of the COVID-19

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environment surrounds the theme of ‘ramification’ and of the pandemic’s impacts for the tourism sector (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b). South African tourism experienced among the worst pandemic impacts within the African continent (Bama and Nyikana, 2021). From a supply-side perspective Kruger and Viljoen (2022) examine determinants which can support the regeneration of South Africa’s tourism industry following its hollowing out because of the pandemic. Mzobe et al. (2022) focus on the need to unlock the opportunities for expanding domestic tourism. Dube-Xaba (2021) is of the view that in the wake of COVID-19 VFR has the potential to fuel the resurgence of the South African tourism industry and most especially for domestic tourism. In debates about potential directions in African tourism research agendas in the COVID-environment the observed positive benefits of leveraging VFR travel in post-disaster recovery situations reinforces the need to extend the African corpus of scholarship on VFR travel (Rogerson and Baum, 2020). Likewise, Musavengane et al. (2022) identify that it would be worthwhile for researchers to probe in greater depth the impact of COVID-19 on VFR travel in Southern Africa.

This paper responds to these calls for further research on VFR travel by examining the impacts of COVID-19 on the VFR sector and its spatial imprint in South Africa. Two further sections of material are presented. These deal first with the literature context of VFR travel and research on VFR in South Africa and followed by the empirical work on the pandemic’s impacts for VFR in the country. In their review of recent tourism geographical literature on South Africa Rogerson and Visser (2020, p. 5) observe “a rich vein of research investigations is emerging around VFR travel in South Africa”. This paper offers a modest contribution both to that South African geographical literature as well as to broader discussions concerning the ramifications of COVID-19 for VFR travel, including its impacts.

LITERATURE CONTEXT - VFR TRAVEL AND SOUTH AFRICA

Visits to friends and relatives are described as a “simple, often taken-for granted pleasure” with a rhythm of visits usually organised around birthdays, anniversaries, and public holiday periods (Kelly, 2022, p. 634). In many countries VFR travel is the main driver of domestic tourism (Rogerson, 2015a; Zátori et al., 2019) and can be a significant contributor also to international tourism flows (Backer and King, 2015). The phenomenon of VFR travel continues to expand in a context where households are increasingly geographically dispersed as a result either of migration or lifestyle considerations and yet wish to retain ongoing emotional and friendship connections (Backer and King, 2015; Griffin and Dimanche, 2017). Seaton (2017, p. 455) observes that this situation is unremarkable “since relationships between family, relatives and friends, and visits to or by them, are mainstays of human life for all except the chronically unfortunate, isolated or disaffected”. Indeed, Kelly (2022, p. 634) maintains that the action of VFR travel represents “an unspoken network of connection, identity and belonging”. Based upon Australian evidence, Backer (2019) highlights the positive quality of life impacts of VFR travel.

Beyond its social significance for tourism destinations the activity of VFR travel confers economic benefits (Trites et al., 1995; Backer, 2007; Asiedu, 2008; Backer, 2010). These benefits are not always appreciated by policy-makers and destination managers as the breadth of VFR expenditures and therefore the impacts for destinations of VFR travellers are underestimated (Jackson, 1990; O’Leary and Morrison, 1995; Chhabra, 2005; Lee et al., 2005; Backer, 2007; Backer and King, 2015; Backer and Morrison, 2015; Yousuf and Backer, 2015; Griffin and Nunkoo, 2016). VFR travel has been shown to be resilient in the context of economic downturns thus making it significant for local economic development programming as well as for overcoming the seasonality issues which commonly are associated with leisure tourism (Backer, 2012; Griffin, 2013). Overall, Backer (2007) stresses that in tourism scholarship the VFR market has been both under-researched and under-respected. This said, Seaton (2017, p. 455) notes the paradox that VFR travel as a marginalized category by tourism scholars and planners “has always been, as a domain of behaviour, more central to human experience than leisure tourism”. Although an upturn in research interest occurred in the 2010 decade recently Zentveld et al. (2022b, p. 385) re-stated that “relatively little VFR research has been undertaken”. Likewise, Lin et al. (2022, p. 18) point out that notwithstanding the capacity of VFR travel to exhibit strong resilience in the face of global crises “it has been one of the most underexplored tourism contexts in the literature”.

For certain observers the lack of popularity of VFR research is an outcome of several difficulties associated with precisely defining what is VFR travel (Munoz, 2018). In a critical commentary Palovic et al. (2014) maintain that the concept is unstructured and chaotic. VFR can be considered variously as a trip purpose, a trip activity and an accommodation use (Griffin, 2016). It was argued by Backer (2007) that use of trip purpose alone is insufficient to capture the extent of VFR and therefore that it is appropriate to incorporate accommodation use in discussion of visits for pleasure. The conceptual definition was advanced that VFR constitutes “a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives” (Backer, 2007, p. 369).

Table 1. Backer’s typology of VFR (Source: Adapted after Backer, 2012)

	Accommodation: Friends and Family	Accommodation: Commercial
Purpose of Visit: VFR	PVFRs	CVFRs
Purpose of Visit: Non-VFR	EVFRs	Non- VFRs

Backer (2012) proposed a definitional typology that used the two dimensions of ‘purpose of travel’ and ‘form of accommodation’ to define more clearly VFR travellers “but also to distinguish which ones are not” (Munoz, 2018, p. 52). Four visitor categories emerge (Table 1). These are as follows: (1) pure VFRs (PVFRs) which are VFR purpose and stay with friends and relatives; (2) commercial VFRs (CVFRs) which are VFR purpose and staying in commercial

accommodation; (3) exploiting VFRs (EVFRs) which are for pleasure purpose but stay with friends or relatives; and, (4) non-VFRs which are visitors for leisure purpose and staying in commercial accommodation (Backer, 2012). Arguably, this typology represents a major conceptual advance for VFR studies (Barnes and Rogerson, 2021). This definition of VFR further builds upon the recognition that the phenomenon of VFR is not simply about leisure. It recognises that “there are instead multiple practices within visits that have little to do with tourism such as attending a funeral, child care or visiting an ailing relative” (Munoz et al., 2017, p. 480). For this reason, both Backer (2012) and Zentveld et al. (2022) prefer the use of the term ‘VFR travel’ to the descriptor ‘VFR tourism’.

Despite its minor status in tourism writings by African tourism scholars it has been asserted that VFR travel ‘matters’ and most especially so within the environment of sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson, 2017a). As indicated by Dzikiti and van der Merwe (2017) VFR travel in Africa includes a segment of international travellers. By far the largest constituent is, however, domestic travel. In pre-COVID South Africa VFR has been shown as the leading segment of tourism travel as a whole and in the economy of domestic tourism (Rogerson, 2015a, 2015b; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020b, 2021c). Ordinary or working class South Africans dominate domestic tourism flows and are drivers of a low-density form of tourism which has parallels in many other countries in the Global South.

The activity of VFR travel in South Africa is massively the domain of less affluent Black travellers many of whom are part of split or multi-locational households with both an urban and rural ‘home’ (Rogerson, 2015b, 2017b). Henama and Apleni (2018, p. 775) assert that the face of Black tourism in South Africa is dominated by VFR travel which takes the form of an informal economy of domestic tourism. Residents of many of South Africa’s disadvantaged urban ‘townships’ are important participants in VFR travel movements (Rogerson and Mthombeni, 2015). As these low income communities are excluded on cost grounds from participating in other forms of tourism VFR travel therefore assumes a vital social function in South Africa (Rogerson, 2017b; Musavengane, 2019). Musavengane (2019, p. 341) re-iterates that the majority of ‘poor’ Black South Africans engage in VFR mobilities and that Black Africans dominate VFR travel. Likewise, Henama et al. (2022) confirm that the major contours of second homes tourism in South Africa are shaped by working class South Africans who work in the major cities but have ‘second homes’ in the former apartheid-created (mainly) rural ‘homelands’ where members of the extended household family are residents.

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON VFR TRAVEL IN SOUTH AFRICA

Two sub-sections of material are presented which relate to the methods and data used in this investigation followed by the findings on COVID-impacts for VFR travel in South Africa.

Methods and Data

For the tourism sector in South Africa no official data is available to monitor tourism flows and the economic contribution of tourism at sub-national level. Reliance is given therefore to the unpublished data base which is maintained by the private sector consultancy IHS Global Insight (now part of S & P Global). This South African tourism data base represents a subset of the IHS Global Insight Regional eXplorer (ReX) which is a consolidated platform of integrated data bases that, in the absence of official establishment and enterprise surveys, provides currently the most useful data at sub-national scale, including the municipal scale. Data is collated regularly and updated from a wide range of sources (both official and non-government) with the primary data reworked to ensure consistency across variables and by applying national and sub-national verification tests in order to ensure that the model is consistent for measuring business activity. In terms of the spatial disaggregation of data, IHS Global Insight apply both a top down approach from questions posed in demand-side surveys as well as a bottom up approach using the supply-side distribution of tourism services. For the most accurate geographic distribution at lower scale regions and local areas the supply-side measures are deemed as the most appropriate. For purpose of travel data, a differentiation is made between holiday/leisure trips, business trips, VFR and other (mainly religious or health) travel.

For the category of VFR travel, trips are distributed according to numbers of non-household members that are present in each household as measured in various census subsets; for domestic tourists the distribution of local non-household members is used whereas for international tourists the distribution of non-local non-households is applied.

Arguably, for tourism geographers the local tourism data base of Global Insight is particularly valuable as it contains details of the tourism performance of all local municipal authorities in the country in respect of *inter alia*, the number of tourism trips differentiated by primary purpose of trip; bednights by origin of tourist (domestic or international); calculation of tourism spend; and, of the contribution of tourism to local gross domestic product (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021c). From this data base information can be extracted on an annual basis from 2001 for tourism trips as estimated for all local, district and metropolitan authorities in the country. For students of the geography of tourism the IHS Global Insight data base is illuminating as in an international overview it is apparent that tourism geographical scholarship gives only limited attention to exploring spatial variations of the pandemic’s impact within countries (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2022a, 2022b). This omission is surprising in light of the facts both that spatial analysis is a vital research tool for tourism geographers (Hall, 2012) and demonstrated as a valued foundation for tourism policy and planning (Popescu and Persu, 2022). The time period under scrutiny for this investigation is between 2019-2020 and represents therefore an analysis of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 upon the landscape of VFR travel in South Africa. Detailed accounts of the various lockdowns and the changing pandemic restrictions which were imposed by the South African government on local and international travel are provided by Rogerson and Rogerson (2020a), Visagie and Turok (2021) and, most recently, by Lekgau and Tichaawa (2022).

Findings

The immediate impacts of COVID-19 for the tourism economy of South Africa are summarised on Table 2 for a range of indicators. Using data for trips and bednights for the period 2019-2020 it is evident that the segment of travel that experienced the greatest downturn in 2020 was business travel. The second most affected travel segment was, however, that of VFR travel. This segment shows losses of 67.5 percent in terms of trips and 69.8 percent in terms of bednights (Table 2). It should be understood that the category 'bednights' includes both paid (commercial accommodation) and non-paid bednights (Rogerson, 2018). In the case of VFR travel in South Africa, which is dominated by poor and working class visitors, the overwhelming share of VFR bednights would not be in commercial accommodation and instead at the homes of host friends or relatives (Rogerson, 2017b).

Table 2. Key Indicators of COVID-19 Impacts on Tourism in South Africa, 2020
(Source: Authors based on unpublished IHS Global Insight data)

Indicator	2019-2020 Net Change (-)	Per Cent Decline
Total Trips ('000s)	30016.1	66.9
Total Bednights ('000s)	16887.8	68.2
Leisure Trips ('000s)	6845.5	64.3
Leisure Bednights ('000s)	44785.5	64.5
Business Trips ('000s)	2283.9	70.3
Business Bednights ('000s)	15469.7	70.6
VFR Trips ('000s)	18260.1	67.5
VFR Bednights ('000s)	96201.7	69.8
Other Trips ('000s)	2626.6	67.1
Other Bednights ('000s)	12420.9	67.7

Variations in the geographical patterns of VFR travel and associated COVID-19 impacts can be examined for both total trip and total bednight data. The analysis is undertaken for both absolute losses as well as relative change.

The focus is on data for a total of 213 spatial units. These are composed of South Africa's eight metropolitan areas and 205 local municipal areas which encompass a group of secondary or middle-tier centres in the urban settlement hierarchy as well as small town and rural municipalities. Figure 1 maps out the boundaries of South Africa's major metropolitan centres and the country's nine provinces.

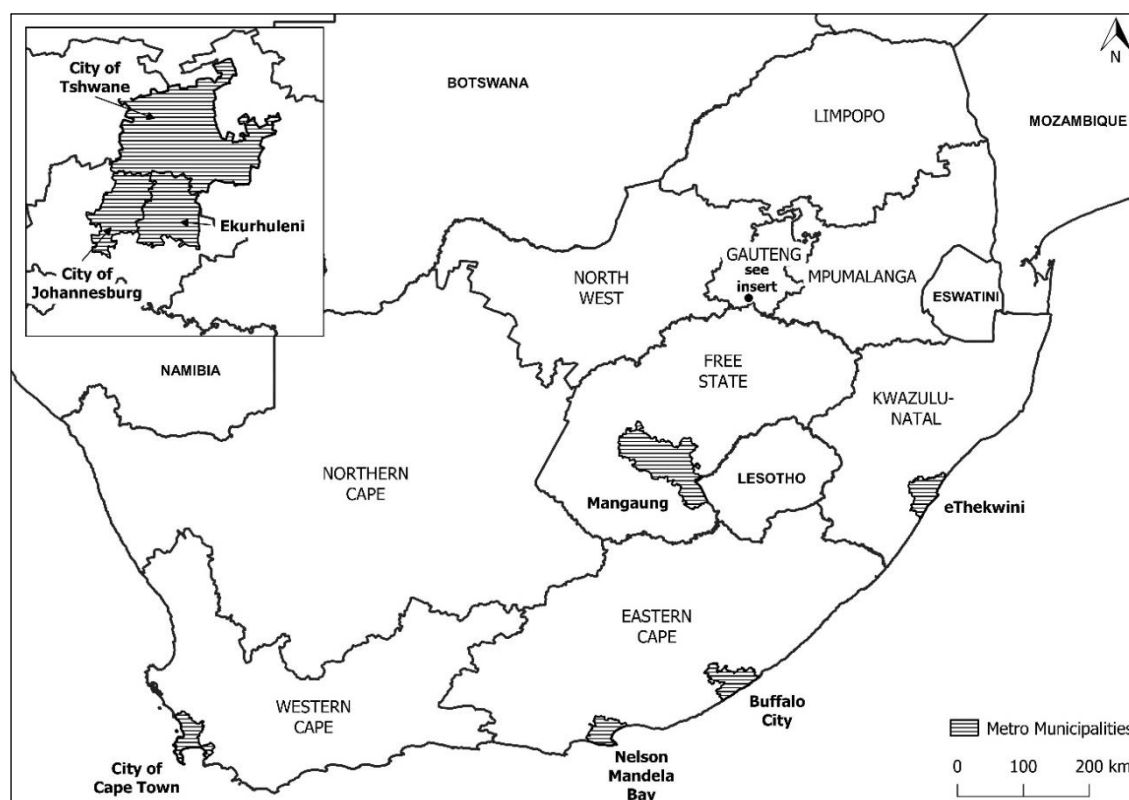


Figure 1. South Africa's Nine Provinces and Eight Metropolitan Areas (Source: Authors)

Table 3 provides a list of the leading 15 municipalities which are ranked for the absolute loss recorded for VFR travel in terms of both numbers of trips and total number of bednights for the period 2019-2020. As a result of South Africa's various COVID-19 travel restrictions and lockdown measures absolute falls in VFR travel were evidenced across *all* of South Africa's local areas. The decline of VFR travel in 2020 was therefore geographically widespread

across the country. In total, however, the 15 leading centres on Table 3 accounted for almost 50 percent of the total decline in VFR trips (9 088 000) during the period 2019-2020. Indeed, ten of these 15 areas exhibit relatively greater losses in numbers of VFR trips than the rate (67.5 percent) for South Africa as a whole.

It is evident that the major individual losses were recorded in terms of VFR travel to several of South Africa's major metropolitan centres. This reflects the trend – particularly noticeable in the urban Global South - that large urban centres are traditionally significant destinations for VFR travel (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021d). The greatest absolute declines occurred for the country's three inland metropolitan areas in the economic heartland of Gauteng province.

Taken together the metropolitan areas of Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni recorded a decline of over 4 million VFR trips. Next, following these declines of the Gauteng metropolitan areas Table 3 demonstrates significant falls in VFR trips occurred in the two coastal metropolitan areas of Cape Town (Western Cape) and eThekweni (KwaZulu-Natal), the secondary city of Polokwane – capital of Limpopo province – the metropolitan areas of Mangaung (Free State), Buffalo City (Eastern Cape) and the city of Mbombela, the provincial capital and major centre of Mpumalanga province. Beyond these centres further significant declines are recorded in three small town and rural municipalities of Limpopo province (Thulamela, Greater Giyani and Fetakgomo/Greater Tubatse), Rustenburg in North West province and for Steve Tshwete and Govan Mbeki local municipalities which are situated in Mpumalanga province. This latter group of local municipalities includes areas which are the location of 'second homes' of large numbers of split Black households, many of which are found in the former Homelands created under apartheid albeit with origins that date back to the earlier segregationist colonial era (Rogerson, 2014, 2017b).

Table 3. Leading South African municipalities: Absolute decline of VFR trips and VFR bednights 2019-2020 (Source Authors construct based on IHS Global Insight data. Note: LIM – Limpopo, NW – North West, MP – Mpumalanga, GP - Gauteng province)

Municipality	No. of Trips ('000)	% National Loss	Municipality	Bed-nights ('000)	% National Loss
City of Johannesburg	1 871	10.2	City of Johannesburg	12286	7.3
City of Tshwane	1 122	6.1	City of Tshwane	7 068	4.2
Ekurhuleni	1 068	5.8	Ekurhuleni	6 975	4.1
eThekweni	926	5.1	City of Cape Town	6 782	4.0
City of Cape Town	909	5.0	eThekweni	5 038	3.0
Polokwane (LIM)	585	3.2	Buffalo City	1 981	1.2
Mangaung	419	2.3	Polokwane (LIM)	1 954	1.2
Buffalo City	370	2.0	Mangaung	1 884	1.1
City of Mbombela (MP)	324	1.8	City of Mbombela(MP)	1 543	0.9
Thulamela (LIM)	291	1.6	Rustenburg (NW)	1 287	0.8
Fetakgomo/Greater Tubatse (LIM)	280	1.5	Nelson Mandela Bay	1 172	0.7
Rustenburg (NW)	269	1.5	Thulamela (LIM)	968	0.6
Greater Giyani (LIM)	248	1.4	Fetakgomo/Greater Tubatse (LIM)	864	0.5
Steve Tshwete (MP)	211	1.2	Emfuleni (GP)	836	0.5
Govan Mbeki (MP)	195	1.1	Steve Tshwete (MP)	834	0.5

The results of the analysis for VFR bednight data discloses a similar set of findings and rankings to that for VFR trips (Table 3). Once again all local municipalities across South Africa experienced losses in terms of numbers of bednights for VFR travel. The losses for VFR bednights are widely dispersed across South Africa as indexed by the finding that the leading 15 centres collectively account for less than one-third of all the national decline in VFR bednights. The highest losses were concentrated geographically in the metropolitan centres with Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Cape Town and eThekweni responsible for the greatest falls (see Table 3). Together these five metropolitan centres accounted for a decline of 31.87 million VFR bednights in the period 2019-2020 as an outcome of the immediate impact of COVID-19. The list of leading centres in terms of losses of VFR bednights includes all eight of South Africa's metropolitan areas. Outside of these metropolitan centres notable declines in bednights for VFR travel were evidenced also for the secondary cities of Rustenburg (North West), Mbombela (Mpumalanga) and Polokwane (Limpopo) as well as of the small town and rural municipalities in the former rural homelands which now are part of Limpopo province (Table 3).

The above analysis shows that the absolute losses related to the collapse of VFR travel were uneven geographically across South Africa albeit mainly concentrated in the country's large metropolitan areas. Table 4 turns attention to focus on issues of *relative* decline in terms of identifying the municipalities on the basis of which were worst impacted in terms of relative loss of VFR trips and VFR bednights. This revealed a completely different picture of the geographical impact of COVID on VFR travel. In terms of indicators of both trip losses and decline in bednights the leading relative declines occurred in small predominantly rural local municipalities in the provinces of Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Northern Cape. The list of worst impacted local municipalities are in economically distressed areas and geographically remote from South Africa's major metropolitan areas which recorded the greatest absolute losses in VFR travel mobilities. The impacted municipalities are among South Africa's least visited tourism spaces and most can be described as 'non-tourism' spaces (Rogerson, 2017c). These are local areas which are VFR-dependent as leisure or business travel to those areas is almost non-existent. Arguably, the COVID-19 induced collapse of VFR travel would have worsened the considerable economic and social hardships in such areas following lockdowns and travel restrictions.

Table 4. Leading South African municipalities: Relative Decline of VFR trips and VFR bednights 2019-2020 (Source: Authors construct based on IHS Global Insight data. Note: LIM – Limpopo, EC – Eastern Cape, NC – Northern Cape province)

Municipality	% Trip Loss	No. '000s	Municipality	% Bed Night Loss	No. '000s
Umzimvubu (EC)	88	87	Umzimvubu (EC)	85	476
Matatiele (EC)	87	45	Matatiele (EC)	82	267
King Sabata Dalindyebo (EC)	79	82	Ga-Segonyana (NC)	79	204
Mhlontlo (EC)	79	44	Gamagara (NC)	79	95
Nyandeni (EC)	79	44	King Sabata Dalindyebo (EC)	78	450
Ingguzu Hill (EC)	79	34	Mhlontlo (EC)	78	240
Ntabankulu (EC)	79	18	Ingguzu Hill (EC)	78	186
Port St Johns (EC)	78	72	Joe Marolong (NC)	78	136
Thulamela (LIM)	76	291	Port St Johns (EC)	77	408
Collins Chabane (LIM)	76	170	Sol Plaatje (NC)	77	381
Makhado (LIM)	76	169	Nyandeni (EC)	77	241
Ga-Segonyana (NC)	76	45	Mbizana (EC)	77	207
Joe Marolong (NC)	76	30	Nala (FS)	77	157
Gamagara (NC)	76	22	Masilonyana (FS)	77	131

CONCLUSION

Although VFR travel represents the largest constituent of tourism flows scholarly attention on VFR remains sparse (Zentveld et al., 2022b). This paper represents a contribution to the small literature which acknowledges the relevance of researching VFR travel mobilities. Our focus has been upon the ramifications of COVID-19 upon VFR travel in the experience of South Africa. It has been shown that the VFR travel sector was second only to business travel in terms of the negative impacts of COVID-19 restrictions imposed in South Africa. There was observed an uneven geography in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on VFR travel mobilities. Using data on VFR trips and bednights the analysis has disclosed that the largest absolute declines in VFR travel occurred in South Africa's major metropolitan areas which have diversified tourism economies. By contrast, a different complexion was shown in terms of the relative decline and local impacts for destinations of the COVID-19 hollowing out of VFR travel. It was evident that the worst affected spaces were remote, mainly rural spaces which are in South Africa's poorest and most economically distressed areas. These findings highlight the potential need for local research investigations in these spaces to examine both the detailed economic and social ramifications of COVID-19 and steps towards recovery from the pandemic

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