

Cape Town's Water Shortage

By Michelle Marie Arean - February 9, 2018



The water shortage in Cape Town is a real issue. Officials are expecting water to run out some time in April (Update: since this story was published, the date has now moved to May 11); that day is being referred to as "Day Zero." As locals recycle water for their daily needs such as using bath water to flush toilets or water lawns, and clean the floors, the tourism industry is also feeling the effects of the massive drought.

The water shortage has been caused by the lack of rain—one of the worst droughts in South Africa in over a century—which has lasted over three years. This has caused the Theewaterskloof Dam, the largest of the six dams that make up the city's main source of water, to be at 13 percent capacity. If the supply throughout the water system falls below 13.5 percent of capacity, the government has plans to turn off the taps throughout the city. When this happens schools, hospitals, and other essential services would be the only areas where the water remains on.

According to Cape Town's government office, as of Feb. 1, residents are only allowed to use 50 liters, or a little over 13 gallons, of water per person, per day for the next 150 days.

Now, for those traveling to Cape Town, the restrictions also apply to tourists, and the travel industry is taking precautions to aide in the conservation of water throughout the city.



The Tourism Situation & Restrictions

"Tourism to Cape Town, and to South Africa as a whole, has taken a small hit since the announcement of Day Zero. Some travelers have expressed apprehension about visiting a city with severe water shortage," says Dania Weinstein, **Cox and Kings'** destination specialist for Africa & Middle East. "However," she adds, "we must keep two things in mind, 1. there is a responsible way to visit Cape Town by following all the rules and choosing the most eco-conscious properties, and 2. Not visiting Cape Town will have detrimental effects on the tourism industry and the over 300k people whose livelihood (and families) depend on it." Adding that, "All hotels and attractions are still up and running, and for those who wish to see the city, it's still a fabulous destination."

According to Lucille Sive, CEO of **The Travel Corporation's** Africa division, who just returned from the Cape Town last week, "Cape Town is open for business and welcoming travelers from around the world." Sive, who visited hotels, attractions, and restaurants during her stay says message she heard from all of them was that the experience of tourists visiting the "Mother City" is not being disrupted or affected in any negative way by the water shortage.

“ *For the ongoing health and prosperity of the city, tourism, like water, must continue to flow.*” ~
Lucille Sive, CEO of The Travel Corporation's Africa Division ”

However, Sive does point out that, "Visitors should be aware that they may have to make a few minor adjustments to their bathing and dining routines, such as taking shorter showers, foregoing baths, and drinking bottled water at restaurants instead of tap water, but otherwise their trip will not be impacted in any significant way.

"In light of recent media coverage, some travelers are under the impression that drinking water in Cape Town will be in short supply and sanitation will be compromised. It's important that agents make travelers aware that hotels are providing bottled water for drinking, and that sinks, toilets and showers are all functioning. They must also make people aware that visitors are welcome in Cape Town, that water will be available for all their daily needs."

Weinstein notes that specific measures are being implemented across the board to help with the conservation of water such as: "pool water being replaced with ocean water, hand sanitizer stations installed instead of running water taps, and gardening reliant on grey water. Some hotels are better than others and taking even further measures to ensure minimal impact. The **Cape Grace** is an example of one property that has gone above and beyond, replacing all showerheads to reduce flow, and installing 'water from air' machines, which create drinkable water from the atmosphere."

Michael Nel, general manager of **The Twelve Apostles**, adds that just as many other area hotels, The Twelve Apostles is actively implementing water-saving measures in order to comply with the current water restrictions, while at the same time keeping the operation



The beachside The Twelve Apostles hotel. (Photo courtesy of The Twelve Apostles.)

running at the service levels that guests expect. For the Twelve Apostles these measures include: “clear signage in and around the hotel to inform guests of water restrictions; informing guests on arrival of all initiatives and encouraging them to follow them during their stay; placing restrictors on showers and basins to reduce water flow; removing bath plugs to restrict bathing and encourage 2-minute showers; installation of waterless urinals in all public toilets; installation of storm water tanks to collect any rain water that may fall so that it can be used in and around the hotel, thus reducing the need for municipal water; the laundry company has reduced its water consumption from 12L per kilogram of laundry being washed to 1L per kilogram through innovative technologies; and no longer changing linens and towels on a daily basis (this will only be done on request if a guest is staying more than four to five days consecutively). Additional storage tanks are being installed on the property, in the event that the water supply is cut for periods of the day. This will ensure that the hotel will still be able to run seamlessly.”

“Once the rains come (hopefully in April), the dam will refill and these restrictions will be lifted. If the rain is delayed, restrictions will be adjusted accordingly, but all sites are expected to stay open as usual at this time,” adds Weinstein.



A traveler enjoying a mountain walk. (Photo courtesy of The Twelve Apostles.)

To Travel or Not to Travel? That is the Question.

If you’re wondering if traveling to Cape Town during this time might do the city more harm than good, one perception that was consistent with everyone we spoke to is not to let the droughts deter your clients from taking in this beautiful destination. Tourism is one of the main sources of income for the local economy.

"Agents should still book their clients to Cape Town because the city relies on tourism to keep a healthy economy, and to maintain 320,000 jobs," says Sive. Adding that, "Tourists' impact on the water situation is marginal compared to the disastrous way the economy would be impacted if they didn't visit. It's important to keep in mind that international travelers represent less than 1 percent of the population of the Western Cape. This means that, overall, the impact of a travelers' water usage while visiting the city is minimal."

“ *Sherwin Banda, president of African Travel, Inc., advises agents to reassure guests that “they will find Cape Town as welcoming, inviting and beautiful as ever.”* ”

Weinstein agrees, "In peak tourist season, less than 1 percent of total water usage in the Western Cape is from tourists. But, think of all the jobs and people who rely fully on income from the tourism industry. Should all visitors cancel, the effects would be devastating. Welcoming tourists means continued economic growth, which is especially important during these challenging times. Visitors to the Western Cape are welcome, but they must be mindful in their water usage while enjoying the region."



A perfect spot to whither away the day in Cape Town. (Photo courtesy of The Twelve Apostles.)

Booked a Cape Town Vacation?

For guests who are headed to Cape Town despite the water shortage, Weinstein says, "all travelers must do so in a mindful and respectful manner. Hotels will have signage for all water saving requirements, and every guest must comply. Spa services using lots of water will not be on offer. But if you are worried about drinking water, don't be—the hotels will provide enough. Everything else is still up and running, so aside from these amendments to your daily hygiene routine, you'll be able to enjoy Cape Town as usual."

However, Weinstein suggests agents give their clients a few guidelines before they head to Cape Town. "On arrival, guests should speak to the hotel staff about water restriction expectations and be sure to adhere to those rules. But outside of a quick shower and some other minor adjustments to daily routine, agents can assure their clients that their Cape Town experience will be everything they've dreamed of."

"For guests who wish to visit the Western Cape, but are concerned by the drought, keep in mind that the region is large and some areas are not affected by water shortage at all. In fact, some of our favorite properties in stunning locations are hardly affected, or have low water restrictions in place. The Cape Overberg, a fabulous area for whale watching, beaches, wildflowers, and horse riding, is operating as usual. **Grootbos Private Nature Reserve** is an example of a property just two hours from Cape Town that provides a fabulous experience for families or romantic getaways alike, without compromising on water," adds Weinstein.

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