

How infrastructure is unlocking Uganda's tourism potential



Tourists watch a gorilla at the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. UWA is investigating fraud that has bedevilled the authority for years. PHOTO | COURTESY

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BY TREVOR LUTALO

For decades, Uganda's tourism promise has often been described in superlatives. The country has mountain gorillas, the source of the Nile, snow-capped mountains on the Equator, expansive savannah parks, diverse birdlife, cultural heritage sites and some of the most dramatic landscapes on the continent.

Yet for years, one persistent question has lingered within policy circles and among investors alike: why has Uganda's tourism performance remained below its full potential despite possessing some of Africa's richest natural assets?

From potential to performance

Increasingly, government officials and tourism sector players argue that the answer lies not only in marketing Uganda better, but in fixing the infrastructure ecosystem around tourism.

As Uganda heads into another political cycle under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, officials are now positioning infrastructure as the missing link that could finally transform tourism from a largely potential-driven sec-

tor into a high-value economic engine.

The shift is visible across policy documents, road projects, aviation upgrades, digital systems, conservation investments and regional connectivity plans being tied directly to tourism growth ahead of the Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE) 2026.

For years, Uganda's tourism sector largely depended on the attractiveness of its natural resources. But industry players have consistently pointed out that having world-class attractions alone is no longer enough in a highly competitive global tourism market.

Tourists increasingly judge destinations not only by wildlife sightings or scenery, but by the ease of movement, airport efficiency, accommodation standards, digital connectivity, safety, transport systems and overall visitor experience.

This is where infrastructure becomes critical. Uganda's tourism earnings rose to a record USD 1.7 billion in 2025, up from USD 1.28 billion in 2024, according to figures from the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities. International tourist arrivals also increased from approximately 1.3 million visitors to

1.65 million over the same period.

While officials attribute part of the growth to aggressive destination marketing and the global tourism recovery, they also say improvements in transport networks and investments in hospitality are beginning to reshape how tourists experience the country.

The government's broader tourism strategy now appears to be shifting from simply attracting visitors to increasing tourist value, length of stay and expenditure. Road infrastructure has become one of the most visible aspects of this push.

Roads opening up tourism circuits

For years, access to some of Uganda's premier tourism destinations has remained challenging. Long travel hours, rough roads and unreliable transport networks often discouraged tourists from extending their stay beyond major parks.

But ongoing road upgrades connecting tourism circuits are beginning to alter that reality. The Kampala-Entebbe Expressway has significantly improved travel time between Entebbe International Airport and the capital, creating a more seamless first impression for arriving visitors.

Elsewhere, roads linking major tourism areas such as Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth National Park, Murchison Falls National Park and Kidepo Valley National Park continue to receive upgrades under various government infrastructure programmes.

The tourism industry argues that such investments are not merely transport projects but economic enablers.

Why visitor experience now matters more

Dr Basil Ajer, Director at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, says infrastructure is increasingly becoming central to how Uganda competes internationally.

"Tourism today is about the entire visitor experience, not just attractions. A tourist may come because of gorillas or wildlife, but what determines whether they return, recommend Uganda or spend more time here is the quality of infrastructure surrounding that experience. Roads, airports, digital systems, safety, utilities and hospitality infrastructure all matter," he says.

Dr Ajer adds that Uganda is now deliberately integrating tourism into broader national development planning rather than treating it as an isolated sector.

"For many years, tourism was viewed mainly as a conservation issue, but globally, tourism is infrastructure-driven. If visitors can move efficiently, access destinations comfortably, and experience reliable services, the economic benefits multiply across communities, hotels, transport operators, agriculture and the creative economy," he says.

Air connectivity and Uganda's tourism ambitions

Aviation infrastructure is equally becoming central to Uganda's tourism ambitions. Entebbe International Airport continues to undergo expansion works aimed at increasing passenger handling capacity and improving operational efficiency. The growth of Uganda Airlines has also become part of the country's tourism positioning strategy, with government viewing direct air connectivity as essential for attracting higher-value international

visitors.

Industry players argue that direct routes reduce travel fatigue, improve destination competitiveness and increase Uganda's visibility in key markets. The tourism sector is also increasingly looking beyond traditional leisure travel.

Beyond wildlife

Government is investing in meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism, with Kampala positioning itself as a regional business tourism destination. Conference infrastructure, hotel expansion and urban development are expected to support this shift.

Uganda Tourism Board Chief Executive Officer Juliana Kagwa says infrastructure investments are now allowing Uganda to reposition itself more competitively.

"For a long time, Uganda had incredible attractions, but accessibility and visitor experience remained major constraints. What we are seeing now is a gradual alignment between infrastructure development and tourism growth. When roads improve, airports expand, and hospitality investments increase, it changes how international buyers and tourists perceive the destination," she says.

Kagwa notes that Uganda's tourism strategy is increasingly focused on strengthening tourism circuits rather than isolated attractions.

"We are moving towards destination integration. A tourist should be able to arrive in Entebbe, connect easily to different parts of the country, access quality accommodation and have a smooth experience throughout their journey. Infrastructure is helping us unlock destinations that were previously underutilised," she says.

This approach is particularly important as Uganda prepares for POATE 2026, which government hopes will position the country as one of Africa's emerging tourism investment and travel desti-

nations.

Officials say familiarisation trips involving international tour operators, travel media and content creators are increasingly being used not only to market attractions, but to demonstrate improvements in accessibility and visitor readiness.

Digital infrastructure shift

Beyond roads and airports, digital infrastructure is also emerging as a key pillar of Uganda's tourism ambitions. Tourists increasingly rely on digital platforms for bookings, payments, navigation and destination discovery.

The rise of digital tourism platforms, online accommodation systems and mobile payments has changed how visitors engage with destinations. Government and tourism agencies are therefore paying closer attention to digital transformation within the sector.

The push includes improving internet connectivity in tourism areas, strengthening digital marketing and encouraging tourism businesses to adopt technology-driven systems.

The country's growing ecosystem of travel-tech companies and digital booking platforms is also helping formalise parts of the tourism economy that previously operated informally.

But officials acknowledge that infrastructure development must go beyond physical investments. Human capital and heritage preservation are increasingly being viewed as equally important.

Heritage and Culture

Dr Jackie Nyiracyiza, Commissioner for Museums and Monuments, says cultural infrastructure remains one of Uganda's most underdeveloped tourism assets despite growing global demand for heritage tourism.

"For years, Uganda's tourism conversation focused heavily on wildlife, which is important, but cultural tourism and heritage infrastructure are equally critical if we are to increase visitor experiences and diversify tourism products. Museums, heritage sites, interpretation centres and cultural spaces are part of tourism infrastructure because they help tell Uganda's story," she says.

Dr Nyiracyiza argues that tourists are increasingly looking for immersive experiences beyond game drives.

"Modern travellers want to understand people, culture, identity and history. Infrastructure for cultural tourism helps us preserve national heritage while creating economic opportunities for communities. If we invest properly in museums, monuments and cultural sites, tourism becomes more inclusive and sustainable," she says.

Tourism as a rural economic driver

The government also sees tourism infrastructure as a tool for regional development. Many tourism destinations are located in rural or semi-rural areas where infrastructure investments can stimulate local economies. Improved roads, electricity, water access and telecommunications often benefit both tourism businesses and surrounding communities. This creates broader economic spillovers beyond the tourism sector itself.