

BUSINESS TOURISM IN SOUTH AFRICA: GROWTH AND UNEVEN GEOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Progress made in international business tourism scholarship largely has overlooked the spatial or geographical dimensions of business travel. The novel contribution of this article is to investigate the national performance of business tourism in South Africa between 2002 and 2024 and unpack the major geographical contours of business tourism. The leading business tourism destinations as well as those least visited business spaces are identified in an analysis of 213 local municipalities in South Africa. Key findings show that a major post-pandemic recovery has occurred of business travel in South Africa. In terms of geography, the results confirm that business tourism is spatially concentrated or polarized with business tourism dominating in the large metropolitan areas which host the bulk of the country's private sector commercial activity. Further, there is a strong performance of several business destinations associated with political and government activities, most importantly capital city functions at national and provincial level. The local level of business tourism is revealed as distinctive and influenced by an area's economic base. Case studies can illuminate the differentiated character of business tourism across levels in the national settlement system from major metropolitan centres, secondary centres and small towns.

Key words: business tourism, Global South, post-pandemic recovery, metropolitan dominance, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

According to Davidson (1994, p. 1) business tourism “represents one of the oldest forms of tourism”. The past quarter-century has witnessed the burgeoning of business travel and business tourism which consolidated its status as a vital segment of the global tourism economy (Davidson & Rogers, 2006; Celuch & Davidson, 2009; Biletska, 2011; Beaverstock et al., 2010; Rogers, 2013; Davidson, 2018, 2020). Robust growth has been recorded in flows of business tourism, both domestically and internationally, such that for certain countries it

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accounts for (at least) one-quarter of all tourism flows (Christie et al., 2014). Recently, Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) asserted that business tourism is an important activity worldwide and has triggered the interest of international organizations charged with managing it. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) identifies business tourism as a key market niche and tracked its post-pandemic trajectory. It is disclosed that 2022 marked a phase of slow uneven recovery such that business travel rebounded at a more laggard pace than leisure travel. This was a result variously of corporate policies, digitalization and the growth of hybrid events. Post-2022, however, the evidence is of a clear trend towards the accelerated 'bounce' of business travel as part of the sustained global expansion of tourism demand and most especially for international travel (World Tourism Organization, 2024).

Among several scholars Kourkourides and Frangopoulos (2024) pinpoint that following the pandemic the market for business tourism experienced a considerable upturn. These authors project a continued growth trajectory, not least because of the acknowledgement that the rebuilding of business contacts in the post-COVID era necessitates that businesses go beyond virtual meetings. Within tourism scholarship Liu et al. (2025, p. 989) assert therefore that the "advent of the post-pandemic era has brought renewed attention to business tourism". It is against this backcloth that the intention in this paper is to offer a modest contribution to African research scholarship concerning business tourism. Across sub-Saharan Africa, business tourism is acknowledged as critical for boosting tourism economies and with wider ramifications for economic and social development (Christie et al., 2014). It was pointed out that during the pre-pandemic era that Africa was "the only continent where the number of business tourists consistently exceeds leisure tourists" (Coles & Mitchell, 2009, p. 3). Except for a handful of mainstream leisure destinations, such as Botswana, Kenya or Mauritius, it remained that "business tourism is by far the most important tourism segment in many African countries" (Coles & Mitchell, 2009, p. 34).

The novel contribution of this paper is to provide insight into the *spatial* aspects of business tourism within one country and to examine the changing patterns of business trips from a demand-side perspective. It will be argued that in the corpus of existing literature on business tourism only sparse attention has been given to the geographical structure of the business tourism economy. South Africa provides the case study for this investigation. Three sections of material follow. The next section gives a contextual literature review situating the study within an overview of key directions and themes in international business tourism scholarship. After a brief discussion on data sources, the results section unpacks the patterns of business tourism within South Africa over the two-decade period which is covered by this investigation. Key identified themes are of polarization and the markedly uneven geographical development of business tourism across South Africa.

LITERATURE CONTEXT

In a classic text Davidson (1994, p. 1) delineates the scope of business tourism as centred upon "people travelling for purposes which are related to their work". None the less, as Biletska (2011, p. 185) reflects, business tourism "is complex and multifaceted". Travel for work purposes can assume several guises with the major formal categories those of general business travel,

meetings, conferences, exhibitions and incentive travel (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). Although this definition is contested, the concept of business tourism usually is applied to encompass independent business trips and travelling for purposes of meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions – MICE tourism (Davidson, 1994; Davidson & Rogers, 2006; Biletska, 2011). Mainly, business tourists are comprised of employees of large corporates, government, NGOs or development agencies. Some business tourists, such as contractors, could spend several weeks at a particular location whilst others return on a regular basis on multiple occasions throughout a year. Beyond work travel for MICE purposes, other aspects of business travel can incorporate visits to suppliers, clients, contractors or for research purposes (Rivett-Carnac, 2025).

Further extensions of the traditional definitions around business travel have been recognised in recent years. Among the most significant are the activities of digital nomads. Arguably, the rise of digital nomadism is a new phenomenon in business tourism. It refers to remote working by individuals who retain employment whilst travelling (Hannonen, 2020, 2025). Lacárcel (2025) maintains that digital nomads are capitalizing on the convergence of digitalization and labour flexibility. In addition to digital nomads a further broadening of the ‘Northern’ definition of business tourism is required from the perspective of the Global South. Unquestionably, the distinctive character of business tourism which occurs in the Global South must be acknowledged. This is an informal economy of business tourism which has both an international and domestic dimension. Scholarly attention to this overlooked facet of business tourism was alerted by the pioneer research on cross-border traders in West Africa conducted by Timothy and Teye (2005). Subsequent research undertaken across several African countries discloses the existence of an extensive informal business economy dominated by the activities of cross-border shoppers and traders as well as a parallel domestic informal economy of shoppers and traders (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025).

Academic research on business tourism concentrates on the Global North and is focused on the attraction of business events, MICE tourism, convention and exhibition centres, upmarket business hotels and recently the ramifications of COVID-19 for a ‘new normal’ of business tourism (Davidson, 2019; Liu et al., 2025). In their useful systematic review of global literature on business tourism Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) identify several themes which characterise scholarship on the topic. The economics and politics of convention site selection processes attracted much historical interest (Zhang et al., 2011). Economic impact studies of MICE events and the perspectives of involved stakeholders was a strong focus in the early evolution of business tourism research. Indeed, the influential works produced by Getz (1989, 2008), Davidson (1993, 2018) and, by Dwyer and Forsyth (1997) constitute essential foundations for the establishment of a distinctive literature concerning the sub-field of business tourism. Key stakeholders under scrutiny were event organisers, owners or suppliers of business tourism venues, and the participants in business tourism.

In the bibliometric visualization exercise pursued by Liu et al. (2025) which is primarily centred on Northern research concerns, four leading issues were isolated in the literature. These issues relate to tourist behaviour, destination marketing, information technology, and work-family interferences of business travellers. Arguably, over recent years, different topics have moved onto the radar screen and research agenda of international business tourism. Issues

surrounding local boosterism and the investment of public funds for promoting convention tourism are explored by Davidson (2020). Other prominent concerns include sustainable development, the professionalisation of the sector, the inclusion and use of new technologies, the role of the public sector, and inevitably the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic for business tourism (Hernández-Andrés et al., 2025). The work of Dodds and Holmes (2022) is illustrative of the growing interest in business travellers and sustainability. In terms of technologies the range of issues incorporates big data and smart MICE tourism (Zhou et al., 2024). Henn and Bathelt (2025) interrogate how firms transfer knowledge which is generated through business conferences and events. The wider role of innovation in driving competitiveness of business-tourism connected products and services is highlighted by Teixeira et al. (2025). The emergence of a recent scholarship and debates around 'bleisure' is a further extension of business tourism literature (Pinho & Marques, 2021; Batala & Slevitch, 2024; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024; Park et al., 2024).

In terms of the recent phenomenon of digital nomadism Hannonen (2020, 2025) provides the critical foundations for research progress. Arguably, remote working by digital nomads can stimulate local economies particularly in tourism-dependent regions and localities (Koufodontis & Gaki, 2025). In the international arena, in several countries local governments play 'smart' roles in encouraging and seeking to attract such nomad professionals. One example is Japan where local governments in attractive places ('vacation locations') organize crafted programmes of workcation in order to attract employees who are able to work flexibly (Hannonen, 2025). Local government facilitation of the establishment of local infrastructures such as co-working spaces is a preferred strategy for destination development and boosting the growth of this form of business tourism (Ji et al., 2024).

From a global perspective Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) isolate that the majority production of business tourism research occurs from Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific. In correspondence with recent trends in tourism scholarship in general, China emerges as a significant country focus for business tourism research (Zhang et al., 2011; Iacuone & Zarrilli, 2018). The mainstream of existing international literature concerning business tourism is overwhelmingly dominated by research about business tourism in the Global North or business travellers from there (Davidson, 2019; Hernández-Andrés et al., 2025). Looking at published systematic reviews of research on business tourism, it is striking that minimal attention is given to Global South issues of business tourism or of business travellers from this part of the world. Informality is a defining feature of business tourism across most cities in the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2025). Nevertheless, in the recent bibliometric visualisation review of 30 years (1994-2023) of business tourism research conducted by Liu et al. (2025), studies undertaken in the Global South are almost entirely ignored. The scant consideration given by these authors to research outside of the Global North is a remarkable omission. This is especially so in light of the appearance of an energetic scholarship on various facets of formal as well as informal business tourism in sub-Saharan Africa (C.M. Rogerson, 2005, 2011, 2014; Donaldson, 2013; J.M. Rogerson, 2014; C.M. Rogerson, 2015a, 2015b; Tichaawa, 2017; Greenberg & Rogerson, 2018; Pandey & Rogerson, 2019; C.M. Rogerson, 2019; Matiza, 2020; Tichaawa, 2021; Makoni & Rogerson, 2023; Welthagen et al., 2023; Makoni & Mearns, 2025; Rogerson &

Rogerson, 2025). In the alternative scoping of the state of global business tourism research produced by Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025), a more geographically balanced analysis is undertaken. Welcome recognition is given to the emergence of academic interest and of a research tradition based outside of the Global North.

The review by Hernández-Andrés et al. (2025) flags South Africa as the major country focus for African business tourism research. Much recent research has concentrated on the impacts and adaptations to COVID-19. Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021a) unravel the specific impacts of COVID-19 on the MICE sector in South Africa. In a series of further works the adaptive responses and resilience of the MICE sector in South Africa to the COVID-19 pandemic are under scrutiny (Lekgau & Tichaawa (2021a, 2021b, 2023). Indeed, these authors demonstrate that virtual and hybrid events represented a valuable tool for enhancing the resilience of South Africa's MICE sector during the crisis of COVID-19 (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). Outside of South Africa several issues concerning both business tourism – formal and informal - have been explored in the contexts of Cameroon (Tichaawa, 2017, 2021), Kenya (Ogendo, 2018), Lesotho (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013), Rwanda (Rwigema & Celestin, 2020), Tanzania (Mwijarubi & Sabulaki, 2019) and Zimbabwe (Shereni et al., 2021; Manyeruki & Kabote, 2022; Makoni & Rogerson, 2023; Makoni et al., 2023a, 2023b; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024). Following the well-documented South African experience, Zimbabwe emerges as the second major focus for business tourism scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa.

METHODS AND SOURCES

The analysis of the geography of business tourism flows in South Africa is based upon the tourism component of the private sector S&P Global South Africa Regional eXplorer data base. This tourism data set is a subset of a consolidated platform of integrated data bases 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. Sources include the regular surveys undertaken by South African Tourism and Statistics South Africa on international tourism arrivals and their movements as well as flows of domestic travellers within South Africa.

The collated 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. As demonstrated in previous research, the local tourism base of the Regional eXplorer data set is valuable for spatial analysis and understanding the changing structure of the tourism space economy (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2021b). 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 data base exists from 2001 and is constantly updated with

adjustments made to reflect official changes made in municipal administrative boundaries as well as the availability of new data (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). This investigation draws upon the 2025 iteration which provides the historical data as amended going back to 2001. The data base covers all South Africa's nine provinces and is differentiated for 213 spatial units. These comprise 205 local municipalities and the country's eight large and designated 'metropolitan areas', namely Buffalo City (East London), Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, eThekweni (Durban), Johannesburg, Mangaung (Bloemfontein), Nelson Mandela Bay (Gqeberha), and Tshwane (Pretoria). The country's network of 44 district municipalities is not included in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mainstream of research in South African tourism scholarship concerns leisure tourism. The topic of business tourism is therefore relatively undeveloped. The existing literature on South Africa concentrates around five issues, *viz.*, who are the business travellers (formal and informal); the growth and supply of dedicated business tourism products in terms of conference facilities, exhibition centres or business accommodation facilities; the nexus of business tourism, local development and urban tourism; the impacts of climate change; and, most recently, the ramifications of COVID-19 and associated MICE sector responses and adaptations. Only limited information exists about the demand-side of business travel, most especially of the spatial flows of business travellers. Understanding these flows and the relative importance of business tourism in tourism economies is useful for policy-makers.

This analysis of the demand-side of flows of business travellers is pursued using the S & P Global tourism data base. The data base allows for the construction of the geographical distribution of business trips and a profile of the relative importance of local municipalities as business tourism destinations. The term 'business trip' can refer either to an international business trip or a domestic business trip into a South African destination. It should be noted that no spatially differentiated information is available on business tourism spend which might reveal the varying impacts of formal versus informal sector business travellers. The analysis below is therefore the establishment of a geography of business tourism which is based upon numbers of business trips rather than expenditure data. Two subsections of material are now given. The first provides a picture of the growth of business travel and its relative importance compared to other forms of travel in South Africa. The second section pivots to explore geographical issues and patterns.

The Growth and Importance of Business Travel

Figure 1 reveals the trajectory in business travel trips in relation to total national trips. Figure 2 shows the proportionate share of business trips in total tourism trips.

From Figures 1 and 2 three points must be noted. First, is that Figure 1 indicates that business trips constitute only a relatively small share of total national trips in South Africa. Second, Figure 2 shows that, as indexed by volume of trips, business travel is the third purpose of travel in South Africa after VFR and leisure travel mobilities. Three, the trajectory of business travel trips reflects clearly the COVID-19 impacts with 2020 and 2021 showing a marked downturn in trips.

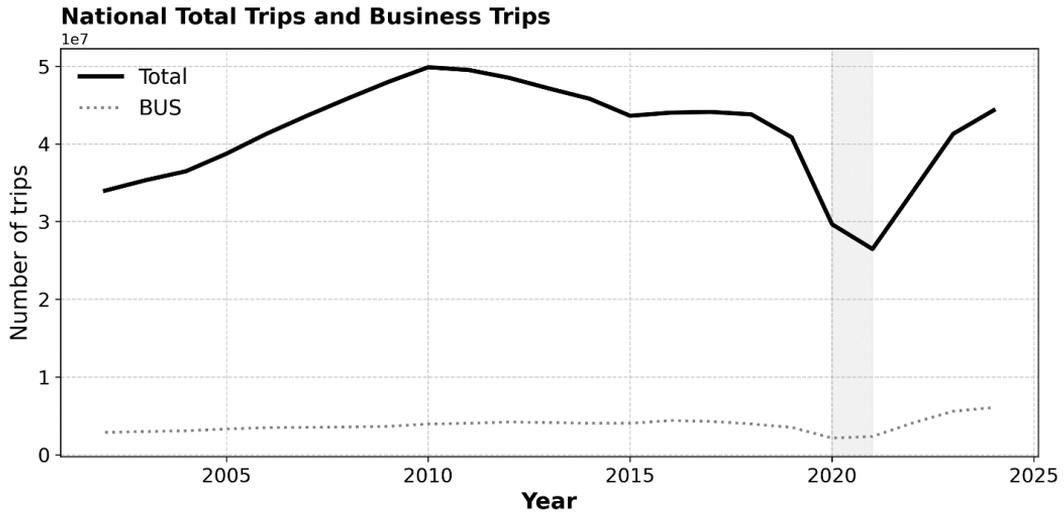


Figure 1. Comparison of Business Trips with National Total Trips 2002-2024
Note: The notation 1e7 refers to 10 million. The shaded years are those of COVID impact

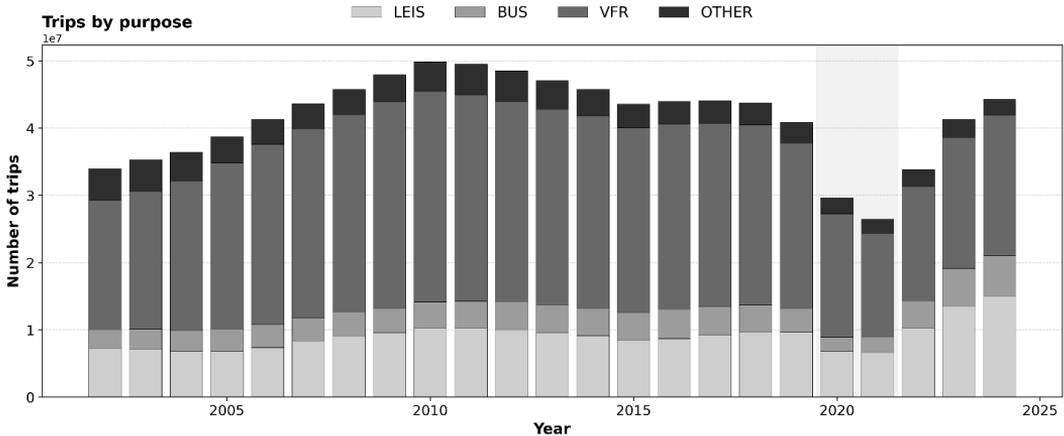


Figure 2. Trips by Purpose in South Africa, 2002-2024
Note: The notation 1e7 refers to 10 million.

Table 1. South Africa: Selected Years - Volume and Share of Business Trips

Year	Business Trips ('000s)	% Share of Business in Total National Trips
2002	2 862	8.42
2010	3 943	7.91
2019	3 506	8.58
2021	2 339	8.83
2024	6 056	13.67

Table 1 gives more specific detail of business travel and its share of total trips for five selected years. In terms of the study period the rationale for the selection was as follows. 2002 is the base year and when Johannesburg hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development, a major trigger event for the

building of a business tourism economy in South Africa's major city (Rogerson, 2002). The tourism economy of South Africa was boosted in 2010 by the organization and impacts of the mega-event, FIFA Soccer World Cup. The year 2019 is selected as the final 'normal' travel year before the COVID-19 pandemic affected the trajectory of the national tourism economy for the subsequent two years (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). Finally, 2024 is the most recent year for which S & P data currently is available. It marks a year in the post-COVID recovery of the national tourism economy with visible signals of the appearance of a 'new normal' in tourism flows for South Africa.

Table 1 highlights that following a consistent rise in business travel during the 2000s decade, the volume of business travel was steady in the period 2010-19 with a rise in the share of business trips to national tourism trips by 2019. This phase was followed, however, by the major decline which was experienced between 2019-2021. What is striking is the remarkable recovery of business travel during the post-2021 period. By 2024 there is recorded the highest ever volume of business trips which reached over 6 million for South Africa (Table 1). The sharp upturn in the volume of business travel is reflected also in the growth in the relative significance of business travel in total national tourism trips. Alongside an expansion in the volume of business travel this growth in the proportionate share of business travel is accounted for also by the laggard post-pandemic recovery in the volume of VFR travel. From accounting for approximately 8 percent of total tourism trips for South Africa from 2010-2021, by 2024 business travel mobilities represent 13 percent of total trips (Table 1).

These results point to the strong 'bounce' and recovery in business travel in the post-pandemic years. Such findings are confirmed by those produced by Onderwater (2023) who looked at the business travel mobilities of staff working in an international consultancy firm based in South Africa. It was revealed in that investigation that once lockdown and other travel restrictions were lifted in South Africa "business travel picked up to a higher level than previously expected for the future" (Onderwater, 2023, p. 5). The conclusion of that small corporate study was that "on average business travel is resembling the Old-Normal situation" (Onderwater, 2023, p. 6).

The Geography of Business Tourism

The spatial distribution of business travel within South Africa can be unpacked by examining two sets of issues. First, is the absolute flows of business travellers at a local municipality destination level. This is investigated both in terms of those most visited business tourism destinations and the (little examined) least visited or worst-performing business travel destinations. Second, the relative concentration of business tourism in destinations is interrogated.

Table 2 ranks the leading 20 business tourism destinations in South Africa on the basis of their proportionate shares of total national business trips. It is demonstrated that business tourism is dominated by South Africa's eight major metropolitan areas which all are consistently among the top 10 business destinations. South Africa's major city and commercial heart, the City of Johannesburg is clearly the most significant business travel destination. With its cluster of headquarter offices of leading South African corporates and other large commercial enterprises Johannesburg enjoys the greatest concentration of business hotels and conference/exhibition facilities in the country (J.M.

Rogerson, 2014). In addition, Johannesburg inner city is the major national hub for informal business travellers as the city is a magnet for cross-border shopper/traders arriving from surrounding African countries as well as cohorts of domestic informal shopper/traders (Rogerson, 2018; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). In November 2025 the Johannesburg business economy was boosted massively by the decision that the city would be the venue for the Group of Twenty (G20) meeting of Heads of State and Governments. This mega-event of government leaders alongside various other associated people's summits and NGO gatherings around the city offered major financial benefits for the city's tourism and hospitality economy. The political decision by national government that Johannesburg rather than Cape Town or Durban would host this gathering.

Table 2. Leading 20 Municipalities' Share of National Total Business Trips for Discrete Years

Rank	% National Total							
	2010		2019		2021		2024	
1	City of Johannesburg	15.52	City of Johannesburg	13.48	City of Johannesburg	12.12	City of Johannesburg	12.49
2	City of Tshwane	8.90	City of Tshwane	8.03	City of Tshwane	6.58	City of Tshwane	6.58
3	City of Cape Town	6.48	Ekurhuleni	5.52	City of Mbombela	6.22	Ekurhuleni	5.50
4	eThekweni	6.33	City of Cape Town	5.32	Ekurhuleni	4.88	City of Mbombela	5.23
5	Ekurhuleni	5.72	eThekweni	4.72	eThekweni	4.31	eThekweni	4.42
6	City of Mbombela	3.35	City of Mbombela	4.58	City of Cape Town	3.52	City of Cape Town	3.71
7	Mangaung	2.30	Mangaung	2.85	Mangaung	2.70	Mangaung	3.03
8	Polokwane	2.15	Polokwane	2.06	Nelson Mandela Bay	2.40	Nelson Mandela Bay	2.11
9	Nelson Mandela Bay	2.13	Nelson Mandela Bay	1.99	Kouga	2.00	Buffalo City	1.95
10	Buffalo City	1.30	Buffalo City	1.25	Buffalo City	1.71	Kouga	1.53
11	Rustenburg	1.23	Nkomazi	1.22	Nkomazi	1.61	Nkomazi	1.39
12	Madibeng	1.12	Thaba Chweu	1.20	Thaba Chweu	1.59	Thaba Chweu	1.36
13	Mogale City	0.96	Emalahleni	1.05	Polokwane	1.39	Polokwane	1.29
14	Thaba Chweu	0.92	Kouga	1.02	Bushbuckridge	1.10	Dihlabeng	1.17
15	Nkomazi	0.90	Ba-Phalaborwa	0.92	Ndlambe	1.09	Emalahleni	1.12
16	Ba-Phalaborwa	0.89	Dihlabeng	0.92	Ray Nkonyeni	1.06	Ray Nkonyeni	1.08
17	Emalahleni	0.87	Ray Nkonyeni	0.92	Dihlabeng	1.04	Msunduzi	1.07
18	Ray Nkonyeni	0.87	Greater Tzaneen	0.90	Emalahleni	1.04	Sol Plaatje	0.95
19	Greater Tzaneen	0.84	Mogale City	0.90	Dr Beyers Naude	1.02	Bushbuckridge	0.95
20	Emfuleni	0.76	Madibeng	0.89	Dawid Kruiper	0.95	Steve Tshwete	0.86

Following Johannesburg, the second largest business travel destination is the City of Tshwane, with Pretoria its core. As the location of national government ministries, foreign diplomatic representations as well as many international agencies the City of Tshwane benefits greatly from flows of business travellers which are linked to national government as well as a lesser flow of corporate travel. The next most significant group of metropolitan centres for business travel are the two coastal cities of Cape Town, and Durban (eThekweni) and Ekurhuleni, which adjoins Johannesburg and is the location of O.R. Tambo Airport, South Africa's major international gateway. In all these cities there are established convention centres and large hotels with conference facilities. Finally, the metropolitan centres of Mangaung (Bloemfontein) in Free State province and the two other coastal metropolitan municipalities of Buffalo City and Nelson Mandela Bay (Gqeberha) are regularly ranked in the ten most important municipalities based upon their share of the national business trips.

Outside the metropolitan centres Table 2 discloses that among the list of leading business destinations there are a number of what would be recognised

as 'secondary centres' in the South African settlement system. Further, Table 2 indicates the existence of a group of small-town local municipalities which serve significant functions for business tourism. The most important secondary city is Mbombela, the provincial capital of Mpumalanga. The provincial government function provides once again one anchor for the city's economy of business travel, including for political gatherings. Arguably, other factors are the city's geographical proximity both to Kruger National Park making it an attractive MICE destination and its proximity to the border with Mozambique lending Mbombela a role in business travel associated with Mozambique. By 2024 Mbombela was the fourth most important business travel destination in South Africa ahead of both the major and larger coastal cities of Cape Town and Durban. Other notable secondary cities that must be recognised are Polokwane and Kimberley (Sol Plaatje municipality), respectively the capitals of Limpopo and Northern Cape provinces. The capital function again reinforces the importance of the location of government activities and meetings in impacting the uneven geographical development of business travel.

Arguably, locational proximity to the commercial markets of Johannesburg and Pretoria is one critical factor for the performance of the municipalities of Rustenburg, Madibeng, Emfuleni and Mogale City. The specific characteristics of many other of the second-tier business tourism destinations listed in Table 2 remain to be revealed. The value of local case studies to provide fresh insight on business tourism is exemplified by Rivett-Carnac's (2025) research in the 'Coalfields' region of Mpumalanga. Of interest is the regular appearance in the list of leading business destinations of the Mpumalanga municipality of Emalahleni (Witbank) and the 2024 listing also of Steve Tshwete (Middelburg). These regions of Mpumalanga are distinctive as business destinations because their local economies are anchored on coal mining, electricity power generation and a declining industrial base. According to Rivett-Carnac (2025), tourism in the Coalfields area of Mpumalanga concentrates upon Emalahleni and Steve Tshwete and is organised to support a distinctive form of local business tourism. The local business tourism economy and the focus of accommodation service providers are structured to support the area's industrial base of coal mining, coal power generation and other industries, with a segment of government meetings industry. The towns of Witbank (Emalahleni) and Middelburg are major regional foci for the hosting of business events with local accommodation service providers mainly catering to business tourism markets (Rivett-Carnac, 2025). For these two towns, government meetings, business travellers from the mines and from Eskom (the parastatal national electricity power provider) with their suppliers/contractors are critical business markets for local accommodation suppliers. Overall, it is observed that "independent business travel and business events are both common in the Coalfields, with business events particularly common in Emalahleni and Middelburg" (Rivett-Carnac, 2025, p. 71).

Turning to the opposite end of the business tourism spectrum in South Africa, certain reflections can be offered concerning the distribution of least visited (as indexed by volume of trips) or worst-performing local municipalities. The 20 least visited local municipalities are shown in ranked order on Table 3; the listings show the province in which the local municipality is located. It is observed from Table 3 that the least visited areas are dominated by remote spaces of South Africa, which in many respects are those 'left-behind' in terms of national economic development. The limited business travel to these largely

rural and small-town destinations is therefore ‘the other side of the coin’ to the flows of business travellers into South Africa’s biggest centres of commercial activity. Geographically, these least visited business destinations concentrate in the poorer economically disadvantaged regions of the country with the lowest numbers of business trips recorded in mainly rural areas of the Eastern Cape and parts of KwaZulu-Natal province. As a general pattern, remote local municipalities which incorporate spaces of the former Bantustans or Homelands established in the apartheid period are among the worst performing as business tourism destinations. Examples would be Ntabankulu in Eastern Cape and Nkandla in KwaZulu-Natal, two local municipalities which since 2010 are consistently listed as those least visited by business travellers. In addition to these former Homeland spaces the cohort of local municipalities which are ranked as least visited for business travellers includes some which are situated in sparsely populated and arid areas of the provinces of Western Cape and Northern Cape.

Table 3. Worst-Performing Municipalities’ Share of National Total Business Trips for Discrete Years

Rank	% National Total							
	2010		2019		2021		2024	
1	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.008	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.008	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.009	Ntabankulu (EC)	0.011
2	Nkandla (KZN)	0.012	Nkandla (KZN)	0.012	Nkandla (KZN)	0.012	Nkandla (KZN)	0.013
3	Khai-Ma (NC)	0.012	Khai-Ma (NC)	0.012	Laingsburg (WC)	0.021	Laingsburg (WC)	0.021
4	Renosterberg (NC)	0.013	Renosterberg (NC)	0.013	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.026	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.023
5	Magareng (NC)	0.014	Magareng (NC)	0.014	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.026	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.025
6	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.017	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.017	Maphumulo (KZN)	0.026	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.027
7	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.020	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.020	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.029	Dannhauser (KZN)	0.030
8	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.020	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.020	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.030	Emadlangeni (KZN)	0.030
9	Thembelihle (NC)	0.021	Thembelihle (NC)	0.021	Ratlou (NW)	0.031	Nqutu (KZN)	0.031
10	!Kheis (NC)	0.023	!Kheis (NC)	0.023	Magareng (NC)	0.032	Prince Albert (WC)	0.033
11	Kareeberg (NC)	0.023	Kareeberg (NC)	0.023	Nongoma (KZN)	0.032	Magareng (NC)	0.034
12	Richtersveld (NC)	0.024	Richtersveld (NC)	0.024	Nqutu (KZN)	0.033	Ratlou (NW)	0.037
13	Laingsburg (WC)	0.027	Laingsburg (WC)	0.027	Prince Albert (WC)	0.033	Emalahleni (EC)	0.037
14	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.027	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.027	Mamusa (NW)	0.033	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.038
15	Nongoma (KZN)	0.027	Nongoma (KZN)	0.027	Sakhisizwe (EC)	0.035	Dr AB Xuma (EC)	0.040
16	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.027	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.027	Emalahleni (EC)	0.035	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.041
17	Siyathemba (NC)	0.028	Siyathemba (NC)	0.028	Dr AB Xuma (EC)	0.037	Mamusa (NW)	0.042
18	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.028	Ubuhlebezwe (KZN)	0.028	Kagisano/Molopo (NW)	0.038	Khai-Ma (NC)	0.043
19	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.028	Umzimkhulu (KZN)	0.028	Mhlontlo (EC)	0.040	Nongoma (KZN)	0.044
20	Umzimvubu (EC)	0.028	Umzimvubu (EC)	0.028	Umuziwabantu (KZN)	0.042	Kagisano/Molopo (NW)	0.047

Note: EC – Eastern Cape; KZN – KwaZulu-Natal; NC – Northern Cape; NW – North west; WC – Western Cape

Table 4. The Polarization of Business Travel: Share of National Trips (%)

	2010	2019	2021	2024
Metropolitan Areas	48.7	43.2	38.2	39.8
Leading 5 destinations	43.0	37.6	34.1	34.3
Leading 10 destinations	54.2	49.8	46.4	46.5
Leading 20 destinations	63.5	59.7	58.3	57.8

Table 4 provides a picture of the extent of concentration of business tourism in South Africa over the period 2010-2024. In earlier research it was disclosed that the distribution of business trips and travel is more geographically concentrated or polarized than is the case for leisure travel and far more so than the much more dispersed spatial pattern which is associated with VFR travel (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). Table 4 confirms the polarization of business travel around South Africa's eight metropolitan areas. Of note is that taken with the share contributed by the other 12 most visited destinations for business travel, almost 60 percent of all business travel in South Africa is accounted for. Nevertheless, it is observed from Table 4 that the extent of polarization is showing signs of weakening. Between 2010 and 2024 the share of business travel accounted for by metropolitan areas has eroded from 48.7 percent in 2010 to 39.8 percent in 2024. Likewise, parallel declines are evident in the shares of the leading 5, 10 and 20 destinations between 2010 and 2024. These signals of a greater spread of business travel point to the need for further case study research to unpack local opportunities and changes which are taking place.

CONCLUSION

Towards the close of the decade of the 2000s, tourism scholars were alerted that the predisposition in tourism studies to focus upon the holiday sector had not encouraged research into other key components of urban tourism, such as business tourism (Williams, 2009). Arguably, since that warning there has been a growth and maturation in international business tourism scholarship including a recognition of its vital role in urban tourism. Indeed, recently Liu et al. (2025, p. 989) could affirm that in global tourism scholarship the topic of "business tourism is once again in the spotlight". Nevertheless, one major blind-spot in international research on business tourism concerns its spatial or geographical dimensions within countries.

The novel contribution of this paper is examining the national performance of business tourism in South Africa and isolating the major geographical contours of business tourism through identification of the leading business tourism destinations. Several striking findings emerge from the analysis. First, is that a remarkable post-pandemic recovery has occurred regarding business travel in South Africa with the highest ever volume of trips recorded in 2024 despite the shifts towards virtual meetings which occurred during the COVID-19 years. Second, the findings confirm that, relative to leisure travel or visits to friends and relatives travel, business tourism is geographically concentrated or polarized. Three, the results show the predominance of business tourism in the large metropolitan areas which host most private sector commercial activity and especially the 'command centres' or headquarters of leading corporates. Further, it was observed there is recorded a strong performance of certain business destinations which are associated with political and government activities – most

importantly capital city functions at national and provincial level. Four, the local level of business tourism can be distinctive and influenced by the area's economic base. Indeed, in final analysis, a research challenge is to advance our limited understanding of the differentiated character of business tourism at all levels in the national settlement system from major metropolitan centres, secondary centres and small towns. Local differences matter and can be best approached through case studies.

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