**THE BEST OF THE BEST IN LOCAL TOURISM HONOURED**

**Bloemfontein**: About 200 guests gathered at the glittering 2018 Lilizela Tourism Awards to honour and celebrate Free State tourism product owners who have worked hard to perfect their products and provide travelers with unique experience. This year’s venue was the luxury car dealership Land Rover, were tourism products owners were treated like tourists in their own back yard, under the theme “Honouring the best of the best”.

The awards are an initiative of the National Department of Tourism (NDT) led by South African Tourism and delivered by the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa. The aim of the awards is to recognize and celebrate tourism businesses for tourism excellence, for their contribution to South Africa’s global competitiveness, and for growing tourism’s contribution towards GDP and job creation.

Research shows a significant increase in the number of international arrivals for the FS Province and this is good enough reason to want to make sure that the province’s tourism products are of high standard to attract even more travelers to the province.

When delivering key note address, Acting HOD Dr. Mbulelo Nokwequ emphasised the importance of transformation in the tourism sector. He said, “the South African tourism industry is essential for transformation and development both socially and economically. He went further to say that these awards should also support the Government’s resolve for a Radical Socio Economic Transformation”.

The competition is divided into four categories namely; Service Excellence, Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development and the MEC’s Award. In the Free State Province, about 63 tourism players and businesses entered the competition this year with 37 finalists.

A total of 20 winners were bestowed and will compete with winners from other provinces during the national competition which will take place in November 2018. The winners include:

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| **Name of Establishment** | **Category** |
| Clarens Xtreme Adventures | Action and Adventure |
| Gariep A Forever Resort Caravan Park | Caravan and Camping |
| Lions Rest Country Estate | Country House |
| Letsatsi Game Lodge | Game Lodge |
| Art Lovers Guest House | Guest House |
| Castello Guest House Bloemfontein | Guest House |
| Tukha Guest House | Guest House |
| Southern Sun Bloemfontein | Hotel |
| Frontier Inn and Casino | Hotel |
| Road Lodge Bloemfontein Airport | Hotel |
| Wild Horses Exclusive Mountain Lodge | Lodge |
| Lions Rock Lodge | Lodge |
| Monte Bello Venue | Meetings, Exhibitions and Special Events (MESE) |
| Gariep A Forever Resort Conference | Meetings, Exhibitions and Special Events (MESE) |
| Basotho Cultural Village | Roots and Culture |
| Free State National Botanical Garden | Social Beauty |
| Bethesda Exclusive Accommodation | Self-catering Exclusive |
| Gariep A Forever Resort Chalets | Self-catering Shared Vacation |
| Thabile Tours and Shuttle | Tour Operators |
| Joseph Rantseke | Tourist Guide (Culture) |

Talking to one of the winners, Ms. Satty Mdhluli the founder of Thabile Tours and Shuttle Services, she praised the awards for the exposure they provide to tourism products owners and establishments. Ms. Satty established Thabile Tours and Shuttle Services in 2006, and since then the business has grown tremendously and does not only operate locally and has transported tourists to countries such as Malawi, Botswana and Lesotho.

Recipient of 2018 MEC Award is Monate Nate Wa Phokeng Lodge from Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality.

The department wishes to congratulate all the finalists and winners and also extend good luck to the 20 winners who will be representing the province in the national competition.

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**For more details contact: Buko Gcolotela on 051 400 4725 or Email:** [**gcolotelab@destea.gov.za**](mailto:gcolotelab@destea.gov.za)