

OPENING ADDRESS
TOURISM MINISTER DEREK HANEKOM
THE IGLTA ANNUAL GLOBAL CONVENTION IN CAPE TOWN
14 APRIL 2016

Delegates to this historic convention,

Friends in tourism,

It is a great honour for me to welcome you to the first International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association Convention in Africa. We are extremely proud that you have chosen South Africa for this ground-breaking event.

Welcome to the making of the South African success story. Many of the early chapters of this story are completed, some are still being written, and people like yourselves, who come here from all over the world, are helping us write future chapters about the success of tourism in our country.

I really hope you have built in time to enjoy some of our amazing attractions and offerings: from the best of leisure and adventure, to the stories behind our culture and heritage, to our beautiful landscapes and our warm and wonderful people.

When you visit our iconic sites like Robben Island, you will understand how far we have travelled on our journey to success in the past two decades, how much we have learnt from our oppressive past, and how much we value our freedom and our human rights - rights which many of you here have had to fight long battles to secure, and quite possibly have not yet secured.

This convention will help brand South Africa as a country that welcomes LGBT travellers. The tourism trade network, and travellers, will appreciate all that we have to offer, especially our wildlife, cultural and gastronomic experiences. I am sure that you will also take the bigger story of South Africa, our achievements and advancements beyond tourism, to the wider world when you return home.

Many of you may know that when South Africa first became a democratic state, we were a society perched on the brink of catastrophe. More than three hundred years of repression preceded those momentous days which led to the unbanning of political organisations; the release of political prisoners and the re-shaping of what was an entirely repressive society, into one which cared for its people - one which recognised the dignity of each and every human being, no matter what their race, ethnicity, or standing in society, marital status, disability, gender or sexual orientation might be.

It was a long road to a democratic, caring society. And the change could not happen overnight. It could not, because that is not how human beings work. Change comes slowly. As the English poet WB Yeats once said "peace comes dropping slow". To change from systematic violence and exploitation to a land where every citizen would

be valued and cared for; to change from a land with a racially defined privileged few, to one where the people would share the wealth and opportunity of the country – this could not be anything other than a slow process. When we look back at the 22 years since we achieved our freedom, we have made huge advances, but the journey towards a non-racial, non-sexist society, free of stereotype and prejudice has only really just started.

At that exciting time of the transition from Apartheid to democracy, one of the great icons of our liberation struggle, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, coined the phrase “Rainbow Nation”. It was poetry, and just the right medicine for our divided nation. What he meant by that was that the beauty and wonder of the rainbow lies in nothing other than its many different colours. So he used it as a metaphor for our country. Many colours, but one nation. It worked for us and played a very important part in making people recognise the beauty of our racial and cultural diversity.

As time progressed, we began the real work of addressing inequalities and confronting persistent racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice, sometimes in ugly ways. Student protests of the past year have brought all of this into very sharp relief. Much of what was previously just accepted as part of our national life, has been brought into question, analysed and sometimes seriously challenged.

Perhaps we are now better described as a “Kaleidoscope Nation” – where things are constantly changing and shifting, and sometimes even colliding. But the beauty is all still there. The different colours are still wondrous. The shape and form of our nation shifts continuously, but it is up to us to define the dream, and to shape it.

I have no doubt that our shared dream is of a world where you can love who you choose to love, without fear or embarrassment; where the colour of your skin does not matter; where you can worship in your way, or not worship, if that is your choice. A world where our sameness is more important than our differentness - where you can be you and I can be me and we care for each other.

We became the first country in the world to include a sexual orientation protection clause in our Constitution to ensure the rights of all people. Consequently, LGBT people took pride of place as full and equal members of our society. It filled many of us with immense pride, but it was a hard battle and there was considerable opposition to it from some quarters.

These rights are now firmly included in our Constitution, because they belong there and because it is right for them to be there. We recognise that we have not yet reached our destination. We are still on the journey and we still have a very long way to go.

So, as much as I would like to, I cannot promise you that wherever you go in South Africa, as LGBT people, that you will be accepted by everyone. What I can promise you is that you will experience a warmth and a depth of human belonging that you are unlikely to find anywhere else on the planet. I can't promise you that you won't

experience prejudice, or racism, or sexism or homophobia. But what I can promise you is that you will be treated respectfully as a fellow traveller on this, our human journey.

What I can say without any shadow of a doubt is that, as a country, we need you and want you here. Not because of who we are, but because of who you are. Because of the struggles you have faced. Because of the brave (or even the ordinary) lives that you lead. We need you because you bring experience and challenge into our lives – and we have never been afraid of either. We need you because, in many instances, you bring a new way of looking at things – a new and exciting way of living which has always been part of our South African life, but frequently ignored, or disparaged, or violently rejected. We want you here to be a light to the millions of LGBT people in our country, so that wherever they are, they might know that they are not alone – that they are quite normal and that they should live their lives unafraid. For that is the kind of country we are trying to build.

We have a concept here, which is part of the reason why we did not destroy each other. It is a concept called “*Ubuntu*” and it is embedded in the soil and it lives in the heart of every South African. It is this: we are who we are, because of others. It is an affirmation that I am a person, because of other persons. I can promise you that you will experience it!

And that is the reason why we included that clause in our Constitution. Because we cannot be whole, if another person is excluded. It is a wonderful thing indeed.

We are fortunate to have the most amazing and unique World Heritage Sites in our country. Here in the Western Cape, you can enjoy the glory of the Cape Floral protected areas, which boasts the greatest floral diversity on the planet. Robben Island stands as testimony to our troubled and divided past – but also as a beacon of hope, courage and resilience – paving the way to democracy in 1994.

We go back to the beginning of time, when a meteor hit the earth at Vredefort and brought about some of the most important climate changes the world has known, until now. We have the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and the majesty of the Maloti-Drakensberg Park, in Kwazulu-Natal; we have the Richtersveld Cultural and botanical landscape in the Northern Cape. And perhaps, most importantly, the place where the umbilical cord of our collective ancestors lies buried, with the astonishing Hominid fossil finds of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site in Gauteng.

It is because of this, our common humanity, that we can open our arms to you and welcome you to our shores. For you are at home! This is the place we all come from. Whether you are Lesbian, or Gay, or Bisexual, black or white or any shade of colour, this incredible continent of Africa is your home. This is where we all come from, whatever journey we have travelled and wherever we find ourselves today.

This continent is our collective home. Let us celebrate our belonging to the family of humankind, and let us rejoice that I am who I am through you. And you are who you are, because of others. Let us celebrate this wonderful thing called "*Ubuntu*".

And so, on behalf of the people of South Africa, I welcome you. I cherish you. I value you. I look for the things you can teach me about being human. With you, I long for the day when we are all one, whatever our race, or gender, or sexual orientation.

Let us walk the next steps together on this wonderful and exciting journey.

I thank you.