



Rooted in community and legacy

Vomba Tours is a family-owned, well-established tour operator situated on the doorstep of Skukuza Kruger National Park and Sabi Sand Nature Reserve. Established in 2016 by Khimbini Hlongwane, the company offers a range of experiences to international and local travellers, including tours of the Kruger and surrounding areas, day excursions, overnight packages, game drives, local community tours, and cross-border trips to Mozambique and Swaziland.

Khimbini has more than 22 years of experience in safaris and tours, and brought his son, Dzunisani, into the business to oversee the operations and management side. Vomba Tours currently operates a fleet of 14 vehicles (open safari vehicles and closed air-conditioned vehicles), has 14 permanent staff members and employs up to 20 freelance guides during peak times. It has also formed mutually beneficial partnerships with other entities in the value chain, such as accommodation providers.

Meet Dzunisani Hlongwane, the director of sales and marketing at Vomba Tours:



Vomba Tours' Dzunisani Hlongwane's entrepreneurial insights

Communication

This is essential for seamless operations. Whether clients, suppliers, or team members, the dialogue should be constant and clear. Always ensure open communication.

Pricing strategy

With tourism being competitive, it's crucial to scrutinise your pricing and identify a distinctive proposition.

Unique selling point

In an industry that's saturated, your unique selling point is vital. Identify it and use it.

"My father launched Vomba Tours with the vision of employing local people, particularly the unemployed youth."

Raised in a village bordering the Kruger National Park and Sabi Sands and schooled in the area, Dzunisani Hlongwane became a qualified tracker after matric. He honed his skills at the Samara Karoo Reserve in Graaff-Reinet and the prestigious Londolozi Game Reserve in the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve. He says his passion for safaris and tourism was inspired by his father, Khimbini, who was previously a ranger in Sabi Sand Nature Reserve.

"I also aspired to be a ranger or a guide in a private game reserve," he says, "but when my father started his own company, I was needed there." Today, Dzunisani is the director of sales and marketing, and he also oversees company operations and management. He is currently studying for a diploma in tourism management at the University of South Africa.

Origins in community

Deeply rooted in the safari region of the Kruger National Park and Sabi Sands, Vomba Tours was born from Khimbini's desire to uplift the local communities. "My father enjoyed working at Singita Private Game Reserve, and also at Inyati Game Lodge, both of which are in the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve," says Dzunisani. "He said it was rewarding and he was able to provide for us. But he also wanted to have something to offer his community. He launched Vomba Tours with the vision of employing local people, particularly the unemployed youth," Dzunisani explains.

Additionally, Khimbini wanted to help the communities become part of the tourism value chain by giving them exposure and a platform. This opportunity was created through one of the company's curated experiences – village tours – enabling locals to sell their traditional art, crafts and food to visitors.

Navigating a major challenge

Vomba Tours was launched before the pandemic and was one of the tour operators lucky enough to survive it. But it was more than luck. Dzunisani says their saving grace was their business model, which caters to both international and local markets. "When there were no tourists from overseas, we focused on the local side of the business. We worked with lodges in Sabi Sand Nature Reserve and in the Kruger National Park to transport their staff members on-site, as the lodges still needed to be cleaned and maintained. It was guaranteed business, no bookings required, and we still have contracts with some of them. We were also the only operator that didn't have to sell off their vehicles to survive.

"During this time, we learnt the value of keeping communication lines open – with our clients, suppliers, and our bank. We asked for a payment break, and they gave us six months. Of course, we had to extend it after six months. It wasn't easy, but we eventually managed to get an overdraft, and this kept us going."

The evolution of Vomba Tours

Since its inception, Vomba Tours has

built a reputation in the industry for delivering unique client experiences. The company has also grown strong personal connections. However, the rapid evolution of the tourism industry calls for adaptability. A strategic decision has now been made to transition to a travel agency model, with a focus on providing comprehensive packages while reducing overheads.

Dzunisani explains: "A travel agency or destination management company could be more lucrative while requiring fewer resources. There's also a demand from clients who want to deal with my father because of his wealth of experience in the industry. Some met him during his guiding days at Singita and Inyati, and they have returned. They trust him and wish to book tours with him. Some have been booking tours from Cape Town all the way to Sabi Sands through him.

"While we've done many of these tours, we're not selling ourselves as a travel agency or a destination marketing company. These are the entities that would typically create the itineraries and client experiences that we do, but without the high operating costs. That's why we see this as our next move; there's growth in it."

Vomba Tours has been leveraging mutually beneficial partnerships with accommodation providers over the years. However, a longstanding ambition has been to own a lodge, an in-house property that would become an integral component of their curated itineraries and packages, while guaranteeing a seamless journey for their clients. Dzunisani says this is one of their major goals in the near future. "But we'll continue to incorporate other lodges across the country, because of our clients' preferences, and we also appreciate the

diversity that other lodges bring to the experience.”

A strategic growth opportunity

A new chapter for Vomba Tours is its inclusion in the SATSA Sigma business incubator programme under the enterprise development segment. “Many companies had applied for this business scholarship, but after extensive short-listing, Vomba Tours was interviewed and selected,” says Sigma International CEO Akash Singh. “Airlink then came on board as the sponsor, which aligns with its deep roots in championing the inclusive agenda.”

The programme aims to bolster various areas of the business, such as enhancing its corporate profile and online visibility, and finetuning its marketing approaches. A significant emphasis is on elevating managerial capabilities – coaching Dzunisani to ensure he is supported and equipped for the company's future growth.

“Incubation with impact is only possible if business needs and gaps are identified and understood and then championed with passion,” explains Singh. “It’s very much like the ancient Japanese art of Kintsugi... taking something that is not at its optimum and gluing it together for renewed impact!”

Dzunisani says he is grateful for the opportunity that SATSA and Sigma have given him to grow his knowledge. “We've also had a lot of support from everyone in the team. Ruben Manikam has taught me so much about financial management and I was also introduced to Craig Drysdale on the sales and marketing side. There have been many helpful webinars, including with travel marketing company Big Ambitions

recently, and its CEO Natalia Rosa.”

“We also thank Airlink for their support even before they sponsored us. They gave us business from the nearby airports, as we are the closest operator to Skukuza. I've been working with Karen McDulling the manager at Skukuza Airport, and she's been great.”

With a dedicated team of mentors assigned to Dzunisani and a strong focus on marketing strategy, a key objective going forward is improving access to international clients. Meanwhile, Vomba Tours continues to be driven by its commitment to excellence and personal connections and looks set to further reinforce its position as a leading travel entity in South Africa.