**HEADING**

**Eastern Cape tourism stars shine bright at inaugural awards**

**KOUGA** – The Eastern Cape’s tourism stars were celebrated in style at the inaugural Eastern Cape Tourism Awards, held at Mentors Country Estate on 27 September 2025.

Hosted in partnership with Kouga Local Municipality as the proud naming partner, the event marked a historic milestone in recognising and showcasing the province’s finest tourism offerings.

The celebration brought together businesses, industry leaders, and community organisations, creating a powerful platform for collaboration, innovation, and investment. From luxury hotels to cultural gems, from adventure operators to future leaders in tourism, the awards highlighted the extraordinary diversity and excellence that position the Eastern Cape as a premier tourism destination.

**A Night of Celebration and Reflection**

Opening the evening, Kouga Executive Deputy Mayor, Timothy Jantjes, set the tone for the celebration by highlighting the importance of the inaugural Eastern Cape Tourism Awards.

“We are not only celebrating excellence in tourism but also writing history together, right here in our beautiful province,” Jantjes said.

“This is a moment that belongs to all of us – whether you are an influencer, a business owner, an established tourism enterprise, or a community organisation. Each of you play a vital role in weaving the story of the Eastern Cape, a story that is rich, diverse, and undeniably inspiring.”

Reflecting on the province’s natural and cultural treasures, he added: “Our province is extraordinary – from the rolling mountains to pristine coastlines, from our game reserves to our historic towns and villages. But what truly sets the Eastern Cape apart is our people. The warmth, authenticity, and creativity of our communities turn every visit into a lasting memory. Tourism is about more than experiences; it is about the jobs created, the businesses supported, and the pride that fills every community welcoming visitors to share in what we have to offer.”

**Elevating the Eastern Cape**

Turning to the broader impact of tourism, he emphasised its role as a driver of growth.
“Beyond the laughter and the adventures lies a serious truth: tourism is an engine for growth in our province. It is a sector that connects rural and urban, heritage and modernity, small businesses and global travellers. It is an industry that has shown resilience in the face of challenges and one that continues to innovate with eco-tourism, cultural tourism, township tourism, and sustainable tourism leading the way.”

He concluded by commending the awards’ role in elevating the province: “The Eastern Cape is home to world-class attractions, and it was an honour to shine a spotlight on the incredible people and businesses driving our tourism success. This event was not only about recognising excellence, but also about positioning the Eastern Cape as a leading destination for both business and leisure tourism. The momentum generated here will continue to boost investment, increase visitor numbers, and ensure that our tourism industry thrives long into the future.”

**Award Highlights**

Categories were carefully curated to reflect the vibrancy of the industry, with winners announced across accommodation, attractions, culinary experiences, cultural heritage, sustainability, and innovation. Special recognition was also given to the Future Leaders in Tourism – young professionals under 35 shaping the industry’s future.

**The winners are:**

* ***Best Hotel & Resort:*** Courtyard Hotel Gqeberha
* ***Best Guesthouse and B&B:*** The Sands @ St Francis Bay
* ***Best Backpacker / Self-Catering:*** Tube & Axe Backpackers & Lodge
* *Best Lodge Stay:* Kuzuko Lodge
* *Digital Tourism Influencer of the Year:* The Real Travel Guy
* ***Sustainable Tourism Award:*** Stormsriver Adventures
* ***Outstanding Culinary Experience & Restaurants:*** Awehness Travel
* ***Ultimate Adventure Attraction:*** Face Adrenalin Bloukrans Bungy
* ***Exceptional Safari & Game Park Experience:* Pumba** Private Game Reserve
* ***Tour Operator of the Year:*** Awehness Travel
* ***Unique Agri-Tourism Experience:*** Pabala Private Nature Reserve
* ***Iconic Cultural & Heritage Experience:*** Tsitsikamma Indigenous Tours
* ***Premier Conference & Events Venue:*** The Boardwalk International Convention Centre
* ***Events & Conference Organiser of the Year****:* Boast Events
* ***Future Leaders in Tourism:*** Zibonele Mdletshe

**Looking Ahead**

The resounding success of the first-ever Eastern Cape Tourism Awards has cemented its place on the provincial tourism calendar. Organisers have already begun preparations to make the 2026 edition even bigger, drawing more businesses, investors, and visitors to experience all that the province has to offer.

“The Eastern Cape Tourism Awards is more than just an awards ceremony – it is a movement to celebrate, support, and grow tourism in our province,” Jantjes added.