

Focus: Tourism Month

Lejweleputswa District: Tourism a new precious commodity

Five sector development strategy

Once generated by gold mining into a thriving economic region known as the Free State Goldfields, the declining gold mining industry over the past decade has led to the Lejweleputswa District of today relying on also other economic sectors for sustainability. One of these sectors is tourism, which, however, within the extensive and diverse geographical area of Lejweleputswa constitutes a multi-faceted industry.

Covering an area stretching from Ventersburg in the south, to Hoopstad in the north and Boshof in the west and including the traditional Goldfields of the Free State, the Lejweleputswa region offers a wide variety of tourism jewels – some already glittering and some waiting to be discovered.

The tourism sector forms part of the following five sector

development strategy for the Lejweleputswa District:

- A distribution hub for South Africa, which would include a cargo airport, the upgrading of the R30 Welkom-Bloemfontein road and improved rail connections.
- A gold jewellery hub to add value to gold, precious and semi-precious stones.
- An unique brand of tourism applications, including events tourism, mining-orientated tourism, game farms, zoological gardens and tourism routes.
- Alternative local agricultural products to be processed before being exported to world markets.
- Development of training structures customized to meet local needs.

Current district economic profile in nutshell

The Lejweleputswa District contains the Free State Goldfields, but is also a major agricultural area. Principally known for its goldfields, Welkom was established in 1947 and is one of very few cities in the world designed to completion before any development took place. By 1992, the goldfields had produced 7 360t of gold from some 20 mines.

Bothaville is considered one of the most important maize centres in South Africa and also forms part of the Free State Maize Route. The annual National Maize Production Organisation (NAMPO) Harvest Farm and Festival attracts more than 50 000 visitors and is the second largest private agricultural show centre in the world.

The Lejweleputswa District has 24.3% of the Free State population and contributes 20.6% of the GDP in the province.

A closer look at the Free State economy reveals that a decrease in its relative contribution towards the GDP of South Africa can, to a large extent, be attributed to a negative growth in mining at an average rate of -4% p.a. for the period 1980 to 1999. The mining sector used to be the mainstay of the provincial economy. It needs to be taken into account that the Free State is not surrounded by a prosperous economic environment of big businesses and industries, as are some other provinces with huge infrastructural and economic activities. However, over the past two years the economic growth rate has increased.

The key economic challenges for the Free State as well as for the Lejweleputswa District are to absorb the shock of the declining mining sector, maintain the existing contribution of agriculture, increase the global link, and address inherent inequities in the economy.

Tourism strengths

Strengths of the diverse tourism sector of the Lejweleputswa District are amongst others the following:

- Aldam Estate on the Allemanskraal Dam near Ventersburg – a first class resort with a wide range of accommodation as well as conferencing options, plenty of water sports opportunities, a restaurant, shopping facilities, etc. The Willem Pretorius Game and Nature Reserve adjacent to Aldam Estate, with abundant game species, indigenous vegetation, etc. It also hosts annually a huge game auction with high turnover.
- Nampo Harvest Day near Bothaville, the largest private agricultural expo in Africa, having drawn this year more than 600 exhibitors and 64 000 visitors over a four day period.
- The innovative Mielie Hop shuttle service between Bothaville and Nampo Harvest Day involving busses and taxis and with a considerable BEE element.
- The Phakisa Freeway is an international standard, multi-purpose motorsport facility between Welkom and Odendaalsrus. The track boasts a 4.24km road course as well as a 1.5 mile banked oval track similar to the highly acclaimed Las Vegas Motor Speedway in Nevada. The asset has great investment potential also as regards becoming the centrifugal force for secondary tourism hub development around it, in particular sporting events.
- The international Harmony Jewellery School at Virginia, offering training in jewellery design and manufacturing at national diploma level, as well as a home system incubator to produce products SA tourism outlets as well as for international markets.
- The annual Food & Witsblits Festival highlighting Bothaville as the Maize Capital of South Africa and drawing visitors countrywide as well as internationally.
- Soetdoring Game & Nature Reserve between Bultfontein and Bloemfontein, hosting inter alia lion and other predators. It is also a sought-after angling venue.
- The annual Boshof Show and Game Auction – an event also renowned internationally.
- These are but a few highlights at random – for others space here allows merely the dotting down of the following:
 - Tikwe Lodge Resort & Conference Centre at Virginia.
 - The Goldfields Casino at Welkom.

- The Goldfields Tourism Route starting at Bothaville.
- The Anglo Boer War Cemeteries at Brandfort, including different sites of Boer, African and British graveyards.
- The Winburg Voortrekker Monument.
- The 1956 Women's Pass Resistance Site next to the old Magistrate Court in Winburg.
- The Winnie Mandela Museum Lodge at Brandfort
- The Arts & Crafts Route and Tavern Tours in Thabong.
- High Chapparral Resort at Virginia
- Other nature reserves, such as Sandveld, Rustfontein, Erfenis Dam, etc.
- The salt pans at Soutpan.
- Numerous exquisite B&B's, hotels, restaurants, etc. strewn throughout the region.
- Many private game farms and nature reserves, offering a host of additional outdoor activities.
- Miscellaneous events such as festivals, flea markets, etc.
- Tourism developments in the offing include:
 - A golf and sports estate planned on the banks of the Sand River at Virginia
 - A fully-fledged tourism centre at Welkom
 - Further developments around Phakisa Freeway
 - Possible gold mine underground tours at Welkom, Virginia and St. Helena
 - A community-run game project at Boshof
 - Opportunities for investment and development in the accommodation, conferencing and tour operating sectors.

Then the attributes of even towns such as Bultfontein, Hertzogville, Dealesville, Ventersburg, etc., etc. has not been touched upon – all places which serve as definite tourism sub-destinations of their own.

This bird's eye-view serves only to prove the inherent strength and uniqueness of the tourism sector in Lejweleputswa – a potential that need to be harnessed increasingly and to be translated into economic growth and employment opportunities for the region as a whole.

The Lejweleputswa District Municipality as the coordinating body for tourism development in the district wishes to extend a fresh hand of cooperation to all stakeholders and tourism product owners – both existing as well as prospective – to realize the potential of the district.



Images of tourist attractions in Lejweleputswa District, top from left, gold mine shaft, Aldam Estate, racing at Phakisa, product of Harmony Jewellery School, demo at Nampo Harvest Day.



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**Tourism Month
programme 2007**

A programme of activities celebrating Tourism Month 2007 in the Lejweleputswa District is to be released to media soon.