



The Herald Focus

OPINION
AS IMPORTANT FOR
SA TO OVERCOME
SEXISM AS RACISM
PAGE 16



OPINION & LETTERS | TV, FUN & GAMES: **PAGES 16-20**

TRAVEL

Web easiest way to book trips

Star rating system no longer accurate reflection of standard

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GONE are the days of phoning up a travel agent and holding your breath while it hunts for adequate accommodation for your long-awaited – and costly – holiday abroad.

Now intrepid travellers go online and are given a choice of thousands of hotels, B&Bs and guest houses, with a virtual tour of the establishments and their immediate surroundings all just a mouse-click or finger-tap away.

Fancy non-smoking, child-free, singles only, vegetarian-catering accommodation? Just tweak the settings of the online accommodation finder – also called search engines – of your choice, and you're A for away. Now, thanks to a doctoral thesis by Eastern Cape-based tourism industry researcher, Wouter Hensens, it has been proven: the world wide web has turned tourism on its head and lead to the "democratisation of the industry".

Hensens, 32, knows all about the decentralisation of power from big tourism industry players into the hands of millions of tourists around



NEW WAY OF TRAVELLING
... Tourism search engine TripAdvisor is changing the way tourists pick their accommodation.

the globe. Not only did he grow up in the industry – his family in Holland worked in the hospitality sector – but he has just completed his doctorate in how personal online ratings by hotel guests are rendering moot the industry's age-old star rating system. It means that thanks to giant internet accommodation search engines like TripAdvisor – it boasts more than 45-million reviews of tourist establishments globally – a Cape Town B&B run by an independent couple with no star rating is in fact the most popular and highest rated in the city when searched for online. "I used to think that hotel

ratings should be left to the experts (officials who give hotels their star ratings)," said Hensens, the academic dean of Stenden South Africa, a tourism school in Port Alfred.

"But since this research, I've completely changed sides. If one expert recommends a certain hotel, but 100 guests say it's rubbish, who are you going to believe more? I call it the democratisation of the retail industry.

Hensens' research comes amid a drive by Tourism Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk to improve the country's grading system – a costly affair of "over 400 hours of consul-

tation" with stakeholders and the formation of a new rating awards committee. But according to Hensens' research, the minister might be swimming against the tide. Having focused his research on online accommodation tool, TripAdvisor, Hensens also has a masters degree in which he focussed on hotel classification in Indonesia.

"My brief was to develop a unique hotel classification system, and for that I had to benchmark over 30 rating systems around the world," he said.

Usually overseen by governments of their respective countries, Hensens said the star rating classification system was not only costly, but also failed to measure what visitors' experiences would be like.

"There is a lack of global alignment of star ratings. Your three-star experience in Germany will be different in France," Hensens said. "Over the past 30 years there's been a boom in star classification systems, but it says nothing about one's experience. Experience is a very subjective measure, but when 100 or more guests rate their experience (of the same establishment), you get a general sense of what your stay will be like."

His research found that there was no correlation between star ratings



STARRY EYED. ... Eastern Cape based tourism industry researcher, Wouter Hensens, has written his doctoral thesis on how the world wide web is rendering moot the traditional tourism star rating system. Picture: FREDLIN ADRIAAN

and ratings left by guests (online). "One example I found was the top rated hotel in Rome was a small, 2-star establishment run by a couple. It received 4.8 out of 5 on TripAdvisor."

It eclipsed the guest ratings of other 5-star establishments in the Italian capital, he said. His conclu-

sion offers two scenarios for the future – both dismal news for the traditional star rating system.

"The one is that social media (online ratings) will drive out the conventional system, forcing governments to ask themselves why they have spent so much classifying their hotels. "The second is that

conventional (star ratings) will take the back seat and only focus on measuring tangible items which guests might visit for, leaving the subjecting (online) rating to social media."

He will receive his doctorate from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University next month.