

Regional News

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BY FELIX WAROM OKELLO

For years, the West Nile Sub-region's tourism potential has remained largely untapped, dwarfed by the well-trodden safari circuits of the western region and the white-water rafting capital of Jinja in eastern Uganda.

Yet, West Nile possesses a unique and compelling tourism portfolio that, if strategically developed, could transform it into one of Uganda's most sought-after destinations.

Opportunities range from water sports on the River Nile, mountain hiking, off-road biking and cycling up the hills of Metu in Moyo District.

The sub-region is blessed with a combination of natural undulating mountainous wonders, rich cultural heritage, and a strategic location that positions it as a gateway to two neighbouring countries — the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan.

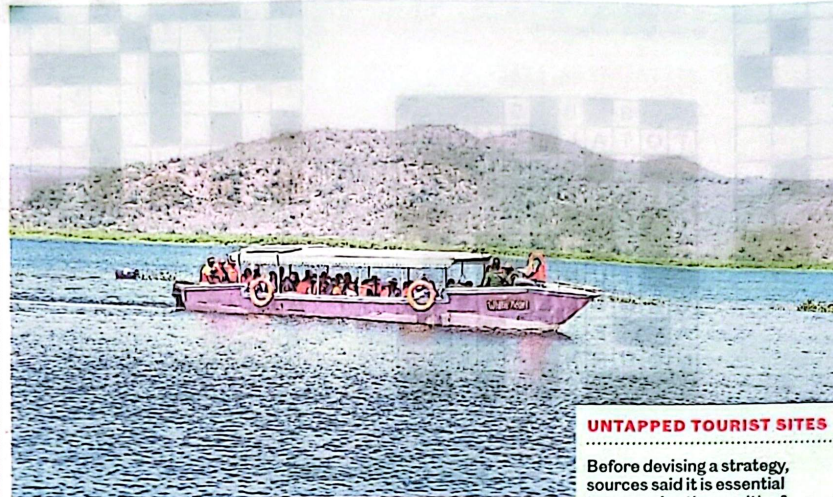
Sources said to tap into the tourism revenue, stakeholders, from local governments to private investors and community leaders, must move beyond a fragmented approach and embrace a cohesive, region-wide strategy centred on infrastructure, product development, marketing, and cross-border integration, among others.

"We know about some of the sites, but most of them are idle. They are in a poor state without any improvement. I think government is unwilling to assist the local governments to revive these sites," Mr Luiji Ondoma, a resident of Maracha, told *Daily Monitor* at the weekend.

"Even the Miriadia Falls in our district, are not generating income for the people and local government. A few people struggled to discover and utilise this site, but not much money is generated from it," he added.

For instance, Mr Joseph Opio, a resident of Nyapea Sub-county in Zombo District, said at the weekend: "There is a need to prioritise infrastructure and private investment in accommodation. I only saw good hotels in Arua City and not in Zombo or Nebbi or Pakwach or even in Koboko. The international tourists have their standards. So, private de-

How West Nile can tap into tourism windfall



Tourists enjoy a boat ride on River Nile in Adjumani District. PHOTO/ MARKO TAIBOT

velopers should be supported to construct modern lodges."

The Nile also creates a natural border with South Sudan and the DRC, adding a geopolitical intrigue that can be packaged into adventure tourism.

Shs4.8 trillion

The amount Uganda earned from the tourism sector in 2024, according to the Tourism ministry.

Arua City Mayor Sam Wadri Nyakua emphasised the importance of tourism in promoting local content. He urged the visitors to spend locally by buying local products like honey, onang-onang, *kitenge*, among others.

During the World Tourism Day national celebrations in Arua City last September, Mr Nyakua reminded President Museveni on the pledge to construct a museum in Giligili.

Arua Central Division MP Jackson Atima said: "We need the roads linking the sites to be worked upon in

order to promote tourism to harness revenue and livelihood. There is a need for the establishment of a tourism information centre and regional museum."

Dr Jimmy Opigo, a tourism expert, developer and entrepreneur in West Nile, organises boat cruises on the Nile. "We have always talked of West Nile tourism and people have wondered what is there and how we exactly start or spark action. And we start with 'RaceTheNile' 800 kilometres, which is coming up from November 23-28, international cycling race poised to rival the TourDeFrance and TourDeRwanda," he said.

Explaining why this race is important for West Nile in tourism, Dr Opigo, said: "This race is special because it is the only race where most of its part is along the mighty River Nile, along two countries' borders; DRC and South Sudan, which passes the foot of Mount Ote, crosses the Nile twice by vintage ferry and canoes, rides through refugee camps and most importantly through Ajai Game Reserve."

"Remember, West Nile has Alur, Jonam, Lugbara, Kakwa, Reli, Gimara, Aliba, Nubian, Aringa, Madi, Kebu, Ledu,

UNTAPPED TOURIST SITES

Before devising a strategy, sources said it is essential to recognise the wealth of attractions that West Nile already possesses.

First, the hidden treasures of Mount Kei in Yumbe, Mt Ote, 1,600 metres above sea level with about 160 bird species in Moyo and Mount Wati in Terigo districts are the facets to promotion of tourism. These rise vividly from the savannah plains, offering not only spectacular panoramic views but also world-class rock climbing opportunities.

Unlike the more commercialised climbing destinations elsewhere, these mountains provide an authentic, rugged adventure experience. The surrounding landscape is also home to large populations of diverse bird species, other animal species, making them ideal for ecotourism and bird watching.

Congolese and several South Sudanese refugees whose cultures have formed a melting point for foods, music and dance, especially Congolese Lingala Rumba and Arab influenced tasty foods," he added.

Despite these assets, West Nile's tourism sector remains nascent. The prima-

ry barrier has been infrastructure.

While the main roads from Pakwach to Oraba have been tarmacked, the feeder roads leading to key attractions like Mount Kei, the Miradia Falls, the Audi Caves, Mt Ote in Moyo, the Aliha Pyramid in Maracha, the burial site for Nyipir in Nebbi District, the hot spring in Panyimur in Pakwach District, and other remote cultural sites remain in poor condition.

Also, tour operators often cite a lack of standard accommodation as the single biggest reason they do not include West Nile in their itineraries.

However, local investors in Adjumani have recently constructed both mid-range and high end lodges that are comfortable for the tourists.

They also said the sub-region is still erroneously associated with instability — a hangover from the days of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency and former president Idi Amin's syndrome.

Obongi MP Hassan Kaps Fungaroo, has for the past six years been advocating for the construction of a museum in honour of President Amin, but the plans have been thwarted.

"This museum will be a learning and research centre, and could attract tourists once it is well-stocked with different artefacts. Why should West Nile continue to suffer because of some of the things which were done during Idi Amin's era? We should fight this negativity because we need to move on with developments," Mr Fungaroo said.

Sources said West Nile must adopt a multi-pronged strategy to address challenges and attract tourists.

Government's response

The Minister of Tourism Wildlife and Antiquities, Col (rtd) Tom Butime, concurred on the need for development because there is loss of revenue from the idle sites in the sub-region.

"West Nile is ripe for tourism because of the strategic location with the transformation that is improving and you must embrace tourism because it talks about the community. You cannot talk about tourists and the community do not benefit," he said.

Mr Butime added: "It is a sector that touches communities, that keeps transport running, that brings tourists to the hotels, which will make a cup of milk to find a market, potatoes to be bought, people will be employed. Once the sites are revived, the tourists will come."

Given West Nile's position as a gateway, there is immense potential for border tourism. Simplifying visa processes for tourists entering from South Sudan and the DRC, and creating one-stop border posts that cater specifically to travellers, could, among others, encourage more cross-border tourism circuits.