

Cape Town promotes sex tourism

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Cape Town, South Africa's main holiday resort with well over 1.2 million foreign visitors a year, is making plans to increase its share of the world tourism market by promoting the city as a world-class destination for sex.

A new marketing organisation, Cape Town Tourism (CTT), was set up last year as part of an effort to halt the recent slow-down in the expansion of the tourist industry. Two weeks ago, CTT announced a new initiative—to advise visitors to the city about the services of prostitutes. The South African newspaper *Sunday World* greeted the announcement with the headline: "City to sell sex tourism".

CTT's manager Cheryl Ozinsky denied this to the BBC, claiming that "all we are doing is trying to manage an existing service". She said that her office was drawing up guidelines, which would focus on fair conditions for those employed in the sex industry, hygiene checks and access to regular medical tests. This would assist the fight against AIDS, she claimed, as properly run sex tourism outlets would have to abide by the guidelines. The alternative, she continued, was to sweep the issue under the carpet and pretend that the sex tourism industry does not exist.

Ozinsky admitted she was unclear about the current legal position surrounding prostitution. In fact, prostitution in South Africa is a criminal offence, under Act 23 of 1957.

Nevertheless, Cape Town's plan to promote the sex industry clearly has the blessing of both the provincial and national governments. CTT works closely with another recently established body, the Western Cape Tourism Business Council, which aims to achieve a partnership between the tourist sector and the provincial government.

The claim that the new initiative has anything to do with addressing the AIDS issue in Cape Town or anywhere else in South Africa, (where the epidemic is

spreading faster than anywhere in the world), is the height of cynicism. About 3.6 million South Africans now carry the virus—one of every eight adults. A further 550,000 new cases are expected each year as 1,500 people become infected daily. Within three years, almost a quarter million South Africans will die annually from AIDS. The figure is predicted to reach half a million per year by 2,008.

AIDS is a gigantic medical and social problem, which is not being seriously addressed by the ANC government. The millions of AIDS sufferers in South Africa have been effectively abandoned. For these people there is no help, no proper treatment, no counselling. Families are devastated; children are left without parents.

In the absence of any campaign to educate the population about the epidemic, all kinds of backwardness exists. Some AIDS sufferers believe that sexual intercourse with a virgin will cure their condition, and in some schools in KwaZulu Natal girls as young as six are subjected to "virginity tests".

Under the apartheid regime, rich South African tourists had to travel to Mozambique and Swaziland to seek out the services of prostitutes. Today, there is no shortage of prostitutes within the country. With an unemployment rate of more than 30 percent, desperate poverty is driving women and young men into the sex industry in all the big cities. A recent survey in Pretoria found that more than 50 percent of prostitutes there carried the AIDS virus.

In Cape Town, where more than 600 children sleep rough on the streets every night, there has been a huge increase in the sexual exploitation of children. Last year, a conference in the city organised by the Network Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children was told that a large number of sexually exploited children were coming to Cape Town from other parts of South Africa. The conference co-ordinator, Bernadette van

Vuuren, said, "We have seen the whole continuum developing, from parents pimping their children for money, to sophisticated gangs prostituting children." She said, "We need to look at how we can prevent South Africa from turning into a sex tourism destination."

CTT's announcement indicates that they and the government have taken the opposite view. Last week, President Thabo Mbeki was in Washington meeting with American businessmen, urging them to invest in South Africa. In offering his country as a production platform for the international corporations, he has also to be mindful of their leisure requirements. The aim of CTT is to create an "AIDS free zone" where international tourists and businessmen can be assured they will run no risk of being infected with the deadly AIDS virus.



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