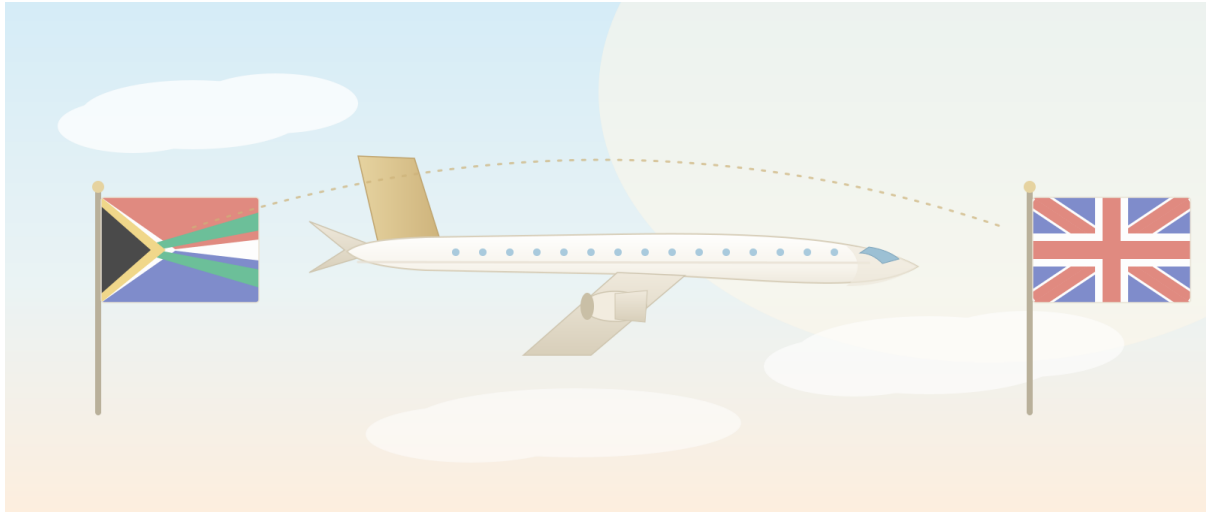


TRAVEL & CUSTOMS COMPLIANCE

New Compulsory Traveller Declarations: What Everyone Crossing South Africa's Borders Now Needs to Know



New customs declarations now apply on departure and arrival. Illustration © Ryan Michael & Associates.

Prepared by Ryan Michael & Associates | Client Advisory | 3 July 2026

With effect from 1 July 2026, the South African Revenue Service (SARS) requires every person crossing a South African border to lodge a traveller declaration online before setting off. The requirement applies whether you are flying out for a business trip, driving across a land border, or returning home from abroad. What was previously an optional convenience has become a legal obligation, and travellers who ignore it risk delays, penalties, and the loss of goods.

The measure is the latest step in a long-running modernisation of the country's customs processes, and it arrives alongside a separate change to how large sums of cash must be declared at the border. Below, we set out what the new rules mean in practice.

From a voluntary pilot to a legal requirement

The declaration system is not entirely new. It grew out of the digital “travel pass” that SARS first trialled at selected South African airports in 2022, as part of a wider drive to modernise border administration. That trial ran through the South African Traveller Management System (SATMS), which was later rolled out to sea, land, and rail ports of entry and exit.

Throughout the trial period, completing the declaration was optional. From 1 July 2026, however, it is compulsory. In practical terms, that shifts the burden onto every traveller to plan ahead rather than to rely on formalities being sorted out on arrival.

Who must declare, and by when

According to SARS, the online declaration must be submitted no earlier than 24 hours before you depart from the country you are travelling from. For travellers reaching South Africa via a multi-stop route, the clock runs against the final leg of the journey into the country.

The obligation is broad. SARS has indicated that, as a general rule, it captures:

- South African citizens and residents, as well as foreign travellers;
- Persons travelling by air, land, sea, or rail; and
- Minors and anyone unable to complete the form themselves — in which case a parent, legal guardian, caretaker, or other assisting person must complete it on their behalf.

Who is exempt

The rules do carve out a limited set of exceptions. A narrow group of travellers who qualify for paper-based exceptions are not obliged to file online. In addition, air and sea passengers who are merely transiting through South Africa are excused, provided they remain within the designated transit areas and do not formally enter the country. Everyone else must use the online platform.

What information you must provide

When completing the declaration, SARS requires travellers to supply:

- Passport or travel document details;
- Details of the journey itself;
- Contact details;
- Details of any travelling companions, where applicable; and
- A declaration of any goods, currency, or bearer negotiable instruments being carried — with further particulars if the system prompts for them.

What actually needs to be declared

Ordinary personal effects intended for your own use do not need to be declared. What does require attention are goods, currency, or other items that exceed your traveller allowance or that otherwise call for customs scrutiny. SARS has set out the duty-free position per traveller as follows:

- Goods valued at up to R5,000 per person may be brought in free of duty and VAT;
- A further amount, up to R20,000, may be permitted but can attract duty and VAT; and
- Where the combined value tops R25,000, ordinary customs duties and VAT become payable.

This concession may be claimed only once per person in any 30-day window, and it is not available to travellers returning after an absence of less than 48 hours.

Once a declaration is lodged, SARS sends a confirmation together with instructions on what to do on arrival at the relevant port. Travellers are advised to keep that confirmation accessible — on a phone or printed — and to follow the directions and signage at the port.

If the system is down — and the cost of getting it wrong

SARS has made allowance for practical hiccups. A traveller who cannot file electronically — because of a system failure, no internet access, or another reasonable ground — may be assisted at the port by an officer or at a self-service terminal where one is available. In exceptional cases, a paper declaration may still be accepted, though SARS stresses this is the rare exception rather than the norm.

The consequences of non-compliance are real. SARS has warned that travellers are legally bound to make a full and truthful declaration. A failure to declare goods, currency, or other relevant items — or the making of a false declaration — can result in delays, the detention or forfeiture of goods, financial penalties, or other enforcement action.

A parallel change: declaring cash above R100,000

Running alongside the mandatory online declaration is a significant development in anti-money-laundering law. President Cyril Ramaphosa has issued a proclamation bringing section 30 of the Financial Intelligence Centre Act into operation.

The effect is twofold. First, both local and foreign travellers must now declare cash exceeding R100,000 when they cross the country's land and sea ports. Second, SARS Customs and Excise is formally tasked with receiving those declarations and passing them to the Financial Intelligence Centre. From 1 July 2026, any traveller crossing an air, land, or sea border while carrying cash, goods, currency, or bearer negotiable instruments above the R100,000 threshold must declare it through the customs traveller management system.

For anyone moving settlement proceeds, estate distributions, or business funds across a border, this is the change to watch: the R100,000 cash trigger now bites at the physical border, not only through the banking channel.

Sources and acknowledgements

This advisory summarises and comments on publicly reported information. We gratefully acknowledge the reporting of BusinessTech (article by Staff Writer, published 1 July 2026, “New mandatory travel rules for anyone entering or leaving South Africa”, businesstech.co.za), which brought these developments to wider attention. The underlying regulatory requirements are those of the South African Revenue Service (SARS), and the cash-declaration change flows from a proclamation by President Cyril Ramaphosa commencing section 30 of the Financial Intelligence Centre Act. Travellers should verify the current requirements directly with SARS before travelling. Nothing in this article constitutes legal advice, and readers should obtain tailored advice on their own circumstances.

HOW RM & ASSOCIATES CAN HELP

Cross-border movement of money and assets is where travel rules, tax, exchange control, and estate planning meet — and where a misstep can be costly. At Ryan Michael & Associates, we help individuals, families, and businesses stay firmly on the right side of these obligations, and we resolve matters when they go wrong.

Our services include:

- **Deceased estates & trusts** — administration of local and cross-border estates, executorship, liquidation and distribution accounts, and estate-related tax and compliance matters;

- **Conveyancing & property law** — residential, commercial, and sectional-title transfers, bonds, and development work;
- **High Court litigation & dispute resolution** — including asset recovery, forfeiture, and customs- and tax-related disputes;
- **Family law & divorce** — including the financial and cross-border dimensions of matrimonial matters;
- **Corporate & commercial** — company structuring, agreements, and regulatory compliance, including FICA-related obligations;
- **Notarial & insolvency services** — the full suite of work handled by our Attorneys, Notaries, and Conveyancers.

Planning to move funds, wind up an offshore or local estate, or transfer proceeds across a border? Speak to us first. A short consultation now can prevent detained goods, penalties, and delays later.

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