

NAMUGONGO CASHES IN ON TOURISM

By Angel Habwezi

On Sunday May 20, my visitors from Siena, Italy wanted to see Namugongo Martyrs Shrine. They had asked their friends in Siena what they should look out for in Uganda, and Uganda Martyrs shrines at Namugongo were recommended.

We arrived at the Catholic site at around 1:00pm. The sign at the entrance I used to use when I was last in Namugongo in 2011, directed us to another gate, which was much better. Namugongo has really changed.

We were received and directed to the parking area by a man clad in uniform with a big smile. He advised us to first pass through the registration office. That was an unusual welcome gesture that made me happy from within. I have been to many cultural tourism sites in the world and the order, customer care, respect and competence is always welcoming. We may not be exactly there with Namugongo, but we are on the right path. I was impressed.

At the registry, the receptionist explained that if we wanted a guided tour, we would need to pay. For a local person, it is sh5,000 and a foreigner, \$5 (about sh19,000). A uniformed young man who identifies himself as Lubega introduced himself and proceeded to take us around. He gave his dramatic explanations with a great composure and display of wider knowledge about the martyrs.

He explained to the Italians the structure of a local hut, the role of bananas in society, the power of the Kabaka and even the context of Pope Paul VI's visit to Uganda in 1969. Many of these things were also new to me. For instance, I didn't know that the name Namugongo came from the torturous way condemned people were dragged along with their backs to the ground (*na mugongo*), to their death.

Inside the Basilica, he explained the dominance of the number 22, the number of Catholic martyrs, in the architectural design, pillars and corridors. He showed us Kaloli Lwanga's bone at the altar, explaining how carbon dating technology works. He referred to the only other basilica in Uganda, the first ever in Sub-Saharan Africa at Lodonga in Yumbe district where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared on December 8. I also didn't know that.

Lubega then took us through the grotto, the island site, the water tap area and the stands. He answered all questions about cost, design, history and context. I could tell that my visitors were impressed. We tipped him generously.

Back at the registry, the Italians again donated more money in appreciation.

ANGLICANS NOT SERIOUS
We then proceeded to the Church of Uganda site where I had promised my visitor, a museum depicting the tribulations of the martyrs. I had never been there, so I was also



The writer and her Italian friend touring the Catholic shrine in Namugongo recently. Left is their tour guide Lubega

gone. And he has been here! Maybe he has left to start his Sunday," she said.

It was at 3:00pm. She gave me his number to call, but it was off. She told me he was the only one with keys. She didn't even know any of his supervisors we could call. So, without him, our dollars, shillings and verbal advertising as we narrated to potential tourists were missed. How could it be one man? No assistant! What if different groups arrived at ago? What if he got an emergency?

On Monday, I registered my complaint on the Anglican site Facebook page: *Anglican Uganda Martyrs Shrine Namugongo @ anglicanugandamartyrs.shrine*. I also got their contact number, 0702467889, but it was switched off. But when I visited the Catholic site online and sent in my gratitude note, it was answered almost immediately. "You are welcome, madam. Please come again and encourage your friends to visit," it stated.

I called the number given, 0392179039, and the lady picked and explained that they are continuing to receive tourists until Tuesday May 29. They closed because of the June 3 pilgrimage and resume on June 4. I asked her how many paying tourists they receive daily and she said would get that information from the pilgrimage office, which is authorised to handle such requests. Now, that was good service.

Later, on Saturday, I called the Anglican number again and it was still off. My Facebook complaint hadn't been answered. The last posting on the Martyrs Facebook page was May 14 at 3:05pm and it was a shared picture of Anglican bishops posing with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

That, to me, is being unserious. It won't take our tourism further than wishful thinking.

GETTING SERIOUS

At least, Namugongo is making some money. We may not be there yet, but we are on the way.

Martha Tukahirwa of the Uganda Tourism Directory, said a lot of planning and coordination is still needed so that even residents can see beyond the religious fulfilment to the financial strategy.

"We need to push for extended stays, several pilgrimage times a year, a diversity of other activities to indulge in and more. A person asks to come to Uganda and the agent plans it all in a package," she said. Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) is also marketing Uganda's faith-based tourism. The UTB CEO, Stephen Asiimwe, says they are advertising the trek from Munyonyo and Busega to Namugongo and on June 3, visitors are reminded of the other tourism assets like wildlife, water bodies, cultural heritage and international attractions like Source of the Nile, equator and mountains of the moon.

"Namugongo has hosted three popes, there are many movies about the Uganda Martyrs and more things that popularise the place," said UTB's John Sempewwa.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO ATTRACT MORE TOURISTS

This weekend, *New Vision* has published results of a survey on people's perception on the Uganda Martyrs, including views on how Namugongo can be positioned to earn more from tourism. The survey was done using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, and received 278 responses from email, Facebook and WhatsApp. A total of 186 males and 88 females participated in the survey.

One of the questions was: How can Namugongo make tourism money from Uganda Martyrs? It was answered by 218 people and skipped by 60. Many of the answers referred to the same thing. Below is a summary of suggestions that respondents offered:

- Just good leadership and administration.
- Put Namugongo on the tourism website
- Build amenities like guesthouses and hotels around the pilgrimage areas for comfortable tours all year round. The Water project at the Anglican side is okay too.
- Charge a little payment for whoever wants to tour around.
- Build and rent out shops which sell martyrs-related items (books, films, miracle water, souvenirs) to pilgrims.
- Invest more in visibility to attract people all year around.
- Organise an exhibition during Martyrs Day with different cultures and traditional food.
- Anglican Museum should be replicated at the Catholic site



Receipts issued to Ugandan tourists in the Catholic shrine

regularly and market it well in social media.

■ Just hand it over to the experts in tourism to come up with ideas.

■ 'Sell' it to investors to pay annually and find ways of recovering their money.

■ Diversify the attraction also to other sites like Munyonyo and encourage all year round pilgrimages, not just June 3.

■ By gazetiting the shrines as tourism sites.

■ By telling more stories about the martyrs to the whole world.

■ Now that there is a museum, tourists can pay to tour. Artefacts and souvenirs can be made and souvenir shops built to enable tourists buy for their loved ones.

■ Invest in more international publicity and visibility. Make post cards with Martyrs and site pictures, place billboards at borders and airport entry points as well as major hotels.

■ Have partnerships with tour companies to have the sites advertised.

■ Pay commission for tourists brought.

■ Empower local traders and boost their small businesses, organise them in groups to make the neighbourhood more attractive to visitors

■ Invest in favourable infrastructure around the shrine. Good wide roads, easy to access amenities, decent and affordable accommodation.

■ Merge the two shrines.

- Whatever you do, remember that Namugongo is a faith based site; we don't have to make money with it. Uganda Martyrs should not be commercialised. People should not be denied the right to pilgrimage because they can't afford the entry fee. God and the martyrs wouldn't be happy with that.
- Organise social entertainment at the premises.
- Just let it be and only encourage visitors. Every tourist who enters Uganda spends money on other things and Uganda benefits at large
- Build user-friendly and appropriate access infrastructure that encourages family visits where people don't fear the stampede. Put more order and reduce crowd risks
- Work on the hygiene and cleanliness.
- Build a vibrant website, updated

looking forward to the experience.

But when we arrived, no one paid us any attention. The museum was locked and the only sign of religious

tourism was a signpost showing that a Ugandan pays sh5,000 and a foreigner, \$5. We asked a passer-by what we needed to do in order

to tour around and he also didn't know. He referred us to the kiosk lady located at the upper parking.

"I don't know where this man has