

Posted to the web on: 14 November 2007

Banzai braai-master keeps homes fires burning

BRADLEY Brouwer tells a story. He was walking past a butchery in Tokyo's upmarket Ginza district in September when he came across a butcher. "I was watching him making sausage, but he had minced the meat so fine it was like powder. I said to him very casually 'Can I show you something?' He made me tea and we sat in the back office. I said, 'I'd like to show you how to make boerewors.'" "

With rougher-ground mince, the former Vaal Triangle Technikon catering manager made a cheese and a salt-and-pepper boerewors. They braaied them outside the shop and offered passersby tastings. It was a hit.



Boerewors, umngqusho, Sandton, a canyon — SA Tourism's man in Tokyo, Bradley Brouwer, tells Michael Bleby about his recipe for tempting the Japanese

"They came in and bought four or five packs of it. It wasn't cheap — about ¥800 (R50) for a piece a quarter of a metre."

On his return to Japan, Brouwer is carrying 40kg of boerewors spices. He has been invited back by the butcher for a boerewors cooking demonstration in front of journalists. After that he plans to teach bobotie.

It's an appropriate response for a qualified chef, perhaps, but less expected of a tourism promotion boss. It is perhaps lucky that Brouwer is a man of many talents. He needs to be. For SA Tourism's country representative to Japan is waging a war for tourists on a shoestring in one of the most expensive markets in the world. He needs to pull together everything he has to increase SA's slice of the Japanese market, the second-largest in the world and one estimated by the World Travel & Tourism Council to be worth \$523bn this year.

Brouwer, SA Tourism's man in Japan since March, has an annual budget of just \$3m, the smallest of any of the 17 destinations in which the tourism promotion body has representatives stationed. Until the number of inbound Japanese tourists, currently about 32000 a year, rises to 65000, Japan will remain a "tactical" rather than a "core" market — and that means limited funding. His is a tale of making the most of limited resources in a market with better-funded rivals.

"I had to be more creative," he laughs. And as his "boerewors on a Ginza footpath" story shows, he has been just that.

SA is growing as a destination for Japanese tourists. Numbers so far this year are up 3,3% on a year earlier, while the larger and more established Australian and New Zealand markets are down by about 12%, reflecting the overall downturn in numbers of outbound Japanese tourists.

While Japan is also a minor part of SA's tourism picture, it is one worth cultivating. The 19000 Japanese visitors in the year to August was less than the 28000 Chinese over the same period. The average amount spent by each Japanese visitor once in the country (excluding costs such as flights and accommodation) last year was R9000, compared with R9200 for Chinese visitors.

But the Japanese spend is increasing — last year's figure was up 25% from what it was in 2004. Brouwer is convinced it has the potential to rise further.

Of course, these don't figures tell the whole story. The highest-spending visitors, according to SA Tourism figures are the Mozambicans, who fork out, on average, R21000 with each visit. Angolans, Nigerians and Tanzanians also spend more than the Japanese or Chinese. What this doesn't take into account, however, is length of stay and the exclusions — African visitors generally pay for less in advance than east Asians. The trick with the lucrative east Asian markets is to increase the length of visitors' stays and the opportunities for them to spend.)

Part of Brouwer's job is making SA an easier place for Japanese tourists to spend. He encourages hotels on the set route of four- and five-star South African hotels that the Japanese stay in to accept yen as payment within their premises.

He is also, in conjunction with six major Japanese outbound tour operators, increasing the number of days Japanese tour groups spend in SA. This has required shaking up the itinerary that typically sees Japanese visits last six to eight days.

"Everyone said to me when I left SA: 'You cannot sell Japan without doing the traditional route.' That's Cape Town, Jo'burg for shopping one day — before they fly out — Vic Falls and Botswana, which are not SA."

SA Tourism's Japan operation has long marketed the Victoria Falls and Chobe reserve in Botswana along with South African destinations. But Brouwer questioned the wisdom of that.

"I looked at it and said we need to do stuff that the Japanese see as icons, not what we see. It's easy to say 'I'm a South African, you should go there, you should do this'. What do people like about SA who have been?"

Market research in Japan threw up some surprising winners. Along with Table Mountain and Robben Island, were the jacarandas in Pretoria and Johannesburg, Mandela Square in Sandton with its big statue, and the Blyde River Canyon in Mpumalanga, he says.

"It's the third-largest canyon in the world, but it's the only green canyon in the world. That is a huge seller for them."

Chobe was not seen as an icon, so Brouwer says he dropped it. They don't know we've done that, he says, speaking of his Botswana tourism counterparts. Four of the six operators have done so, while two retain Chobe in their itinerary.

"I've taken Chobe out and put in Kruger National Park for one day and Mpumalanga — the panoramic view, God's Window. I've given them a full day of panoramic views — they love scenic beauty, given them a full day in Kruger Park — they love animals. So SA's scoring two more days of Japanese visitors! "

With more time, people spend more. They are also spending in three provinces, rather than two.

In spreading the word about a destination few Japanese people know about requires a lot of proselytising. Brouwer works six nights a week, giving talks and seminars to consumer groups four nights a week and to trade groups two nights. He tries to keep Sundays for himself.

These are not tasks that country representatives generally do — most have sales staff that take on the task — but given that there are just three people in his office, including himself, Brouwer has little choice.

“It’s time-consuming, but I think that it’s taking the time that has increased our numbers. It’s going to increase the numbers even more.”

The problems Brouwer faces are hardly new. Crime is a biggie and he has no simple answers. The spiel that he gives tourists in his many seminars is to remind them that they are no longer in Japan and to be aware. “Luckily we’ve had no problems with Japanese crime-wise.”

There are no direct flights between Japan and SA and not enough indirect services for the demand, he says. In terms of health, AIDS is a concern, but people are generally more concerned about malaria, he says.

A lack of interest from the South African side hampers things, too. Brouwer complains that when he held workshops on the South African market in June in Osaka and Tokyo, only two provinces sent representatives — Western Cape and North West. As for the rest, he says that they “didn’t even respond”.

Brouwer will keep pushing to develop the market in his low-budget, quirky ways. The former chef and GM of Kiepersol’s Blue Mountain Lodge says he keeps giving recipes to a small South African restaurant tucked away in Ginza. He’s taught them umngqusho (without pap, which is not available in Japan). He has taught them how to do tripe — “the Afrikaans way with white sauce and baby pickled onions, which they love”. And he will keep doing the circuit of information meetings after work, trying to convert Japanese tourists to SA, one gathering at a time.

“It’s about maximizing exposure to SA to work the numbers. Even for 10 consumers, I go.”

Michael Bleby