

The Uganda I Love

'Culture, people are Uganda's most underutilised strengths'

Dr Katongole believes Uganda must cultivate a culture of responsibility—a mindset where everyone, from the airport official to the boda boda rider, understands their role in shaping a visitor's experience.

BY EDGAR R BATTE

As global travellers demand more meaningful, ethical, and immersive experiences, one Ugandan academic and cultural entrepreneur is reshaping how tourism is taught, practised, and lived.

From lecture halls to village courtyards, Dr Celestine Katongole believes Uganda's greatest tourism asset is not just what visitors see, but who they meet. On any given day, Dr Katongole can be found in two very different spaces.

In one, he stands before students at Makerere University Business School (Mubs), dissecting policy frameworks, visitor trends, and the economics of destinations. In the other, he is on packed earth, listening to drums rise into the air as visitors share food, stories, and laughter.

To Dr Katongole, these worlds are not separate. They are deeply connected.

"Tourism today is no longer about watching," he says. "It is about participating, learning, engaging, and leaving a place better than you found it."

As senior lecturer and head of the Department of Tourism Management at Mubs, Dr Katongole trains the next generation of tourism planners, managers, and entrepreneurs.

But as founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Africa Sights and coordinator of Entanda Cultural Adventure, he also lives out the theories he teaches—on the ground, with communities, visitors, and cultural custodians.

What tourists want

The academic is clear-eyed about how visitor expectations are shifting, and fast.



Dr Celestine Katongole (PhD), senior lecturer and head of the Department of Tourism Management at Mubs. PHOTO/COURTESY

He describes two distinct but equally influential markets shaping Uganda's tourism future. He observes that the international traveller is increasingly short on time but rich in curiosity.

He says: "They want to maximise every day. They are looking for experiences that allow them to learn, explore, and enjoy—all at once."

These travellers no longer want to be passive tourists. They want to walk, cycle, cook, dance, talk, and understand. They want to eat local food, visit communities, and buy souvenirs made by the people they meet.

They are environmentally conscious, technology-savvy, and expect professionalism, honesty, and value for money.

Safety and security are not optional; they are fundamental. Then there is the domestic traveller who is largely young, urban, working-class Ugandans discovering travel for themselves.

"They travel in groups," Mr Katongole notes. "They love music, food, alcohol and fun. They pay less, but they expect a lot."

This growing market, he argues, de-

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serves serious attention.

It represents not just leisure, but pride, belonging, and a re-imagining of Uganda as a place worth exploring but by its own people. For him, the buzzwords that often dominate tourism conversations only matter if they translate into real action.

Dr Katongole explains: "Responsible tourism is tourism that takes care of people, the planet, and the businesses connected to it—today and into the future."

It is not a one-off project or a checkbox exercise. It is a system and a long process, one that requires alignment across government, private sector, communities, and travellers themselves.

He argues that Uganda's path to responsible tourism must begin with consensus and a shared understanding of how the destination should grow.

From that consensus must come laws, regulations, and policies that protect natural and cultural resources, guide investment, and ensure benefits are fairly shared along the value chain.

He also notes: "When leaders set the right example, the industry follows."

Mindset change

But beyond policy, Dr Katongole believes Uganda must cultivate a culture of responsibility—a mindset where everyone, from the airport official to the boda boda rider, understands their role in shaping a visitor's experience.

If wildlife has long been Uganda's headline attraction, the tourism enthusiast believes culture may be its most underused strength.

"Culture is one of the few things that truly sets destinations apart," he says.

At Entanda, visitors are immersed in living traditions with food, music, dance, storytelling, language as shared expe-

riences. Some international guests, he notes, have ranked their time at Entanda above gorilla and chimpanzee tracking.

That surprises many. Globally, cultural tourism is valued higher than wildlife tourism. Uganda, with more than 50 ethnic groups, dozens of languages, rich heritage sites, and deep traditions, holds an enormous competitive advantage—if it chooses to invest wisely.

"Our culture is the foundation of our hospitality," Dr Katongole says. "It is why Ugandans are warm, why we welcome [and] why visitors feel at home."

As climate change, environmental pressure, and illegal activities threaten natural resources, the seasoned tourism player argues that authentic cultural tourism offers both resilience and opportunity—economically, socially, and environmentally.

He does not shy away from critiques. Tourism interventions, he insists, must be evidence-based, backed by strong monitoring and evaluation.

Government supervision needs strengthening, with clear rewards for performance and consequences for failure.

Other changes

Private sector and community initiatives require affordable financing, training, quality assurance, and access to markets. Infrastructure like roads, water, ICT, air transport, all remains critical.

So does harmonising taxes and fees to improve ease of doing business. Perhaps most importantly, Uganda must invest in human capital.

He also notes: "Tourism is a people industry. Without trained, professional workers at policy, managerial, and operational levels, we cannot compete."

Training institutions need tools, facilities, and support to produce graduates who are not only employable, but innovative and ethical. Asked who he looks up to in Uganda's tourism sector, Mr Katongole pauses. "I do not look up to any one in tourism," he says carefully.

But he acknowledges the role of steady leadership, particularly within government, noting how institutional stability has contributed to the sector's growth.

It is a telling response, one that mirrors his broader worldview. Tourism, he says, is not about personalities but about systems, values, and long-term thinking.

Dr Katongole is firm that Uganda's tourism story is still being written in classrooms and communities, policies and performances, boardrooms and village squares.

It is written every time a visitor feels respected, culture is presented with dignity and nature is protected rather than exploited.