



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

26 March 2026

UCT study challenges assumptions about Cape Town's iconic sites



Shoni Khangala

Photo: Supplied

A University of Cape Town (UCT) study has found that local and international visitors have significantly different perceptions when visiting World Heritage Sites (WHS).

The PhD study in [Marketing](#) by Shoni Khangala investigated the post-COVID-19 visitor experience at two of South Africa's most iconic WHSs. It discovered differing perceptions among local and international visitors, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all tourism strategy won't work; and that, instead, strategies should be tailored to different groups.

It also found that simply knowing that a place is a WHS, such as Robben Island Museum and Table Mountain, does not automatically make the visit better.

Titled "*Reimagining the tourists' customer journey post-COVID-19: A case study of two world heritage sites – Robben Island Museum and Table Mountain*", the study provided a framework for WHS managers to create more meaningful and resilient visitor experiences in a post-pandemic world.

"I wanted to understand the entire journey, but with a specific focus on how it has been reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. To do this, I examined several key influences: whether visitors even know they're at a World Heritage Site, how lingering pandemic concerns affect their behaviour, and how core elements of a visit – like learning something new, feeling entertained, escaping daily life and appreciating natural beauty – work together to shape their overall perception," said Khangala.

"I then dug deeper to see how these experiences influence visitors on a personal level. For instance, I explored how a powerful visit might become part of someone's self-identity, their "self-brand", how it encourages them to engage more deeply with the site, and how this ultimately leads to satisfaction and loyalty," he said.

The findings challenge some common assumptions. The study found that simply knowing a place is a WHS does not automatically make the visit better. It also identified how elements such as learning, enjoyment, escape from everyday life and the beauty of the environment shape visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

"Overall, the findings show that carefully managing the visitor experience is essential for the long-term sustainability of WHSs, especially in developing countries," he said.

Khangala is one of a handful of South Africans who have worked at both of these iconic WHSs, which are visible from each other. The study gave him the opportunity to share his unique experience.

"I was inspired by the desire to put these two WHSs from a developing country on the map, contributing to global understanding of how WHSs worldwide have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and how they can develop recovery strategies.

"World Heritage Sites are globally recognised for their cultural and natural value, yet research on visitor experiences at these sites, especially in developing countries, remains limited. This gap is even greater when comparing different types of sites such as cultural heritage and natural WHSs," said Khangala.

He said that given the profound disruption to tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it became important to understand how visitor expectations and behaviour have changed. Studying these dynamics at iconic sites such as Robben Island and Table Mountain offered an opportunity to contribute meaningful insights to both scholarship and tourism practice.

Well-managed tourism at heritage sites benefits society in several ways. It protects important cultural and natural heritage for future generations, strengthens local economies through tourism revenue, and supports jobs in surrounding communities. By identifying how visitor experiences can be improved, this research helps ensure that tourism remains sustainable, educational and meaningful.

“Ultimately, a better visitor experience means more people leave with a deeper appreciation for our shared heritage, which benefits the sites, the local economy and the public who visit them,” he said.

Khangala said the study serves as a "time capsule" or benchmark. It captured how people were thinking and feeling about travel during a very specific moment of recovery in late 2022 and early 2023.

“As we move forward, this data will serve as a crucial reference point for researchers to understand how tourist behaviour has continued to change. Another notable contribution is that the study compares a cultural heritage site and a natural heritage site within the same research. This comparison revealed that different types of heritage sites require different visitor engagement strategies. When visitor experiences are thoughtfully designed, balancing education, enjoyment and meaningful engagement, heritage sites can become more resilient and sustainable in an uncertain global tourism environment,” he concluded.

Khangala will graduate for his PhD in Marketing from UCT’s [Faculty of Commerce](#) on Wednesday, 1 April 2026 at the Sarah Baartman Hall.

Ends

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer

Communication and Marketing Department

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Tel: (021) 650 5672

Cell: (072) 563 9500

Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za