

PUT ZEST IN WEST

PETER ROLFE

Covid-19 cost \$2.7bn in visitor spending

MELBOURNE'S west was hit "disproportionably" hard by Covid lockdowns and needs to address an "image problem" to become stronger, a study to be released on Thursday reveals.

The report examining the impact of Covid-19 on tourism in Victoria found visitation to Melbourne's west shrank by two-thirds. The region lost 5.1 million visitors during 2020 and 2021.

The study by Victoria University, the Victoria Tourism Industry Council and Western Melbourne Tourism reveals the west lost \$2.7bn in visitor spending compared to 2019, as repeated lockdowns

crippled businesses. It found government spending on recovery focused largely on regional Victoria and Melbourne's CBD, leaving regions such as Melbourne's west more vulnerable.

But the fast-growing area, including Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley and Wyndham council zones, can grow back "stronger" with careful planning and fresh ideas, the study says.

Victoria University's school of the visitor economy director Joanne Pyke said it was a wake-up call to look at what had slowed the potential

of the west and identify new ways to build a more sustainable tourism sector.

"It would be a wasted opportunity to return to a business-as-usual approach once the sector recovers from the aftershocks of the crisis," she said.

"This study highlights the need for government at all levels, businesses, and industry to work together to make Melbourne's west more resilient in the interests of jobs growth, economic recovery and community wellbeing."

The Resilient Enterprises and Sustainable Employment in Tourism report, funded in

part by the state government, said the west was battling the same chronic labour and skills shortages apparent across Australia.

There were "substantial opportunities for industry development due to planned transport infrastructure spending in the region and forecast population growth" and a largely untapped potential to promote the west's multiculturalism through cultural tourism, it said.

But the region faces unique challenges including being perceived as an industrial area with fewer things to see and do compared to other

areas of Melbourne. "The region faces an image problem," the report said.

"There is a perceived lack of events, general scarcity of tourism attractions and poorer cultural and entertainment infrastructure compared to other parts of Melbourne."

"The lack of infrastructure (in the form of 4-star accommodation and public transport options in outer suburbs) further lowers destination appeal and accessibility."

To combat the problem – and help the west "build back better" – Dr Pyke said a destination management plan was



needed to brand the west similar to the way the Yarra Valley, Great Ocean Rd and Mornington Peninsula had been marketed.

"We need a visitor economy marketing plan so we can tell the story of our industrial, multicultural and first nation's history," she said.

The study included a survey of 275 business owners and managers at tourism operations in Melbourne's west at the end of 2021.

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REPORT FINDINGS

THE CHALLENGES

- An "image problem" that comes from being perceived as an industrial area with few tourism attractions and low aesthetic value compared to other areas of Melbourne
- A reliance on overseas visitors connecting with family and friends, and international students whose numbers remain constrained.
- Limited business capacity and digital literacy of operators, which prevents many from pivoting to e-commerce or using the potential of technology to enhance their businesses.
- Relatively poor regional infrastructure in accommodation and public transport due to years of under-investment and disjointed planning for the area.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRENGTHENING TOURISM IN THE WEST

- Significant infrastructure mega projects planned for the region, including Melbourne Airport rail link, Sunshine precinct project, and the new Footscray Hospital.
- Projected strong population growth, particularly of young adults, families and diverse communities.
- The potential to boost cultural tourism in the area due to its vibrant multiculturalism.

Source: Resilient Enterprises and Sustainable Employment in Tourism



Emily Stott at Overnewton Castle in Melbourne's west. Picture: Alex Coppel

WE NEED TO SELL OUR REGION TO THE WORLD

PETER ROLFE

WHEN repeated Victorian lockdowns brought weddings to a standstill, Overnewton Castle managing director Emma Stott knew she needed to diversify her business.

The historic bluestone homestead built by Scottish pioneer William Taylor in 1849 at Keilor had been a

successful, family-run wedding venue with boutique accommodation pre-Covid.

But as the Andrews government drove Melbourne's in and out of lockdowns, Ms Stott decided to add heritage tours, high teas and even drag bingo and ladies' nights to help balance the books.

"Everything imploded

because we had no visitors, no weddings and no accommodation guests, followed by Melbourne's on-again, off-again opening and closing," she said.

Taking advantage of the pandemic crisis to tap into business coaching and workshops exploring new ways to enhance business, Ms Stott was left frustrated by a lack of awareness of

what the west had to offer.

"The west of Melbourne is so underdone in terms of reputation, but it has so much to offer," she said.

"It's a little disappointing the potential wasn't supported as much as it should be – even among our local government representatives."

Ms Stott said the west needed a committee of

industry experts to help sell it to the world.

"We don't even exist in the eyes of the tourism sector for Victoria," she said.

"We don't just want people on a committee to say they are on a committee – we need people in the trenches on an industry-based advisory board, which also includes Western Tourism and Visit Victoria."