

Uganda losing millions in potential revenue from people with disabilities

HANDICAPPED. Owing to the inadequate design of accommodation facilities and lack of tailored safaris, Uganda's tourism industry is losing revenue which could be earned from visitors with disabilities.

BY TONY MUSHONOROZI
editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

In February of 2015, a picture went viral on social media. It showed a group of white people being carried by Ugandans on stretchers in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The young men were all wearing uniforms, which painted the picture that they worked for a government body. It looked like, in desperation, the government was willing to do anything just to make tourism dollars.

Steven Assimwe, the chief executive officer of Uganda Tourism Board says, "This is a premium service for tourists who wish to enjoy nature without doing the hard work involved. Tasks such as climbing Mt. Rwenzori or tracking gorillas in Bwindi and Mgahinga are not easy for everybody to do by themselves. So we employ porters to help carry them."

It turns out a group of tourists who could afford it, wished to track gorillas without expending any energy. But social media was having none of that, and soon the narrative became about how well-meaning uneducated workmen were robbed of their dignity without even knowing it. The nation was flabbergasted; at least on social media.

In August 2016, one year and a half after the viral picture, the same scene played out again, but this time it was brilliant, ethical and noble.

Necessity drives invention

A group of 10 German tourists were aided to track gorillas in Bwindi on stretchers carried by Ugandan men, only this time; all the tourists involved were people living with disabilities and had no other way of tracking gorillas, since it can only be done on foot.

Hassan Pirani, owner of Safariganga Limited, a Muyenga-based tour company, is the man who created the special service for tourists with disabilities.

"In March 2016, I was at the International Tourism Bazaar in Germany when I met officials from one of the many companies that specialise in tours for the handicapped. They had a group of handicapped tourists that wanted to track gorillas in Uganda. They wanted to know if the necessary facilities were in place, and if not, they wanted me to come up with something. They were desperate," says Pirani.

It was clear from the word go that the only apparatus for the job would be a stretcher carried by locals. So long as it was narrow enough for the footpaths in the impenetrable forest and light enough to be carried easily by men, all would be well.



A tourist is helped onto a stretcher tailored for the gorilla tracking trip in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. COURTESY PHOTO

After four months of working with an engineer, the final prototype was created and it weighed an impressive six kilograms. It was as narrow as 90cm.

The day those German tourists climbed onto those stretchers to track gorillas in August last year was the first step in making Uganda's tourism sector friendly for people living with disabilities (PWDs).

The drive to get equipped

"Uganda is losing millions of dollars in tourism income because of being unfriendly to people living with disabilities. In much of the West, disabled people have lots of privileges and more often than not, they have more money to spend than other people."

Assimwe is aware of this fact. "In many Western countries, people living with disabilities are not only strongly encouraged to travel but the state actually sponsors them to take trips regularly. Clearly, they appreciate the fact that PWDs are more often than not left at home when the rest of the family go to have fun in places such as beaches or exotic places around the world."

When asked what Uganda has done to attract these tourists, Assimwe highlights that all the five star hotels

have special rooms designed for PWDs. He added that during inspections of tourist lodges and hotels, facilities that are unfriendly to PWDs are rated very poorly.

"We encourage all hotels and lodges to be mindful of people with disabilities. We ask that accommodation providers offer well trained, well exposed staff to be on call fulltime for these special tourists, and that rooms must be easy for wheelchair access."

But this is not enough, according to Pirani. "However helpful the staff may be, they could never replace what special facilities for PWDs could do, especially when it comes to personal space and convenience. It is not convenient until convenience rooms are convenient enough," he says.

What the tourists need

A good number of people with disabilities need a special toilet that is much lower than regular ones. They need special bathrooms with strong handles in strategic positions to make it easy for one to pull oneself around. Short of these, you would have to manually lend a helping hand and that is not convenient.

Sadly, most Ugandan hotels and lodges cannot boast of having such facilities, according to the executive

director of Uganda Hotel Association, Jean Byamugisha.

"At the moment, I can say only five star hotels in Kampala have the specially designed rooms for tourists with disabilities," she says, adding that not every PWDs needs a specially designed room to be comfortable.

"The tourism sector is definitely friendly to PWDs because we ensure that our members give special care to PWDs, by doing everything possible to make their stay as comfortable as possible; that is, giving them rooms that are easily accessible by wheelchair."

PWD FACILITIES NOT COMMON

Only five star hotels in Kampala have specially designed rooms for tourists with disabilities. In national parks, only four lodges have specially designed rooms for people with disabilities. They are: Paraa and Mwesa safari lodges, Chobe, and Silverback Lodge Bwindi. The four luxury lodges only have seven rooms between them.

chair, rooms on the ground floor if there is no elevator, assigning well trained staff to support them in any way and so on," she says.

Still lacking

A specially designed room for people with disabilities has the following features: Level flat drive, wheelchair access, wheelchair-accessible toilets and bathrooms with rails for holding onto, fold-down shower chair, lowered bathtub and ground floor facilities.

Specioza Kwarach, an official at Marasa Africa says, "Generally, we do not get many disabled guests coming on safari. The reason for the low numbers, I think, is that we have not sold the country as being friendly to PWDs."

"Truth be told, the tourism sector in Uganda is not friendly to disabled people. To make it friendly, we would have to look at all aspects of the safari, right from transportation to the accommodation to even the activities themselves."

However, Emma Mugizi, the public relations officer, Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, argues that the ministry incorporates gender and labour laws in its laws and policies and that access for PWDs is one of the important features they look out

Uganda losing millions in potential revenue from people with disabilities



"At the moment, I can say only five star hotels in Kampala have specially designed rooms for tourists with disabilities. However, the tourism sector is definitely friendly to PWDs because we ensure that our members give special care to PWDs, by doing everything possible to make their stay as comfortable as possible; that is, giving them rooms that are easily accessible by wheelchair, rooms on the ground floor if there is no elevator and assigning well trained staff to support them in any way."

JEAN BYAMUGISHA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF UGANDA HOTEL OWNERS ASSOCIATION

1.6m

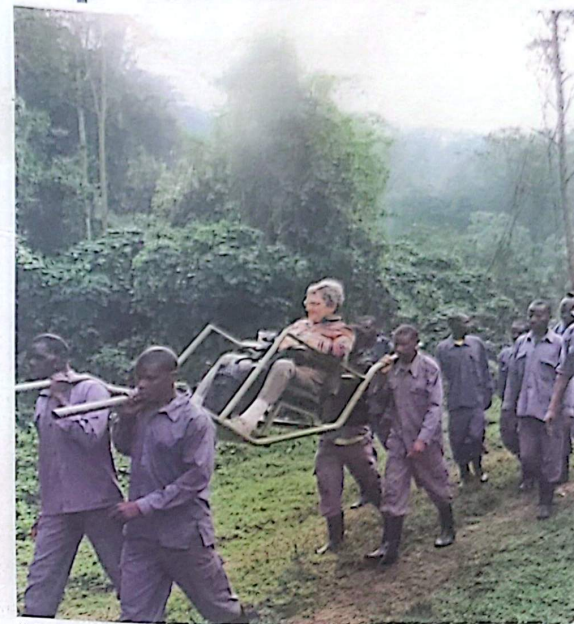
FEES IN SHILLINGS THAT EACH TOURIST WITH DISABILITIES PAID FOR THE STRETCHER SERVICE ON TOP OF GORILLA PERMIT FEES

for when grading and classifying hotels. "Through inspection exercises, we also encourage hospitality establishments without facilities for PWDs to put them in place," she says. She was not able to give quantifiable information about the establishments that offer these services.

Many companies around the world specialise in tours for handicapped people because it is a lucrative business. Just to paint a picture; on top of the 600 dollars that each tourist paid for the gorilla-tracking permit, each one paid 450 dollars extra for the stretcher service.

The 450 dollars were paid to the locals that provided the stretcher service. These young men were not employed by Uganda Wildlife Authority or UTR. They were just members of the surrounding community who were for the first time benefiting from the tourism economy that is otherwise always exclusively enjoyed by the government and lodge owners.

Many countries, mostly in Africa, seem not to realise the potential in being friendly to PWDs. Any player in the tourism sector that desires to go to the next level must furnish tourists with disabilities with the convenience and comfort they deserve.



Uniformed members of the community carry tourists with disabilities on the tracking trip to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. COURTESY PHOTO

FACILITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Required items in a hotel;

- Designated handicap parking with a priority location in the parking lot.
- Step-free access (level or ramped) and/or lift access to main entrance.
- Automated door opening.
- Ground level/lobby level accessible washroom.
- Elevator to above ground accessible accommodation.
- Level or ramped access to public areas.

Rooms:

- Wider entry and bathroom doorways - external 80 cm, internal 75 cm.
- Mid-height light switches and power outlets.
- Lever type door handles.
- Manoeuvring space on each side of the bed - 90 cm.
- Roll-in shower.
- Wheeled shower chair and/or wall-mounted shower seat.
- Grab bars in bathroom.
- Raised toilet.
- Lower hanging closet space.

www.tripsadvisor.com



Top: Tourists with disabilities strapped onto a special stretcher for the gorilla tracking trip. Left: A hotel bathroom should have grab bars for support. (COURTESY/NET PHOTOS)

If I had to be somewhere in Uganda right now, it would definitely be...



ENTERRE WILD LIFE SANCTUARY: The centre's location on the edge of Lake Victoria, its rich vegetation and wide range of birds, butterflies and animals make it an attractive venue for education. Due to its unique position as the only captive wild animal collection centre in the country, it undertakes several conservation initiatives, including wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.

DAVID NTENSIBE, PHARMACIST



KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK: Gazetted as a national park in 1962, Kidepo is Uganda's most isolated national park. It has an abundance of mammals and bird species which will keep your eyes hooked. Kidepo ranks among Africa's finest wildernesses. Camping at the park gives you complete relaxation and peace of mind.

MARIA BABIRYE, ENTREPRENEUR



MT RWENZORI PEAK: I would be at the peak of Mount Rwenzori. It is the highest point of Uganda, snowcapped and with beautiful scenery. I love challenges and there is the climbing expedition that takes between five to seven days, so I would like to meet that challenge.

DENNIS KIKOMEKO, LAWYER



MABAMBA SWAMP: It is one of the best and most convenient places to see the elusive Shoebill Stork. After a minutes in a small canoe, the papyrus reeds open up into flat grassy wetlands where Shoebill storks can be seen regularly. There are also other birds such as the Purple swamphen, Heron, Black Crane, Papyrus G. Common Sand piper, among others.

HASHIM NALULE, SECRETARY (Compiled by God)