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Wedding tourism in South Africa: an exploratory analysis

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Abstract:

Niche forms of tourism are a growing focus in tourism scholarship. One little explored form of niche tourism is the specialized micro-niche of wedding tourism. Within the growing literature that deals with niche forms of tourism in South Africa there has thus far been minimal attention given to the notion of wedding tourism. This article addresses this investigatory void through an exploratory analysis of the wedding tourism industry in South Africa in general and more specifically of Gauteng, the country's major population hub. The empirical material centres on the spatial organisation of wedding venues in South Africa with evidence from Gauteng as the principal focus. The findings show that 'place matters' both in the choice of venues by international or domestic consumers and the existence of distinct clusters of venues which are unrelated to patterns of population. Interviews reveal that wedding tourism is a growing activity for many hospitality businesses and commonly linked also to business tourism with the hosting of conferences. The expanding profitability of wedding tourism has attracted new hospitality businesses to enter this niche market and correspondingly to raise levels of competition in this niche form of tourism.

Keywords: niche tourism; events; wedding tourism; wedding venues; South Africa.



Source: <http://www.fotovideo.co.za/images/CapeTownWeddingPhotos.jpg>

Introduction

Arguably, over the past decade the concept of 'niche tourism' has entered the mainstream discourse of tourism scholarship (MacLeod, 2003; Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Hall & Page, 2006; Lew, 2008; Page & Connell, 2009; Marson, 2011; Rogerson, 2011). In the post-Fordist age of well-informed and demanding tourists a diverse array of different products have emerged to serve targeted niche markets, and have engineered the segmentation of the tourism sector (Trauer, 2006). In particular, since the 1980s, Lew (2008) stresses that specialized tourism products have emerged and consolidated in opposition to mass or packaged tourism (Lew, 2008). Robinson & Novelli (2005: 1) maintain that niche tourism appeared "in counter-point to what is commonly referred to as 'mass tourism'" Furthermore, both Yeoman (2008) and Marson (2011) assert that niche tourism is considered to be an alternative if not antithesis to mass tourism. For Kraftchick et al. (2014: 41) the "development of tourism niches can assist destinations and attractions in market segmentation".

Niche tourism can be defined "by its heterogeneous nature" and is expanding in significance because of a shift in motivational factors by travelers (Marson, 2011: 9). The activity of niche tourism centres on the consumer market segments' interests and travel desires ensuring that a destination is more attractive and marketable (Kraftchick et al. 2014). Robinson and Novelli (2005) maintain that the tourism economy can be differentiated into a set of niches – macro-niches and micro-niches – which can meet the motivational needs of particular segments. A macro-niche has a larger consumer interest segment – such as ecotourism or sports tourism – whereas a micro-niche reach out to consumers in more narrowly defined groups of interests, such as cycling tourism or beer tourism. The expansion of micro-niches in tourism is part of the wider process that "tourism has exhibited growth through differentiation, fragmentation and

reinvention of tourism products" (Marson, 2011: 11). For destinations the exploitation of niche products can increase or refresh the local product offering resulting in a differentiation and diversification of markets (Marson, 2011: 12).

One little explored form of niche tourism is the specialized micro-niche of wedding tourism. Wedding tourism targets couples who want to celebrate their wedding and honeymoons away from home and are looking for a unique experience. South Africa is ranked among the top ten places in the world to marry (Ivanovic et al., 2009). However, within the growing literature that deals with niche forms of tourism as well as planning for niche tourism in South Africa there has been so far minimal attention given to wedding tourism with the exception of one investigation by de Witt (2006). This article seeks to address this investigatory void through an exploratory analysis of the wedding tourism industry in South Africa in general and more specifically of Gauteng, the country's major population hub. The empirical material centres on the spatial organisation of wedding venues in South Africa with evidence from Gauteng as the principal focus. The study situates wedding tourism as a special form of niche tourism within the broader events tourism literature and offers an international review of scholarship around wedding tourism literature. The focus turns subsequently to an examination of the extent, geography and locational influences upon wedding venues.

In terms of research methods, the study undertook a web-based search to construct a national data base of wedding venues across South Africa. This web-based search triangulated data from several sources including the SA Venues website, the 2014 Wedding Expo booklet and bridal magazines such as *The Bride's Diary* and *Bruids Gids*. Beyond the national audit the study uses the findings from semi-structured interviews which were conducted with representatives of a purposive sample of organizers at 30 wedding venues in Gauteng. Issues of concern in these semi-structured

interviews related to the organisation of wedding tourism and locational influences upon wedding venues in the context of Gauteng.

Context of wedding tourism

At one level, weddings can be conceptualized as falling into the arena of events tourism. In terms of events tourism scholarship the major focus has been traditionally upon events in terms of business (Weber & Chon, 2002; Davidson, 2003; Yoo & Weber, 2005), sport (Ritchie & Adair, 2004, Hede, 2005), festivals (Getz, 1991; Formica, 1998; McKercher & du Cros, 2003) or mega-events (Kang & Perdue, 1994; Dansero & Puttilli, 2010). In

a broader canvas sketched for events tourism Getz (2008) stresses that events tourism should include all planned events. Planned events are used as an approach to develop and market tourism as well as for economic development purposes. The core constituent of planned events is that they are unique because of interactions among the setting and people. Planned events are spatial-temporal phenomena and each is created for a purpose (Getz, 2008). The appeal of events is that they are 'one of a kind' and their participants have to be there to enjoy the 'irreplaceable' and 'exclusive' experience. Events have now mainly become the domain of professional organisers because of their importance to achieve certain strategic goals.

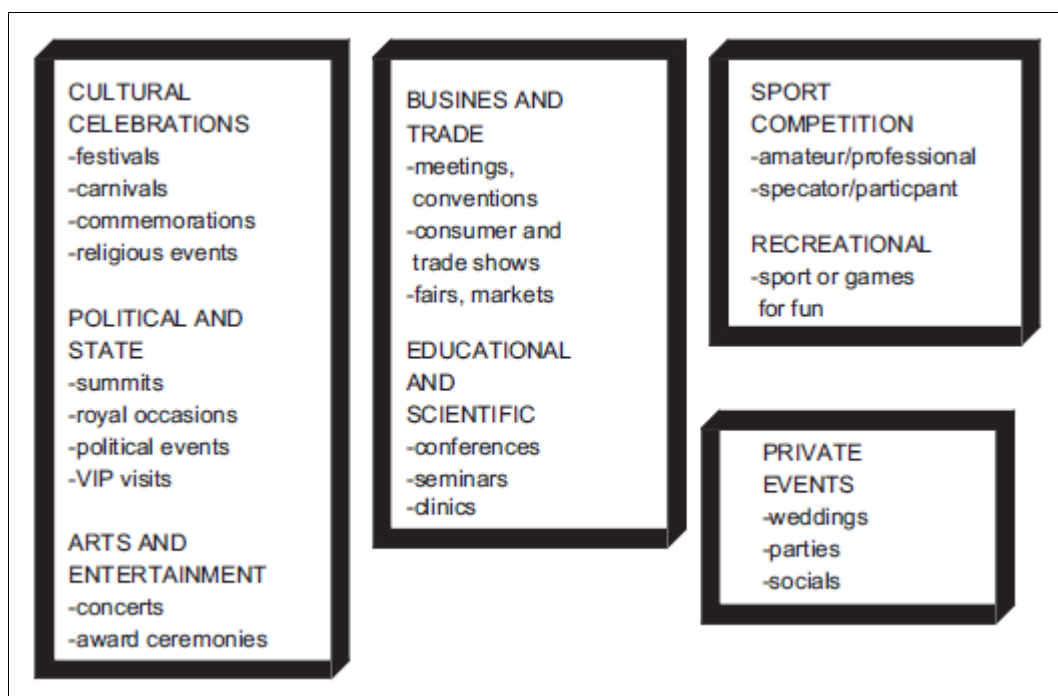


Figure 1: Getz's Typology of planned events (Source: Getz, 2008: 404).

A distinction is drawn between planned public events and private events. The group of public events would encompass for Getz (2008) the planning of festivals, other celebrations, entertainment, recreation, political and state, scientific, sport and arts, business and corporate affairs. The group of planned private events would include weddings. The

typology of these planned events provided by Getz (2008) highlights that weddings are a form of private event and a sub-field of events tourism (Fig. 1).

Wedding tourism as such is a growing niche market that has impacted upon destinations worldwide as couples often travel abroad to get married or to celebrate their wedding (Acorn Consulting

Partnership Ltd., 2008). Poon (2009) estimates that the global market for wedding tourism is between 3-6 million trips annually; from 2002 to 2007 there has been a market growth of 10% annually. According to Durinec (2013), wedding tourism has shown 75% growth between 2007 and 2012. The expanding numbers of wedding tourists in destinations, confirm the importance of this emerging market segment worldwide (Poon, 2009). Financially wedding tourism is a lucrative element of the tourism sector. Indeed, it is recorded that the “financial impacts of wedding tourism are strong, particularly since consumers tend to be more concerned with quality than price” (Kim & Agrusa, 2005: 901). Nevertheless, it is argued that the business of wedding tourism is characterised by intangibility and inseparability and requires a large amount of trust on the part of the consumers (De Witt, 2006). A critical issue in wedding tourism is destination choice. Several factors can impact destination choice with issues of scenery and nature highlighted by Kim and Agura (2005). Other scholars reflect that wedding couples travel to particular destinations where “tourist infrastructure, romantic imagery, religious flexibility and legal convenience coincide” (McDonald, 2005: 191). Many destinations are marketing to build their competitiveness for wedding events. In the international context among the most energetic promoters of wedding tourism are Hawaii, Malaysia, India and New Zealand. In the African context Mauritius and South Africa would be leading destinations. Mozambique is also seeking to enter the wedding tourism market.

Hawaii is not only a destination for honeymoon travellers, but it has become a leading destination for weddings. Hawaii provides simultaneously the romantic exotic offshore wedding and privacy. Each Hawaiian Island makes a beautiful location for weddings and can offer different attractions to suit different styles of wedding style. There are two main products in Hawaii, an exotic tropical beach wedding and an exotic Christian church wedding (McDonald, 2005). In

Hawaii, nature becomes the set for romance and because of the success of weddings in Hawaii, a construction boom is underway to provide ‘privatised natural’ landscapes and simulated sacred spaces for tourist weddings. Another competitive destination for hosting weddings is Malaysia a country with many romantic island getaways and fast emerging as one of the most hip and happening wedding destinations in the world (Zamri et al. 2013). The country is considered one of the ultimate wedding destination spots offering ‘exotic locations’ which are rich in the flavour and culture of Asia. In addition, Malaysia offers attractive locales for conducting religious ceremonies of any kind. India is becoming a further popular destination for wedding tourists and recording considerable rates of expansion (Suklabaidya, 2008).

For wedding tourists, New Zealand is synonymous with nature tourism. The New Zealand tourism board promotes the country as one of the world’s premier natural destinations with plenty of opportunities to wed (Johnston, 2006). New Zealand relies on natural landscapes to market ‘down-under’ weddings. They entice wedding couples with lush green subtropical forests, blue water coastlines and golden beaches. Statistics New Zealand (2010) shows tremendous growth in the wedding tourism niche market. Couples travelling to New Zealand to get married, have increased from 800 per annum in the 1980s to 2 000 per annum for the period 2001-2009.

Within the limited existing corpus of material on wedding tourism literature several prominent themes are emphasised. Areas of focus relate to product offerings, tourism’s potential impact, specialized marketing, and the emerging phenomenon of green weddings. Johnston (2006) stresses the importance of location for the wedding. The location and its surrounding natural landscape produce “natural, 100% pure, exotic and romantic” weddings (Johnston, 2006: 1). Social networks have become a very important element in marketing (Durinec, 2013). In order to boost

revenues, product offerings such as add-on services are used by wedding destinations to provide a variety of wedding packages (Durinec, 2013). Wedding packages appeal due to the convenience offered and the wedding is packaged as an entire experience (Major et al. 2010). Along with hotels and country houses, art galleries, museums and community centres have started to rent their spaces for wedding ceremonies and receptions as a means to diversify their income (Durinec, 2013). In response to the concern of the impacts of tourism on the nature environment, the wedding tourism industry is evolving. As demand grows and consumer preferences change, a sub-niche market within wedding tourism allows for even more specialization, one of which is the growing green weddings market. Eco-weddings are becoming increasingly important as a result of the trend towards sustainable living (Breg, 2013). Indeed, eco-weddings are becoming a popular choice as they reduce costs and have limited negative impacts on the environment. To achieve the eco-friendly consumer preference destination wedding venues may offer biodegradable confetti and locally harvested flowers (Conroy et al. 2012). In the USA the green wedding business is estimated to be worth \$4.7 billion and is a sub-niche market which is expected to grow even more due to increasing demand (Conroy et al. 2012).

According to Adler and Chienm (2008), the wedding reception business is a lucrative market for the food and beverage revenues for hotels. Hotels have realized that the food and beverage of the wedding reception can boost revenues significantly. Many hotels and conference venues are diversifying their services from accommodation and conferencing to diversify as wedding reception venues and/or wedding catering. Indeed, weddings are acknowledged as a highly profitable activity that can contribute to the overall revenue of hospitality enterprises (Adler and Chienm, 2008).

Wedding tourism in South Africa

The national audit of wedding venues discloses a total of at least 649 wedding venues in South Africa across a range of beach, bush, wine estate, country or city destinations. The national geography of wedding venues reveals on a provincial basis that the largest number is situated in Western Cape and Gauteng with 185 and 151 wedding venues respectively. Northern Cape is the area of South Africa with the lowest numbers of wedding venues. Overall, the national network of wedding venues range from luxury game lodges, wine estates, idyllic countryside houses, beach locales, exclusive boutique hotels, five star hotels, cosy guesthouses, all-in-one wedding villages to scenic bush retreats.

Although in total the number of urban-based wedding venues exceeds that of rural areas the importance of the countryside for the location of such venues is especially significant. Indeed, it is observed that South Africa's country venues seek to market themselves as idyllic settings for a beautiful and unique dream wedding, offering peace and tranquillity with majestic high pine trees and old winding oak trees, lush flowering gardens, sparkling waters in the background, ample birdlife and even the relaxing sounds of veld crickets (Figure 2). The natural surrounding beauty is to provide the ideal backdrop for photo opportunities of the newlyweds. With picturesque views over vast open fields and breath-taking sunsets, the country wedding venues aspire to create a 'one of a kind' celebration.



Source: www.salishlodge.com

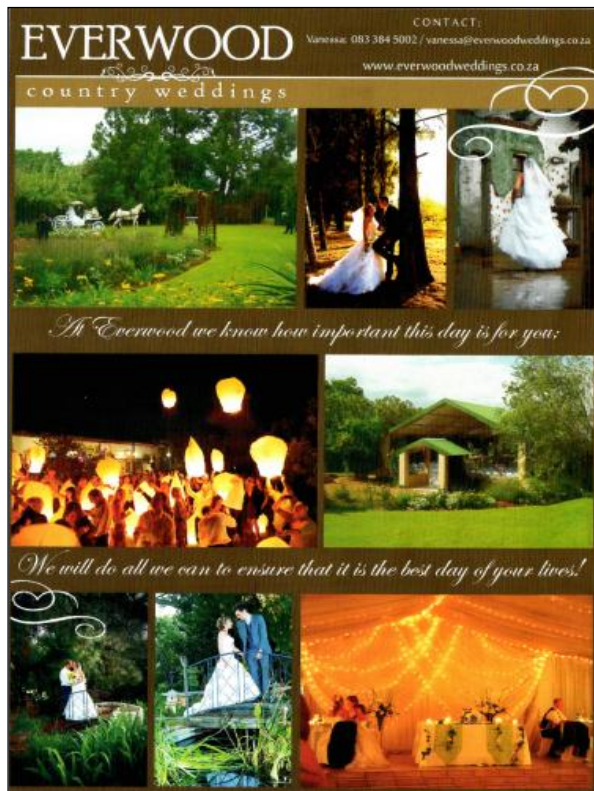


Figure 2: A country wedding venue (Source: Everwood brochure, 2014)



Figure 3: An Urban Wedding Venue (Source: The Forum Turbine Hall, 2014).

By contrast city wedding venues are not all focussed on natural beauty and scenery. Indeed, in central Johannesburg the Forum Turbine Hall and The Pyramid Venue & Conference Centre have become preferred special events venues as they offer something different (Figure 3). The Forum Turbine Hall, a former power

station, has been renovated and offers itself as a chic ultramodern urban wedding venue. The Pyramid Venue & Conference Centre in Village Deep Johannesburg is an Egyptian themed building with a pyramid-like structure and accompanying statues to ensure a 'distinctive' and unforgettable special city event.

The game reserves of Limpopo provide the basis for weddings with most venues found in the Waterberg regions of Bela Bela, Lephalale, Modimolle and Vaalwater. Other venues are spread between Polokwane, Tzaneen and Hoedspruit. In the Northern Cape, the 17 wedding venues are widely distributed across the major towns and in the Namaqualand region. Wedding venues in the Eastern Cape are mainly located along

the coast ranging from cities such as East London and Port Elizabeth. In total 5% of all South African wedding venues are found in the Free State. Bloemfontein, Clarens and Harrismith boast the largest share of the province's wedding venues. In the North-West province most venues cluster around game reserves and near the provincial border with Mpumalanga or Gauteng.

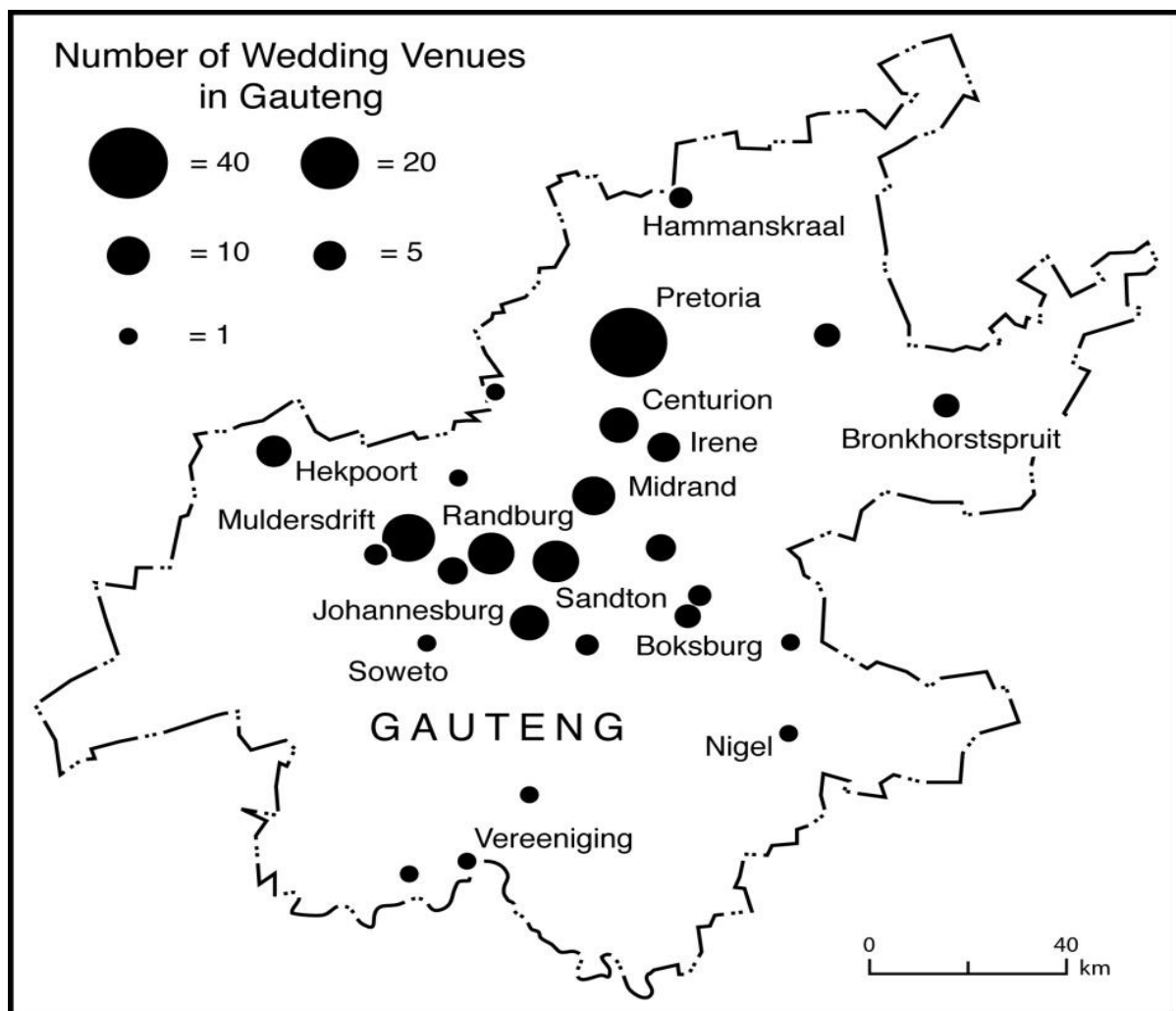


Figure 5: The location of wedding venues in Gauteng (Source: Authors).

Figure 5 provides a more detailed mapping of the clusters of wedding venues in Gauteng. The observed geography of wedding venues is dominated, not unexpectedly, by clusters of venues in or proximate to Johannesburg and Pretoria. It is observed, however, the significant clustering of venues in the West Rand, in particular

surrounding or within the scenic Cradle of Humankind. The area of Muldersdrift is famous for its plentiful wedding venue options and commonly referred to as the "wedding mile". The Villa Tuscana Wedding Village in Midrand provides different styled chapel options for the wedding ceremony ranging from Tuscan to Asian and with different styles of

reception halls to choose from – all in all making it claim to be an award winning wedding village.

Organizational Issues and Competition

The different venues not only host weddings but many have a range of different business activities. Overall, 57% of the venues indicated weddings are their main business activity. Other “secondary” activities include hosting conferences, functions (corporate and year-end), private functions (birthday parties), accommodation (hotel and guesthouses), special events (christenings, stork teas, kitchen teas) and restaurants. Some of the other smaller business activities include matric dances, team building, product launches, artist events, a shop, spa and fly fishing. Other venues include memorial and funeral services as a business activity. Of the 43% of the venues that signalled that weddings are not their main business activity once again the major business activities ranged from conferencing, accommodation, private functions, restaurants and year-end events. The majority of these venues indicated that business tourism and especially conferencing was their “primary” business activity. Cultural and sexual diversity was reflected in styles of weddings that were hosted. The different types include Indian, African, Scottish, Asian, Muslim, Greek, Jewish, French, Portuguese, Italian, Christian, Coloured, same sex and ‘South African’. One venue claimed it was distinctive as the only venue that is “gay friendly” for weddings. International weddings are an important part of the wedding tourism industry. The sample showed that 77% had hosted international weddings as well as the predominant domestic weddings. In the case of international weddings it was disclosed that the United Kingdom, Australia and Nigeria represent the leading source countries. This said, the interviews revealed that such ‘international’ weddings “all have South African connections” in terms of “expats” or a “South African bride or groom

marrying an international”, or “people who have lived in South Africa before emigrating” abroad.

In total 80% of the venues charge clients a rental fee which depends on the size of the reception venue. Venue rental fees typically include: tables, chairs, linens (table cloths and napkins), cutlery, crockery, glassware, waitrons, barmen, décor (chair covers, chair tie backs and underlays), chapel, bridal/honeymoon suite (for use by bride to get ready and overnight stay for wedding couple with breakfast the following morning), set-up of venue, coordination on the wedding day, breakdown and cleaning afterwards and security and car guards. Some venue rental fees include other services such as welcome drinks, cake table, gift table, table for the deejay, a red carpet, automatic climate control air conditioners, a duty manager/supervisor to oversee the wedding event, a seating arrangement plan, confetti stand, stand-by generator, microphones and even a bar manager to control the bar account. Two-thirds of venues offer discounts for booking venues in off-seasons and several offered winter specials and packages.

The average operating time of the sampled 30 wedding venues is 11 years. When the interviewees were asked “Has your business grown over the past few or five years?” the overwhelming majority (86%) of the participants indicated that their wedding business had definitely grown in recent years. The main reasons for growth were more weddings booked, expanding and adding facilities, more conferencing and accommodation booked, employing more people and the offering of more services. Several interviewees provided further details to confirm the growth in importance of weddings for their hospitality businesses with many venues in the process of expanding and upgrading their facilities. Among responses were “*We have extended the barn, added a spa, bistro and shop*”, “*We have built on an extra venue and accompanying chapel, dressing room and bridal suite and can now host three weddings per day as opposed to two*”, “*We have added a venue*

one and a half years ago and have since increased business”, “Our property is growing and we are looking at building a new church”, “We started with standard rooms in our hotel but grew and added something and improved the furniture and décor each year, we are now graded as a 5-star hotel, venue and spa” “We are growing from strength to strength”, and simply that “We have more bums in beds”.

The findings from the 30 interviews provide insight into how the different venues seek to differentiate their product offering from competitors. The responses cluster around four major themes, namely the style of the venue, attractions of a garden setting, the level of service delivered, and the convenience of the venue location. Other sub-issues that were observed included the offer of fine food, the uniqueness of a venue’s chapel and the size of weddings that particular venues could accommodate.

In terms of style of venue interviewees variously indicated the following responses:

- *“We have a Victorian look”,*
- *“We are the only Egyptian themed venue”,*
- *“Our wedding venue is very versatile”*
- *“Our venue is unexpected. We offer six styled venues for different tastes, from classically elegant to romantic, oriental and lapa styles”.*
- *“We are country perfect”*
- *“Our venue is very natural”*
- *“We have a unique ambiance and old world charm”;*
- *“Our venue is really homely”;* and
- *“Our attraction is definitely our Cape Dutch feeling”*

Such responses underscore the widespread importance of venue style in wedding venues.

The second theme is that of offering a ‘garden setting’ wedding. One-third of the interviewees were keen to impress with the following responses: *“our unique garden setting in the ‘city””, “our beautiful gardens, our array of fountains the river stream and waterfall make us stand out from the rest”, “our year round lush green gardens”, “we are amid breathtaking gardens, blended into unspoilt indigenous bush”* and that *“those who visit are enchanted by the fact that they feel a million miles away in a location that offers amazing gardens and a tranquil setting”.* Other respondents stressed that they are *“a bespoke venue for all seasons, set in six hectares of formal gardens and surrounded by 18 hectares of grassland”* and that their *“beautiful English garden provides the most romantic of backdrops and manicured lawns, pretty floral borders, neatly cropped hedge rows and statuesque trees are abound”.* Another interviewed Banquets and Events Manager enthused that they *“offer a garden setting for the outdoor feeling”.*

The third most significant theme for differentiation relates to level of service delivery. In total 25% of the wedding venues mentioned that service plays an important part of their attraction. Respondents were at pains to highlight that their level of service is what sets them apart from other wedding venues. Indeed, several interviewees were passionate about this issue with typical responses as follows:

- *“Our personalised service to every couple”*
- *“We understand that we deal with real people and we want to provide them with a good time, so we are on their level and provide a personal touch and connection and are happy and excited with them”*

- *“The whole experience and the good service, flexible and we tailor make your wedding”.*
- *“We have great service, we are professional and very friendly”;* and,
- *“It is certainly our attention to detail and passion for the job”.*

Overall, the above responses capture the enthusiasm and passion the interviewees have towards issues of service delivery. The last major theme emphasized by interviews related to geography or location, which appeared in 20 percent of the sample responses. Examples of the importance of location are found in the such responses as *“we are ideally located in Fourways”*, *“we are close enough, yet far enough, on the doorstep, at least it feels like you have travelled but it is not too far”*, *“We are centrally located in the East Rand”* and *“We are ideally located in close proximity to both Johannesburg and Pretoria”*. The interviews disclosed that competition in the wedding industry is on the rise as venues are increasingly diversifying their services with many moving towards the hosting of ‘bespoke weddings’. The success of a wedding venue was viewed as determined by service, pride and passion, advertising, communication, cleanliness and capital according to the interviewees. The most predominant element to ensure the success of a wedding venue was service. Responses such as *“personalisation and dedication to the couple”*, *“understanding the bride’s needs and wants”* and *“attention to detail at all times”* indicated that these venues value their level of service on display to the wedding couple.

Conclusion

This article has provided an exploratory analysis of wedding venues in South Africa. Wedding tourism is a niche form of events tourism in which ‘place matters’ both in the choice of venues by international or domestic consumers. The analysis of the geography of wedding

tourism venues in South Africa discloses the existence of distinct clusters of venues which are not related to patterns of population. Wedding venues are geographically situated mainly in areas of natural beauty in both urban and rural surrounds. This results in a range of destinations with the opportunity of maximising local benefits from wedding tourism. Overall, the largest clusters at the macro-scale are situated in Cape Town, the surrounds of Johannesburg and Durban and in the Cape Winelands. At the locality scale countryside locations are significant around South Africa’s major population concentrations and their importance is reinforced by the nexus of game reserves and wedding venues.

The interviews revealed that wedding tourism is a growing activity for many hospitality businesses and is most commonly linked also to business tourism with the hosting of conferences or team-building events. From the perspective of hospitality organizers the most important issues influencing their business operations relate to the style of the venue, boosting the attractions of a garden setting, enhancing the level of service delivered, and maximising the convenience of the venue location. The profitability of wedding tourism has attracted new hospitality businesses to enter this niche market and to raise levels of competition in this particular niche events tourism activity.

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Source:<http://ipunya.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/03/wedding-rings-with-luxurious-yellow-gold.jpg>