

Tourism: Uganda's challenges beyond the gift of nature

Uganda's tenfold growth strategy, a 15-year plan that started in the financial year 2024/2025 to grow the economy tenfold by 2040, is no doubt very ambitious. It is galloping to move from a GDP of \$50 billion to \$500 billion per annum by 2040. It will rotate around ATMS; Agro-Industrialisation, Tourism, Minerals/Oil, plus Gas and Science/Technology. It aims to achieve annual growth of 8 percent, double GDP every five years, and raise income per capita to \$7,000 (Shs25 million).

Tourism in this plan has great potential. According to a 2025 Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities report titled A year of Growth and Recovery, tourism's direct contribution to GDP as of 2024 was Shs6.06 trillion (3.2 percent). It provided about 803,000 jobs, which is about 7.2 percent of total employment. Investments in the sector grew by Shs7.5 billion, amounting to about 17.2 percent of the national total. There were about 1.37 international arrivals. Uganda's main asset is wildlife, which involves gorilla trekking, visits to the 10 national parks and game reserves plus cultural heritage sites teeming with flora and fauna.

The government and individuals have sunk great resources, in time and money, to boost the sector. I have seen adverts on global networks like CNN, mainly selling the gifts of nature Uganda is endowed with. The gorillas, wild animals, mountains, lakes, rivers, etc.

No doubt Uganda is a great destination, especially because of its location at the equator with great weather all year round. Good organic food. The people can also be very good when dealing with foreign visitors. It has the potential to get better.

Considering that people don't just visit a country to view natural endowments, Uganda will need to think beyond the gift of nature if this sector is to contribute significantly to the 10-fold growth

strategy. The net has to be cast very wide to trap those who love sport, music, and dance like Nyege Nyege, cuisine, religion, health, relaxation, education, trade, and industry, etc.

Globally, the countries with a large number of tourists are not necessarily those with great gifts of nature. It is those who endeavour to create unique sights and experiences that may not be replicated elsewhere.

For instance, in 2024, international tourist arrivals in France amounted to about 102 million people. In the whole of Africa, there were about 76 million in the same period. France has a lot of man-made landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, Palace of Versailles, Mont Saint-Michel, Arc de Triomphe, Louvre Museum, Millau Viaduct, etc.

Architectural designs and buildings are made intentionally by women and men out of the vast human resources of creativity, and it differs from place to place. That is how you have the Great Wall of China in China and the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt or the Cathedral in Cologne and Barcelona, and the Burj Khalifa in the United Arab Emirates.

Secondly, we need to think about displaying knowledge. Great civilisations put that in the museum. They are so diverse, for instance, you have the Chocolate Museum in Germany that shows the entire value chain from the Cocoa pod to the Chocolate bar. China is a destination for visitors who desire to experience its production potential in a vast range of products from electronics, machinery, food, apparels and pharmaceuticals. It is a marvel.

One of the challenges Uganda has is the very poor infrastructure. Next year, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania will be jointly hosting the Africa Cup of Nations. The report by the Confederation of African Football (CAF), the governing body of the sport on the continent, released an unflattering inspection report regarding the brand new Ho-

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Plainly speaking



ima Stadium. It is below CAF standards. There are no five-star hotels in the region, and there's no top-tier hospital for the safety of players and visitors. It is a problem countrywide despite years of sustained economic growth. The same applies to roads and other forms of transport like water, air, and rail that may ease the movement of visitors. A credible police force and judicial system are essential for the protection of those who may be victims of crime. There should be no legal threats to visitors' freedoms like the ubiquitous Computer Misuse laws or the propensity to try civilians in military courts.

But besides all this, there is the issue of well-trained, properly motivated, and passionate manpower across the board.

This includes not only people who offer direct services and interact with visitors but also provide correct and accurate information and market the country.

Uganda has a huge information gap. Websites are hardly updated with contacts and good photography to know what is on offer.

Above all this, Uganda has an image issue right from its governance. On social media, you have loads of citizens who should be proudly marketing the country. Instead, they are complaining about it, complete with graphic support.

You are not going to have enthusiastic visitors if they read about abductions of citizens by unidentified men with guns, and the national police force is clueless about them. It makes matters worse if suspects turn up in court wailing with marks of torture. Or that foreigners can go missing for months but are later found cooling in a 'fridge' or 'basement'; euphemisms for illegal detention facilities where people are allegedly tortured and abused.

Same story if foreign diplomats are treated to abuse and threats, and other countries are put on notice by the sound of war drums from top government officials.

It does not augur well if those who oppose or criticise the government end up in detention for long periods without trial. Neither is it helpful if they have to flee into exile, leaving behind their families, who are subjected to abuse and humiliation.

If matters beyond the gift of nature are not attended to, we wash our lovely garments and then roll them in the mud.

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