EA bets on one tourism circuit

BY TREVOR LUTALO

The Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE) 2026 has reinforced a growing reality in East Africa's travel industry: the region is no longer thinking in terms of isolated destinations, but as a shared tourism circuit built on complementarity, connectivity, and cooperation.

Held in Kampala and concluding on May 23, the expo brought together tourism boards, airlines, hotel groups, investors, and tour operators from across Africa and beyond. While Uganda showcased its primate trekking, adventure tourism, and cultural heritage, Kenya highlighted its coastal experience and conferencing capacity, and Tanzania reinforced its global appeal through wildlife safaris and island tourism in Zanzibar.

The message emerging from the three countries was consistent—each is uniquely endowed, and together they form a natural tourism ecosystem that is increasingly being packaged as a single regional product.

... competition to collaboration

For years, East African destinations were often marketed in parallel, sometimes even in competition for similar source markets. POATE 2026, however, reflected a noticeable shift in tone. Stakeholders from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania spoke more about integration than rivalry, and more about shared gains than individual advantage.

Kenyan tourism stakeholders attending the expo said Uganda remains a critical source market and a strategic partner in regional tourism growth.

Tourism stakeholders are amplifying calls for deeper cross-border collaboration as Kenya pursues a 27 per cent growth in Ugandan arrivals targeting 300,000 arrivals in 2026. The stakeholders, who were part of Kenya's delegation at POATE, said the platform offered a strong opportunity to deepen trade ties and strengthen the travel corridor between the two countries.

Uganda, in turn, continues to benefit from Kenya's coastal tourism offering and its established conferencing infrastructure, creating a two-way flow of travellers that is increasingly structured rather than incidental.

Airlines and connectivity shaping the circuit

A key driver of this integration is air connectivity. Kenya Airways, operating daily flights between Entebbe and Nairobi, has become a central enabler of regional mobility.

Felix Mwangangi, Country Manager for Kenya Airways in Uganda, noted that aviation is the backbone of East Africa's growing tourism integration.

"Kenya Airways sits at the integral point of improving these numbers," he said. "Flights from Entebbe to Nairobi connect daily to Mombasa thus giving travellers consistent access to the coast."

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Representatives from Diani Beach on the Indian Ocean coast of Kenya talk to potential clients. Stakeholders from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania spoke more about integration than rivalry. PHOTO/TREVOR LUTALO

A PARTNERSHIP BUILT ON MUTUAL FLOWS

Stakeholders across the region increasingly recognise that tourism flows between Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania are not one-directional. Instead, each country serves as both a source and destination market. Uganda remains Kenya's leading regional source market, contributing 234,556 visitors in 2025, accounting for 31 per cent of all African arrivals and reflecting an 8.7 per cent growth. Tanzania followed closely with 209,536 arrivals. These figures underline a key structural shift: intra-African travel is becoming the backbone of East Africa's tourism resilience, especially as long-haul markets remain unpredictable.