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Tracking South Africa's 'Left-Behind' Tourism Spaces

ABSTRACT

An important research challenge for tourism geographers is the mapping and interpretation of the structure of the tourism space economy. In recent scholarship on uneven regional development much attention surrounds the application of the concepts of 'left-behindedness' and of 'left-behind spaces'. In this research one critical dimension of the unevenness of the tourism space economy is explored, namely the identification and features of the least visited spaces. Using a comprehensive database of tourism trips and tourism spend for 213 South African local authorities the analysis points to the existence of multiple 'left-behind' tourism spaces in the country. The geographical distribution of these spaces mainly is concentrated in the province of Northern Cape. The differentiated structure of these spaces shows the largest group is dominated by travel for purposes of visits to friends and relatives. Beyond that group are, however, a small number of leisure dominated spaces. Although the volume of total trips and tourism spend occurring in such leisure dominated spaces is small, tourism assumes a critical role in local economies. To advance further the understanding of the least visited or 'left-behind' tourism spaces it is suggested local case studies are required.

Keywords: 'left-behind spaces'; uneven tourism development; least visited areas; South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

An understanding of the complexion and dynamics of tourism space economies represents a significant research issue for tourism scholars (Hall, 2012; Kang et al., 2014). The structure of tourism space economies reflects the geographical distribution of tourism assets within a country and combined with the decision-making behaviour and flows of tourists for different purposes of travel such as leisure, business, health, religion or visits to friends and relatives (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). The relevance of comprehending changes occurring in tourism space economies is acknowledged by government policy-makers because of tourism's potential contribution towards addressing problems of uneven or unbalanced regional development (Kang et al., 2014; Karagöz et al., 2022). Further, tourism can be a critical vehicle for place-based local development planning (Rogerson, 2014). In the specific context of sub-Saharan Africa, Ahebwa and Novelli (2014) stress that an improved understanding of the spatial distribution of tourism contributes an evidence base for the making of better-informed national development policies. Accordingly, over the past two decades, several dimensions of the geographical structuring of tourism economies and their implications for policy-makers – national, regional and local – have been under investigation (Tosun et al., 2003; Wen & Sinha, 2009; Goh et al., 2014; Li et al., 2016; Romão & Saito, 2017; Siakwah, 2018; Karagöz et al., 2022; Kiss et al., 2025).

The most critical finding from international research on tourism space economies concerns the unevenness of tourism development and its ramifications for national, regional and local economies. For example, in an examination of unbalanced development in Greece, Drakakis (2022) pinpoints the country's tourism space economy is dominated consistently by metropolitan municipalities which are the most prosperous and economically advanced areas. The uneven geographical development of tourism is therefore a policy challenge which is faced in many countries. In South Africa a number of investigations, mainly conducted by geographers, have mapped out the contours of the tourism economy (Visser, 2007; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2020; Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). The central conclusion of these studies is of the highly polarized character of the tourism space economy with the benefits of tourism development in South Africa concentrated upon only a small number of localities and prosperous regions. Against this backdrop the aim here is to turn the focus away from the prosperous and most researched tourism localities of South Africa. Instead, the analysis falls upon the peripheral spaces of the country, to identify the least visited tourism spaces of South Africa and their essential local tourism characteristics. In certain respects, the study revisits and extends in greater detail a preliminary analysis of South Africa's least visited tourism areas which was produced nearly a decade ago (Rogerson, 2017).

The research is approached through the theoretical lens of 'left-behindedness' and of 'left-behind spaces'. According to Benner et al. (2024, p. 237) "scholarly work in economic geography and regional science has recently seen a renewed interest in spatial inequalities, driven significantly by the debate on 'left-behind' places". Arguably, the phenomenon of left-behindedness is multi-dimensional (Perancho et al., 2025). Among the key identifiers of 'left-behind' spaces are relative

economic under-performance and decline, elevated levels of poverty and disadvantage as compared to national averages, out-migration, poor health, limited investment in economic infrastructure and reduced service provision (MacKinnon et al., 2022). As documented by Todes and Turok (2018) in terms of the uneven national landscape of regional economic development in South Africa spatial inequalities are starkly in evidence. Many of the identifiers of left-behind spaces are defining features for economically distressed spaces in South Africa, marginalised areas of the country where local economies often are based on community services, remittances and government social grants (Rogerson & Nel, 2016; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). Among critical problems surrounding tourism development in such areas are infrastructural shortcomings, corruption and the weak state (if not collapse) of local government as well as lack of capacity for pursuing local economic development or tourism planning (Dlomo & Rogerson, 2021; Giddy et al., 2022; Rogerson & Sixaba, 2022).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section examines how a flurry of international academic debates concerning regional development have been (re-)ignited by the concept of 'left-behind places' around which Benner et al. (2024, p. 238) observes a "high tide of interest". Following the literature review, a brief discussion on methods and data is given before the results section. The findings identify and present a profile of South Africa's least visited tourism spaces which are 'left-behind' in terms of the country's uneven and polarized tourism economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For several decades, research on the challenges of lagging regions experiencing economic decline as an outcome of uneven geographical development has been a vibrant theme in international regional development scholarship (Pike et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2021; Hudson, 2022; Fransham et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2022;). As pointed out by MacKinnon et al. (2022), during the past 30 years the understanding of spatial inequalities and the language which is applied to describe the 'symptoms' and 'remedies' has changed. Following renewed concern about spatial inequalities in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the term 'left behind' has become particularly prominent in recent academic discourse. Broadly, the concept of 'left behind' places references localities which are characterised by economic stagnation or decline. In the environment of the Global North these refer both to former industrial areas beset by problems of de-industrialisation as well as marginalised rural areas (Tomaney et al., 2021).

MacKinnon et al. (2024) aver that concerns about spatial inequality burgeoned most especially after the 'Great Recession' or 2008 global financial crisis. This concern is indexed by the growing stream of research conducted in the USA, Europe and especially in the UK (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Liddle et al., 2022; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2023; Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pruitt, 2024; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2024; Royer & Leibert, 2025). Houlden et al. (2024, p. 1) maintain that in "the UK, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis and 2016 Brexit referendum, the predicament of areas variously termed 'peripheralised', 'left behind' or 'places that don't matter' has emerged as a key topic". Indeed, across

several countries in the Global North, Leyshon (2021) identify the resurgence of uneven development as a political issue that triggered public policy debates as a response to voting patterns that mark out ‘geographies of discontent’ (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; De Ruyter et al., 2021; Lenzi & Perucca, 2021; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2021; Sanderson, 2024; Bernard et al., 2025; Adamiak et al., 2026). Economic geography is seen as an underpinning of a surge of political populism in ‘places that don’t matter’, or ‘left behind towns’ (Koeppen et al., 2021; Lenzi & Perucca, 2021; Leyshon, 2021; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2023; Hertrich & Brenner, 2025; Adamiak et al., 2026). For Sanderson (2024) such places are united through their discontent from being ‘left behind’ in terms of regional economic development. Accordingly, the spatial imaginery of ‘left-behind’ places gained traction for highlighting uneven spatial development as an explanatory cause of ‘geographies of discontent’ with left-behind places pushing a vengeance against more dynamic places because of feelings of abandonment from centres of power (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2021; Perancho et al., 2025).

As indicated, the core characteristics of ‘left-behind’ spaces are relative economic under-performance and decline, elevated levels of poverty and disadvantage as compared to national averages, out-migration, poor health, limited investment in economic infrastructure and reduced service provision. According to MacKinnan et al. (2022) these spaces manifest a combination of features namely economic disadvantage, low living standards, often population decline, lack of infrastructure and political neglect. For Tups et al. (2024, p.1219) such spaces “epitomise the geographical and structural consequences of protracted processes of economic decline and peripheralisation that accompany uneven accumulation processes”. Left-behind places are spaces of systematic disadvantage and arrested development. This said, the fundamental problems of ‘left-behind places’ are not new, rather they have accumulated (and been ignored) for several decades (van Meeteren & Smit, 2025). The term ‘left-behind’ is therefore a new spatial terminology for interpreting a long-established phenomenon which relates to declining or struggling places that often, if not usually, are overlooked by policy-makers mainly concerned with issues of agglomeration and innovation (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024).

Essentially the challenges of ‘left behind’ spaces represent “a contemporary manifestation of long-standing processes of capitalist uneven development” (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 41). Halford et al. (2025) maintain that the long-term left-behind places often confront significant development challenges because of entrenched path-dependencies. MacKinnon et al. (2024) situate the roots of ‘left-behindedness’ in structural and inter-related processes of metropolitanisation and peripheralisation. The latter is traditionally associated with remote (usually rural) regions whereas metropolitanisation classically refers to the selective concentration of economic activities in large cities (Gaussier et al., 2003). The framework of peripheralisation conceives the relationship between core areas and peripheries as dynamic and changing over time (Royer & Leibert, 2025). Unquestionably, social, economic and political exclusion can reinforce peripheralisation (Fuerst-Bjeliš et al., 2025). Spatial inequalities thus are shown to be inextricably bound to asymmetries in geographies of power which allow some spaces to move ahead at the expense of others (Ek & Rauhut, 2024). In a useful

contribution which is based on research undertaken in Germany, Royer and Leibert (2025) assert that recent literature underscores the diversity of 'left-behind' places and their pathways of development and decline.

Arguably, the term 'left-behind places', as it has evolved in Anglo-American discourse, is close in meaning and usage to the earlier concepts of 'marginal regions' and 'marginality' (Fuerst-Bjeliš et al., 2025). For some observers the concept remains, however, somewhat 'fuzzy' and lacks clear definition. For example, Houlden et al. (2024) maintains that despite its increasing application, the term 'left behind' remains a contested concept which is applied at different geographical scales of analysis including regions, cities and even at the level of neighbourhoods. Despite its lack of definitional clarity, 'left behind' evokes forms of spatial peripherality whether economic (lack of jobs, tourism), social (political disaffection) or material (lack of infrastructure). Fuerst-Bjeliš et al. (2025) maintain that the concept of 'left-behind' places strengthens the classic core-periphery theoretical model and in so doing assists our understanding of why in economic, social, cultural and political dimensions certain localities or places are relatively privileged whilst others are structurally disadvantaged and appear locked into a dependent status.

Tups et al. (2024) contend a geographical bias exists in the application of the concept of left-behindedness. The need is for the extension and application of the concept beyond its Global North heartland. One direction for moving forward and deepening research around left-behind spaces is for an increased attention to, and integration of, Global South perspectives (Phelps, 2025). It is evident the terminology of left-behindedness already has journeyed into the Global South environment where it has witnessed relevant application in pioneer investigations (Matamanda et al., 2025; Phelps et al., 2025). Trejo-Nieto (2025) reflects on the manifestations left-behindedness in Mexico in light of European experiences. Scholvin and Lupin (2026) point to the specificities of left-behind spaces in Latin America and potentially the need for refining the concept of 'left-behind' spaces for the specificities of the Global South. In one Zambian study geographical remoteness and climate challenges are acknowledged as playing an important role in explaining the 'left behind' character of certain places. Nevertheless, it was argued that across much of sub-Saharan Africa one should not overlook the chronic underinvestment and persistent disconnections of many 'left-behind' rural hinterland areas from basic infrastructure and markets (Phelps et al., 2025). In South Africa there has been a recent take-up and application of the terminology of 'left-behindedness' and 'left-behind spaces'. Rogerson and Rogerson (2025) interrogate the historical evolution of the former apartheid-created Bantustans and especially their development trajectory in the post-apartheid period within the framework of 'left-behind' spaces. Mpungose and Myeni (2025) interpret geographical outbreaks of violence and discontent in South Africa through a narrative of neoliberalism and the making of left-behind places. Within extant South African tourism scholarship, some attention is given to 'left-behindedness' also in examining post COVID-19 recovery in rural tourism (Rogerson & Sixaba, 2022).

METHODS

The analysis is based upon the tourism component of the private sector S&P Global South Africa Regional eXplorer database. This tourism data set is a subset of a consolidated platform of integrated databases that, in the absence of official establishment and enterprise surveys, provides the most useful data available for planning purposes at a sub-national level in South Africa, with information provided down to the local municipal scale. The information base is built upon the regular collection and triangulation of primary information which is extracted by S&P Global from a wide span of both official and non-government sources. The data is reworked in order to ensure consistency across variables as well as via the application of national and subnational verification tests in order to ensure that the economic model is consistent for the measurement of business activity in South Africa. The S&P data is accessible only through payment for a specified 'data dump' from the organization.

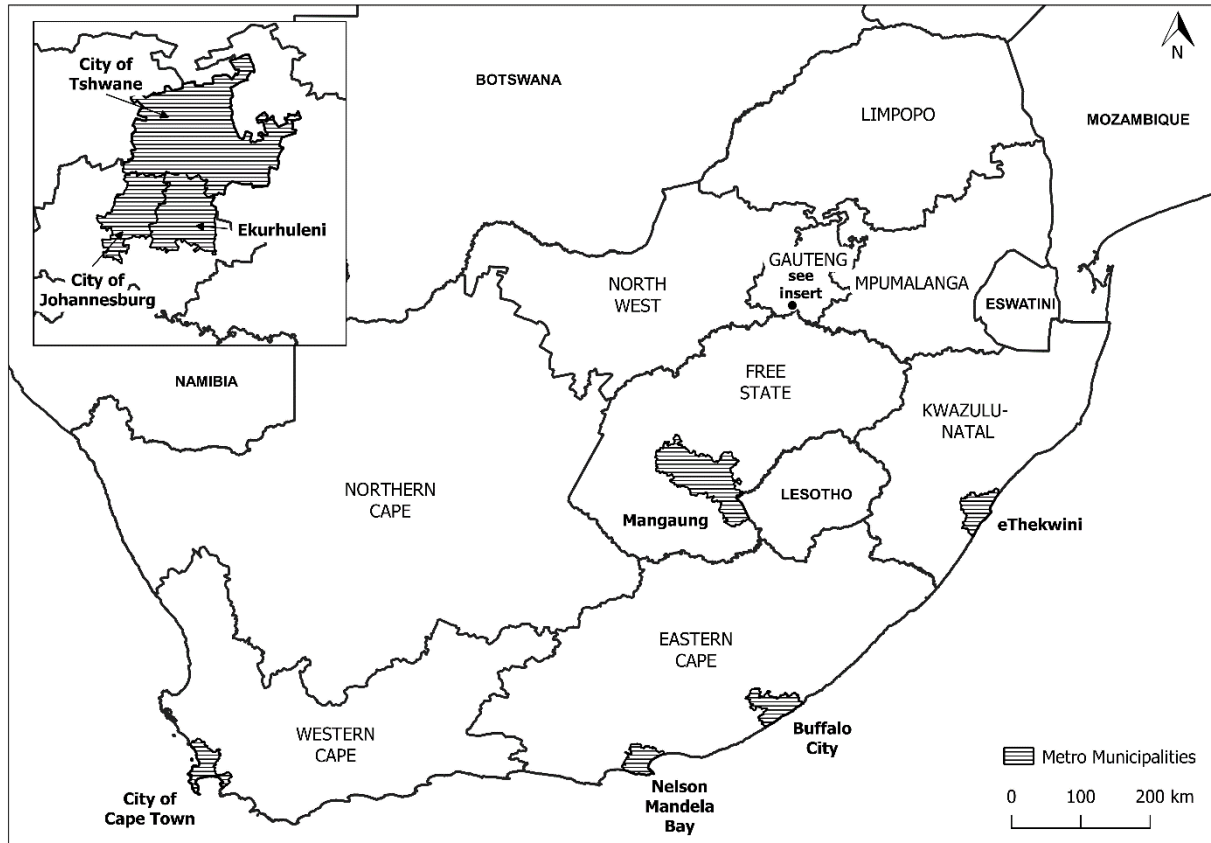
As demonstrated in previous research, the local tourism base of the Regional eXplorer data set is especially useful for spatial analysis and understanding the changing structure of the tourism space economy (Rogerson, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2020, 2021). The data set includes information on the tourism performance of all South African municipalities in terms of the following variables, *inter alia*, the volume of tourism trips differentiated by primary purpose of trip (leisure, business, visiting friends and relatives and other); tourism trips by origin of trip (domestic or international), bednights by origin of tourist; calculation of tourism spend; and, the contribution of tourism to GDP. The database exists from 2001 and formerly was known as the IHS Global Insight data. The data set is constantly updated with adjustments made to reflect official changes made in municipal administrative boundaries as well as the availability of new data. As a result of the refinement and updating of the database over a period of two decades (including the correction of minor errors) as well as several shifts taking place in municipal administrative boundaries in South Africa it must be understood that direct comparison is not enabled with certain tourism data used in earlier studies (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021).

This research draws upon the 2025 iteration which provides the historical data as amended going back to 2001. The data covers all South Africa's nine provinces (Figure 1). The comprehensive data base includes 213 spatial units. These comprise South Africa's eight defined metropolitan areas (Buffalo City, Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, eThekweni, Johannesburg, Mangaung, Nelson Mandela Bay, and Tshwane) and 205 local municipalities. The large metropolitan areas collectively are the leading poles of attraction in the South African tourism space economy (Figure 1). The focus of analysis here is necessarily upon the remaining cohort of local municipalities outside the metropolitan areas and geographically spread across the country's nine provinces.

The identification of South Africa's 'left-behind' tourism spaces is conducted through the extraction and analysis of total trip and tourism spend data from the S&P Global base. A more detailed profile follows in terms of a differentiation of trips by purpose of travel for the country's least visited tourism places. Further insight is given by examination of data concerning tourism's contribution to local

GDP. The extracted set of data set from the S&P Global database was compiled using Excel and presented below through the use of descriptive statistics.

Figure 1. South Africa's Nine Provinces and Eight Metropolitan Areas



Source: Author

RESULTS

The results are organized in the following manner into two sub-sections. Baseline data on total trips and total tourism spend are examined in order to identify the left-behind tourism spaces and their geography. This is followed by an analysis of the structure of the tourism economies of these spaces and their importance to local economies as a whole.

Identifying the Left Behind Tourism Spaces

Table 1 provides the macro-picture of the 30 least visited or left-behind tourism spaces at the local municipality level in South Africa for 2002, 2010, 2018 and 2024. The municipalities are ranked based on their share of the national total of total trips which is detailed respectively for the four study years. In 2002, the base year, the World Summit on Sustainable Development took place in Johannesburg, the country's largest city. 2010 is the year that the tourism economy of South Africa was boosted by

the hosting of the FIFA Soccer World Cup. 2018 represents one of the final ‘normal’ travel years before the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the South African tourism economy (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Finally, 2024 is the most recent year for which data is available. It marks a step towards a new ‘normal’ in the national tourism economy with signs of the post-COVID recovery of tourism flows in South Africa both in terms of domestic and international tourism.

Table 1. Total Trips: Ranked 30 Local Municipalities with Lowest Total Trips 2002, 2010, 2018, and 2024.

Rank	2002 (% National Total)	2010 (% National Total)	2018 (% National Total)	2024 (% National Total)
1	!Kheis (NC) (0.016%)	!Kheis (NC) (0.016%)	!Kheis (NC) (0.015%)	!Kheis (NC) (0.016%)
2	Renosterberg (NC) (0.017%)	Laingsburg (WC) (0.018%)	Magareng (NC) (0.021%)	Magareng (NC) (0.018%)
3	Magareng (NC) (0.019%)	Magareng (NC) (0.024%)	Thembelihle (NC) (0.024%)	Laingsburg (WC) (0.024%)
4	Laingsburg (WC) (0.023%)	Thembelihle (NC) (0.024%)	Renosterberg (NC) (0.025%)	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.029%)
5	Thembelihle (NC) (0.024%)	Prince Albert (WC) (0.024%)	Laingsburg (WC) (0.026%)	Thembelihle (NC) (0.030%)
6	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.024%)	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.025%)	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.028%)	Renosterberg (NC) (0.032%)
7	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.025%)	Renosterberg (NC) (0.025%)	Prince Albert (WC) (0.037%)	Prince Albert (WC) (0.034%)
8	Prince Albert (WC) (0.030%)	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.026%)	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.040%)	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.038%)
9	Richtersveld (NC) (0.035%)	Tsantsabane (NC) (0.030%)	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.046%)	Dikgatlong (NC) (0.043%)
10	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.040%)	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.034%)	Tsantsabane (NC) (0.047%)	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.045%)
11	Tsantsabane (NC) (0.040%)	Richtersveld (NC) (0.035%)	Richtersveld (NC) (0.049%)	Tsantsabane (NC) (0.046%)
12	Kareeberg (NC) (0.041%)	Kareeberg (NC) (0.040%)	Dikgatlong (NC) (0.050%)	Richtersveld (NC) (0.048%)
13	Siyathemba (NC) (0.044%)	Siyathemba (NC) (0.042%)	Kareeberg (NC) (0.062%)	Kannaland (WC) (0.049%)
14	Dikgatlong (NC) (0.046%)	Tswelopele (FS) (0.045%)	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.065%)	Kareeberg (NC) (0.057%)
15	Tswelopele (FS) (0.053%)	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.049%)	Tswelopele (FS) (0.065%)	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.063%)
16	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.054%)	Dikgatlong (NC) (0.060%)	Phokwane (NC) (0.071%)	Phokwane (NC) (0.066%)
17	Phokwane (NC) (0.066%)	Hantam (NC) (0.061%)	Siyathemba (NC) (0.079%)	Tswelopele (FS) (0.076%)
18	Siyancuma (NC) (0.068%)	Siyancuma (NC) (0.065%)	Ubuntu (NC) (0.081%)	Matzikama (WC) (0.076%)
19	Hantam (NC) (0.069%)	Mohokare (FS) (0.069%)	Mohokare (FS) (0.085%)	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.077%)
20	Matzikama (WC) (0.076%)	Ngqushwa (EC) (0.074%)	Hantam (NC) (0.087%)	Hantam (NC) (0.087%)
21	Mohokare (FS) (0.079%)	Matzikama (WC) (0.078%)	Ngqushwa (EC) (0.087%)	Siyancuma (NC) (0.091%)
22	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.082%)	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.082%)	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.087%)	Swellendam (WC) (0.094%)
23	Gamagara (NC) (0.091%)	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.082%)	Sakhisizwe (EC) (0.088%)	Siyathemba (NC) (0.096%)
24	Ubuntu (NC) (0.108%)	Phokwane (NC) (0.084%)	Matzikama (WC) (0.089%)	Ga-Segonyana (NC) (0.099%)

25	Ngqushwa (EC) (0.112%)	Gamagara (NC) (0.084%)	Gamagara (NC) (0.099%)	Ubuntu (NC) (0.102%)
26	Sakhisizwe (EC) (0.112%)	Sakhisizwe (EC) (0.090%)	Ephraim Mogale (LIM) (0.099%)	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.104%)
27	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.114%)	Ubuntu (NC) (0.093%)	Ga-Segonyana (NC) (0.102%)	Ephraim Mogale (LIM) (0.104%)
28	Nama Khoi (NC) (0.115%)	Umzimvubu (EC) (0.094%)	Makhuduthamaga (LIM) (0.102%)	Makhuduthamaga (LIM) (0.104%)
29	Swellendam (WC) (0.117%)	Swellendam (WC) (0.097%)	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.102%)	Mohokare (FS) (0.106%)
30	Bergrivier (WC) (0.123%)	Nama Khoi (NC) (0.102%)	Umzimvubu (EC) (0.105%)	Gamagara (NC) (0.109%)

Source: Author compilation based on unpublished S&P Global database. Note: EC Eastern Cape; FS Free State; LIM Limpopo; NC Northern Cape; and WC Western Cape.

Table 1 reveals the results for trip data which incorporate both international as well as domestic trips. This said, as shown elsewhere, the volume of domestic trips overwhelmingly exceeds that of international travel especially in the non-borderland peripheral areas of the South African tourism space economy (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). For each local municipality the share of national total of trips is given. In terms of overall findings the extremely low volume of trips to these least visited 30 municipalities is evidenced by the fact that taken together the 30 municipalities shown on Table 1 account for less than 2 percent of the national total of tourism trips across all the four years under scrutiny.

The geographical unevenness of the tourism space economy is demonstrated by the strong concentration of least visited tourism spaces in the province of Northern Cape. Of South Africa's nine provinces the Northern Cape is distinguished as being the largest in size but smallest in population. As is apparent from an examination of Table 2 the largest numbers of 'left behind' tourism spaces are situated in Northern Cape with a consistent pattern of eight of the bottom ten local municipalities there as ranked by total trip data. Turning the focus to the wider cohort of the bottom 30 local municipalities with the lowest numbers of recorded tourism trips, the dominance of the Northern Cape is once again reinforced. Of the 30 least visited local municipalities, this province accounts for 20 in 2002, 20 in 2010, 19 in 2018, and 20 in 2024. Infrastructural shortages and physical inaccessibility are critical challenges to tourism development in such spaces. These remote, arid and low populated areas of Northern Cape province therefore constitute a major segment of what would be termed 'peripheral spaces' by tourism scholars (see Schmallegger et al., 2010).

Beyond the Northern Cape there is representation in the lists of bottom 10 local municipalities in the adjoining areas of the Western Cape. As shown on Table 2 broadening the focus to the 30 least visited municipalities results in the regular inclusion of remote areas of the Eastern Cape, Free State and Limpopo into the ranked lists for the four study years. In 2010 only there is a listing of two local municipalities in KwaZulu province. It is observed the grouping of bottom 30 local municipalities on total trip data incorporates additional areas of the Western Cape province. Of South Africa's nine

provinces there is no representation in the listings on Table 1 for Gauteng (South Africa’s economic heartland focused on Johannesburg), Mpumalanga (which adjoins the iconic nature-tourism attraction of Kruger National Park) and North West which is close to the tourism markets of Gauteng and boasts the internationally acclaimed resort and entertainment gambling hub of Sun City.

Table 2. Local Municipalities by Province: Lowest Volume of Total Trips

	EC	FS	GAU	KZN	LIM	MP	NC	NW	WC
2002 Bottom 10	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	2
2002 Bottom 30	3	2	0	0	0	0	20	0	5
2010 Bottom 10	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	2
2010 Bottom 30	1	4	0	2	0	0	20	0	3
2018 Bottom 10	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	2
2018 Bottom 30	4	2	0	0	2	0	19	0	3
2024 Bottom 10	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	2
2024 Bottom 30	1	2	0	0	2	0	20	0	5

Source: Author Compilation. Note: EC Eastern Cape; FS Free State; GAU Gauteng; KZN KwaZulu-Natal; LIM Limpopo; MP Mpumalanga; NC Northern Cape; NW North West; and, WC Western Cape.

Arguably, the best single index of the impact and significance of tourism activity is total tourism spend. Table 3 provides the overall picture of South African local municipalities in terms of tourism spend data for 2002, 2010, 2018 and 2024. Once again, the 30 municipalities are ranked based on their calculated share of the national total of total tourism spend for the four study years. In all four years the share of national tourism spend in South Africa which is collectively accounted for by the 30 lowest tourism spend local municipalities is less than 2 percent throughout the time period covered in this investigation. Not surprisingly, with only minor exceptions, there is a close correspondence in the ranked listings of municipalities by total spend as for total trips. In particular, the ranking on total spend highlights the ‘left-behind’ tourism spaces in the Northern Cape province. Table 4 confirms the peripherality of Northern Cape in the tourism space economy of South Africa. In addition, however, it identifies the limited tourism spend in certain pockets of several other provinces, including remoter parts of Limpopo, North West, Eastern Cape, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal. Only Gauteng and Mpumalanga have no representation of local municipalities in those provinces according to the listing of 30 municipalities based on tourism spend.

Table 3. Total Spend: Ranked 30 Local Municipalities with Lowest Total Spend 2002, 2010, 2018, and 2024.

Rank	2002 (% National Total)	2010 (% National Total)	2018 (% National Total)	2024 (% National Total)
1	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.0177%)	Laingsburg (WC) (0.0279%)	!Kheis (NC) (0.0258%)	!Kheis (NC) (0.0185%)
2	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.0190%)	!Kheis (NC) (0.0280%)	Thembelihle (NC) (0.0280%)	Thembelihle (NC) (0.0189%)
3	Tokologo (FS) (0.0218%)	Kagisano/Molopo (NW) (0.0285%)	Magareng (NC) (0.0299%)	Renosterberg (NC)(0.0208%)
4	Renosterberg (NC) (0.0244%)	Thembelihle (NC) (0.0299%)	Renosterberg (NC) (0.0304%)	Laingsburg (WC) (0.0297%)
5	Thembelihle (NC) (0.0244%)	Magareng (NC) (0.0300%)	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.0327%)	Magareng (NC)(0.0316%)
6	!Kheis (NC) (0.0250%)	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.0342%)	Kagisano/Molopo (NW) (0.0343%)	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.0318%)
7	Magareng (NC) (0.0250%)	Tokologo (FS) (0.0348%)	Tokologo (FS) (0.0365%)	Kagisano/Molopo (NW) (0.0331%)
8	Kagisano/Molopo (NW) (0.0259%)	Prince Albert (WC) (0.0361%)	Kareeberg (NC) (0.0409%)	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.0372%)
9	Laingsburg (WC) (0.0368%)	Renosterberg (NC) (0.0363%)	Khai-Ma (NC) (0.0425%)	Prince Albert (WC) (0.0404%)
10	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.0384%)	Kgatelopele (NC) (0.0371%)	Prince Albert (WC) (0.0436%)	Kareeberg (NC)(0.0430%)
11	Kareeberg (NC) (0.0422%)	Letsemeng (FS) (0.0400%)	Siyathemba (NC) (0.0508%)	Mamusa (NW) (0.0449%)
12	Siyathemba (NC) (0.0440%)	Mamusa (NW) (0.0418%)	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.0534%)	Siyathemba (NC) (0.0485%)
13	Mamusa (NW) (0.0486%)	Kareeberg (NC) (0.0443%)	Mamusa (NW) (0.0568%)	Tokologo (FS)(0.0527%)
14	Prince Albert (WC) (0.0520%)	Siyathemba (NC) (0.0488%)	Tsantsabane (NC) (0.0596%)	Kamiesberg (NC) (0.0550%)
15	Greater Taung (NW) (0.0538%)	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN) (0.0499%)	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.0623%)	Tsantsabane (NC) (0.0551%)
16	Lekwa-Teemane (NW) (0.0580%)	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.0517%)	Greater Taung (NW) (0.0627%)	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.0555%)
17	Siyancuma (NC) (0.0648%)	Kamiesberg (NC)(0.0520%)	Letsemeng (FS) (0.0681%)	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN) (0.0627%)
18	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.0658%)	Tswelopele (FS) (0.0525%)	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN) (0.0716%)	Dikgatlong (NC) (0.0633%)
19	Richtersveld (NC) (0.0689%)	Karoo Hoogland (NC) (0.0549%)	Richtersveld (NC) (0.0762%)	Greater Taung (NW) (0.0647%)
20	Letsemeng (FS) (0.0773%)	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.0573%)	Tswelopele (FS) (0.0761%)	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.0662%)
21	Hantam (NC) (0.0862%)	Greater Taung (NW) (0.0579%)	Makhuduthamaga (LIM) (0.0809%)	Letsemeng (FS)(0.0674%)
22	Dannhauser (KZN) (0.0963%)	Richtersveld (NC) (0.0589%)	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.0845%)	Gamagara (NC) (0.0721%)
23	Matzikama (WC) (0.0978%)	Ephraim Mogale (LIM) (0.0599%)	Ga-Segonyana (NC) (0.0861%)	Ga-Segonyana (NC) (0.0732%)
24	Ntabankulu (EC) (0.1014%)	Mohokare (FS) (0.0601%)	Ephraim Mogale (LIM) (0.0931%)	Richtersveld (NC) (0.0733%)
25	Joe Morolong (NC) (0.1115%)	Hantam (NC) (0.0602%)	Phokwane (NC) (0.0945%)	Phokwane (NC) (0.0775%)

26	Gamagara (NC) (0.1226%)	Gamagara (NC) (0.0631%)	Gamagara (NC) (0.0948%)	Ephraim Mogale (LIM) (0.0795%)
27	Ga-Segonyana (NC) (0.1323%)	Makhuduthamaga (LIM) (0.0658%)	Mohokare (FS) (0.0947%)	uMzimkhulu (KZN) (0.0828%)
28	Ephraim Mogale (LIM) (0.1353%)	Ga-Segonyana (NC) (0.0665%)	Greater Tubatse/ Fetakgomo (LIM) (0.1269%)	Matzikama (WC) (0.0868%)
29	uMzimkhulu (KZN) (0.1382%)	uMzimkhulu (KZN) (0.0708%)	Matzikama (WC) (0.1289%)	Tswelopele (FS) (0.0888%)
30	Sakhisizwe (EC) (0.1404%)	Matzikama (WC) (0.0719%)	Hantam (NC) (0.1313%)	Makhuduthamaga (LIM) (0.0892%)

Source: Author compilation based on unpublished S&P. Global data base. Note: EC Eastern Cape; FS Free State; KZN KwaZulu-Natal; LIM Limpopo; NC Northern Cape; NW North West and, WC Western Cape.

Table 4. Local Municipalities by Province: Lowest Volume of Total Spend

	EC	FS	GAU	KZN	LIM	MP	NC	NW	WC
2002 Bottom 10	0	1	0	0	0	0	7	1	1
2002 Bottom 30	2	2	0	2	1	0	16	4	3
2010 Bottom 10	0	1	0	0	0	0	6	1	2
2010 Bottom 30	1	4	0	2	2	0	15	3	3
2018 Bottom 10	0	1	0	0	0	0	7	1	1
2018 Bottom 30	0	4	0	1	3	0	17	3	2
2024 Bottom 10	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	2
2024 Bottom 30	1	3	0	2	2	0	16	3	3

Source: Author Compilation. Note: EC Eastern Cape; FS Free State; GAU Gauteng; KZN KwaZulu-Natal; LIM Limpopo; MP Mpumalanga; NC Northern Cape; NW North West; and WC Western Cape.

Tourism Structure and Local Contribution

In understanding the structure of the tourism economies of South Africa’s left-behind spaces it is useful to explore data relating to purpose of travel. The trip data can be differentiated into the four categories of leisure (or holiday), business, visits to friends and relatives, and ‘other’ travel mainly consisting of trips for reasons either of health or religion. Applying these categories, Table 5 provides insight into the major purpose of travel for each of the 30 local municipalities with the lowest recorded trips or total spend from tourism. The data is generated for three years, 2002, 2010 and 2024 with a profile shown for each of the municipalities. Several important points must be noted. First, is the overwhelming dominance of VFR travel in the reasons for travel to these municipalities. VFR dominance is evidenced for all the three years under investigation. Of the 30 local municipalities in 2002 22 were VFR dominant, in 2010 as many as 28 were VFR dominant, and for 2024 the most recent data reveals 25 of these 30 municipalities have VFR as the primary motivation for travel.

Table 5. Purpose of Trips: 30 Local Municipalities With Lowest Total Trips/Spend 2024

Municipality/Purpose	2002 L	2002 B	2002 VFR	2002 O	2010 L	2010 B	2010 VFR	2010 O	2024 L	2024 B	2024 VFR	2024 O
!Kheis (NC)	15.3	15.9	53.9	14.9	22.2	11.1	43.9	22.9	19.3	13.8	50.5	16.4
Magareng (NC)	9.1	14.9	66.0	10.0	10.6	4.8	74.4	10.3	9.1	25.3	60.7	4.9
Laingsburg (WC)	47.2	12.0	33.9	6.9	30.0	11.5	53.7	4.7	41.8	12.2	30.7	15.3
Kgatelopele (NC)	10.2	13.4	62.9	13.5	13.0	8.3	67.6	11.1	5.7	34.1	51.4	8.9
Thembelihle (NC)	20.5	12.1	51.9	15.5	16.3	7.1	70.3	6.2	9.6	27.5	61.3	1.6
Renosterberg (NC)	20.9	8.8	56.5	13.8	12.3	4.2	75.2	8.2	8.3	19.8	61.1	10.8
Prince Albert (WC)	50.0	15.3	27.5	7.2	33.3	14.6	47.1	4.9	29.9	13.3	29.2	27.6
Khai-Ma (NC)	35.3	9.1	54.1	1.4	28.8	4.0	58.6	8.6	16.9	14.5	67.4	1.2
Dikgatlong (NC)	13.0	8.2	64.1	14.8	10.1	3.7	77.2	9.0	8.7	20.5	58.5	12.3
Kamiesberg (NC)	50.1	14.7	32.4	2.8	46.8	7.6	44.7	0.9	24.4	28.4	45.2	2.0
Tsantsabane (NC)	15.2	10.1	58.8	15.9	19.8	9.5	58.3	12.4	6.9	21.6	62.3	9.1
Richtersveld (NC)	44.5	12.9	41.1	1.5	38.2	5.3	55.2	1.4	21.1	19.4	56.8	2.7
Kannaland (WC)	58.0	13.8	19.4	8.7	28.0	8.3	58.2	5.4	76.8	15.1	14.6	15.3
Kareeberg (NC)	23.3	7.6	55.0	14.1	16.4	4.2	67.1	12.3	11.0	15.9	68.5	4.5
Karoo Hoogland (NC)	45.1	12.1	41.5	1.3	39.5	6.1	53.1	1.2	20.4	24.3	54.3	1.0
Phokwane (NC)	13.1	5.4	67.0	14.4	11.6	5.7	72.7	10.0	9.7	30.1	84.8	9.1
Tswelopele (FS)	5.9	5.4	71.7	17.1	9.1	6.8	73.9	10.2	19.1	12.4	60.5	8.7
Matzikama (WC)	41.5	9.1	41.1	8.3	35.2	8.3	49.4	7.1	63.0	11.3	24.0	1.7
Ntabankulu (EC)	8.3	0.8	81.3	9.6	8.2	2.8	77.5	1.9	13.4	1.9	64.3	20.5
Hantam (NC)	37.8	12.3	48.3	1.5	41.4	7.6	49.5	1.6	32.4	28.7	34.5	4.3
Siyancuma (NC)	17.3	6.6	63.8	12.2	16.6	5.1	68.4	9.8	10.0	20.8	63.9	5.3
Swellendam (WC)	59.2	9.0	23.0	8.8	53.4	10.0	30.3	6.3	69.0	12.0	10.4	8.5
Siyathemba (NC)	20.0	8.5	55.1	16.4	14.8	5.0	76.7	3.5	5.9	11.0	78.5	4.5
Ga-Segonyana (NC)	13.6	6.1	71.1	9.1	16.9	5.4	69.4	8.3	15.0	9.2	71.7	4.1
Ubuntu (NC)	23.3	6.4	62.2	8.0	20.7	4.6	72.2	2.5	12.2	21.5	65.2	1.2
Joe Morolong (NC)	7.5	0.5	84.7	7.3	8.4	3.0	85.0	3.6	6.0	7.1	78.8	8.1
Ephraim Mogale (LIM)	6.3	2.3	79.8	11.6	8.7	3.3	83.7	4.2	24.4	17.2	68.8	0.9
Makhuduthamaga (LIM)	4.1	1.9	83.5	10.5	5.9	2.9	86.0	5.2	5.7	5.3	84.5	4.6
Mohokare (FS)	20.1	10.0	65.2	4.7	18.4	8.0	70.3	3.4	16.7	16.4	65.2	1.7
Gamagara (NC)	18.8	10.0	60.7	10.4	15.0	5.9	71.4	7.7	13.0	9.4	68.8	8.8

Source: Author Compilation based on unpublished S&P Global database. Note: (1) Purpose of Travel L=Leisure, B=Business, VFR=Visiting Friends and Relatives; and, O=Other. (2) Bold type indicates the most important purpose of travel in any year for each local municipality.

For South Africa as a whole VFR is the leading element of travel mobilities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Arguably, because of their large populations the country's major metropolitan areas invariably attract major flows of domestic VFR travellers. Nevertheless, it is shown that the greatest relative importance of VFR occurs outside the cities and instead in small towns and rural areas where split households are common because of historical flows of (usually male) jobseekers into the cities. Much of domestic VFR travel in South Africa therefore is the 'other side of the coin' with return visits occurring to the small town or rural 'home' at various times of the year including for social obligations

such as family events and funerals (Nengovhela, et al., 2024, 2025). This pattern of mobility is signalled by the high levels of VFR travel recorded in remote local municipalities of Northern Cape, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Free State provinces (Table 5). In the most extreme cases, exemplified by the local municipalities of Joe Marolong in Northern Cape and Makhuduthamaga in Limpopo, VFR travel accounts for over 80 percent of tourism flows in these areas. By contrast, as a general pattern, the lowest proportion of VFR is recorded in the local municipalities of Western Cape province.

A second notable finding shown on Table 5 is of leisure being the dominant reason for travel to a handful of South Africa's 'left behind' tourism spaces. The broad pattern is for these low tourism trip or spend leisure-dominated local municipalities to be located in Western Cape province. In 2002 the tourism flows of eight of the 30 local municipalities were leisure dominated; of these five were found in Western Cape and three in Northern Cape province. In the 2010 and 2024 listings all the leisure-dominant local municipalities were in Western Cape; there were two such municipalities in 2010 and five in 2024. Across the over two decades covered by this investigation study only the two Western Cape municipalities of Prince Albert and Swellendam were consistently leisure dominated. Of note is that a small number of municipalities record a change in terms of which purpose of travel is dominant within certain years. Examples include for the period 2002-2010 leisure to VFR in Laingsburg, Richtersveld, Kannaland, Karoo Hoogland and Matzikama. During the period 2010-2024 the following shifts occurred, namely for Laingsburg VFR to return to leisure dominant; Kamiesberg leisure to VFR dominant; and, for both Kannaland and Matzikama a return from VFR to leisure as the dominant reason for travel. Overall, throughout the study period it is perhaps unsurprising to record that business travel is of limited importance. Likewise, these least visited places in South Africa are not attractive foci in terms of major travel flows for reasons of health or religion.

Finally, the question may be raised as to whether tourism is a sector of any significance in the country's 'left behind' tourism spaces. In this regard the S&P Global database allows an examination of the importance of tourism within the economies of local municipalities. Using calculations of the contribution of tourism spend to local Gross Domestic Product Table 6 provides the results of the data extraction for 30 such local municipalities across the period 2002-2024. For the majority of the least visited local municipalities the contribution of tourism to local GDP was smaller than the share contributed by tourism to national GDP. Nevertheless, Table 6 indicates that for several of South Africa's least visited or left-behind tourism spaces tourism is a critical sector in the economy of these local municipalities. Notwithstanding the small volume of recorded tourism trips and actual tourism spend, 11 of these local municipalities would be described as tourism-dependent in 2002, 10 in 2010 and rising to 11 in 2024. In all of these municipalities the share contributed to local GDP by tourism was higher than that for South Africa as a whole (Table 6). It is mainly those local municipalities where leisure trips rather than VFR are the primary purpose of travel that the tourism sector is vital for the economies of these localities. Examples are the municipalities of Laingsburg, Swellendam and Prince Albert in Western Cape province and the Northern Cape municipalities of Kamiesberg, Kareeberg, Ubuntu, or Karoo Hoogland. The case of Swellendam is unusual for it is a least visited destination which is patronised by international tourists as well as domestic travellers. As Donaldson (2021) highlights, the small town of Swellendam - the core of the local municipality - is a popular one-night stopover which serves (mainly) international travellers from Cape Town going on to stays in South Africa's coastal Garden Route.

Table 6. Tourism Spend as Contributor to Local GDP.

Municipality	2002	2010	2024
!Kheis (NC)	8.0	6.5	6.9
Magareng (NC)	7.3	5.4	5.0
Laingsburg (WC)	20.5	11.5	10.2
Kgatelopele (NC)	2.8	2.5	2.3
Thembelihle (NC)	7.1	5.6	6.4
Renosterberg (NC)	5.1	4.1	4.9
Prince Albert (WC)	12.9	8.3	9.7
Khai-Ma (NC)	6.6	5.2	6.8
Dikgatlong (NC)	5.1	3.9	4.0
Kamiesberg (NC)	12.4	10.1	14.5
Tsantsabane (NC)	2.9	2.5	2.4
Richtersveld (NC)	7.4	8.3	7.5
Kannaland (WC)	6.2	5.6	6.0
Kareeberg (NC)	12.5	8.1	8.0
Karoo Hoogland (NC)	11.3	8.6	11.7
Phokwane (NC)	5.5	4.5	4.7
Tswelopele (FS)	4.4	4.8	5.6
Matzikama (WC)	6.6	5.9	6.3
Ntabankulu (EC)	6.1	4.2	8.0
Hantam (NC)	10.9	7.8	7.4
Siyancuma (NC)	7.4	4.8	5.6
Swellendam (WC)	15.7	12.1	9.6
Siyathemba (NC)	5.9	4.7	5.8
Ga-Segonyana (NC)	2.9	2.6	4.3
Ubuntu (NC)	11.2	8.4	12.1
Joe Morolong (NC)	3.4	2.7	2.9
Ephraim Mogale (LIM)	11.4	7.7	12.3
Makhuduthamaga (LIM)	5.5	3.9	5.9
Mohokare (FS)	7.3	6.0	10.5
Gamagara (NC)	3.4	2.8	3.3

Source: Author Compilation based on unpublished S&P. Global database. Note: (1) For South Africa as a whole, total tourism spend as % of GDP was 7.9% for 2002, 6.5 for 2010 and 6.9 for 2024. (2) Bold indicates a contribution to local GDP which is more than the national share contributed by tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

Within contemporary conversations about regional economic development van Meeteren and Smit, (2025, p. 544) state “the issue of ‘left behind places’ looms large”. The growing literature on left behind spaces has triggered a laudable interest in understanding the unevenness of spatial development but so far with minimal attention to the unevenness of the development of tourism spaces. Nevertheless, as asserted recently by Hardy and Shoal (2025, p. 851) an understanding of “the essence of tourism flows is one of the fundamental undertakings of tourism geography research”.

Arguably, this study makes two contributions to tourism geography scholarship. First, the article offers a modest theoretical contribution by introducing the concept of left-behind spaces into tourism geographical debates. Moreover, the analysis and discussion is set within a Global South environment which Tups et al. (2024) isolate as in need of greater scholarly attention. Second, the paper makes a novel empirical contribution by mapping out the least visited tourism spaces in South Africa over a two-decade period and identifying certain continuities and changes in the patterns of low visitation. Indeed, this is the first research of its kind to isolate the geography of ‘left behind’ areas of the tourism space economy across a period of two decades. Future research that involves local case studies could advance further our understanding of the differentiated role of tourism in such areas.

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