campaigns such as Tembea Nyumbani as well as the Uganda-Kenya Tourism Conference have driven

have seen a growth of 17 per cent," said Doris Makena, Group Sales and Marketing Manager for Jaca-

Gloria Adyero of Loremi Tours said: "Regional tourism is growing fast, but we still face inconsis-

deeper policy alig...

Improved visa openness policies, expanded air connectivity, and harmonised tourism standards are

...than a purely national sector.

POATE 2026 shows Uganda's shift from sightseeing to experience tourism

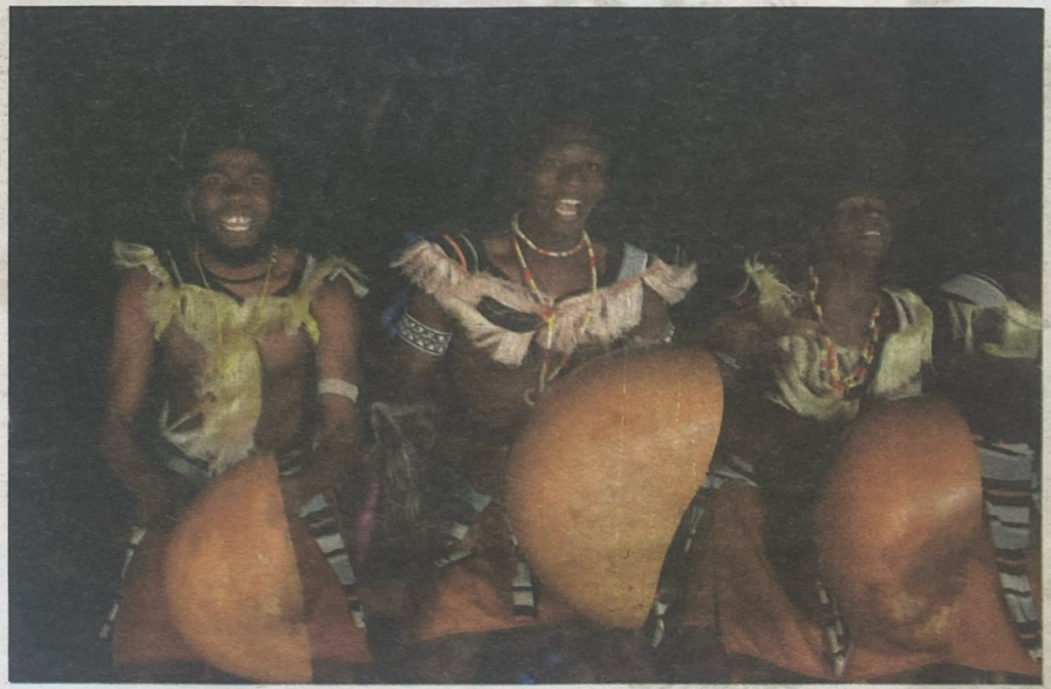
BY TREVOR LUTALO

For years, Uganda has sold itself to the world through images of mountain gorillas, roaring waterfalls, tree-climbing lions and the mighty River Nile. But at this year's Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE) 2026, tourism officials made a broader pitch to international visitors: Uganda is no longer just a place to see, but a destination to experience.

That shift came into sharp focus on Friday night at the Ndere Cultural Centre in Kampala, where the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) hosted a cultural gala for more than 200 international tourism buyers, travel media personalities and tour operators attending the expo.

The evening was filled with traditional music, storytelling, dance performances and Ugandan cuisine drawn from different regions of the country. But beyond the entertainment, the event reflected a growing strategy within Uganda's tourism sector: moving from traditional sightseeing tourism toward experience-driven travel built around culture, identity and community interaction.

The gala featured performances by the renowned Ndere Troupe, who took guests through dances and traditions representing Uganda's diverse cultural communities. Visitors watched performances such as Bakisimba, Bwola, Larakaraka and Ekitaguriro, while some guests joined dancers on stage, turning the event into an interactive cultural exchange rather than a passive performance.



Dancers perform during the Cultural Night at Ndere Centre. Cultural showcases is one area Uganda is increasingly promoting. PHOTO/TREVOR LUTALO

Tourism stakeholders say this type of participation is increasingly becoming important in the global tourism market, where travellers are now seeking immersive experiences instead of simply visiting attractions.

The cultural showcase also highlighted another area Uganda is increasingly promoting, food tourism. International guests sampled local dishes from different parts of the country, including matooke from Buganda, millet bread, smoked meats, groundnut sauces and eastern Uganda's kalo.

For tourism officials, cuisine is becoming part of the storytelling around Uganda's heritage and diversity.

"Globally, tourism trends have increasingly shifted toward what industry experts describe as "experiential tourism", travel built around participation, authenticity and emotional connection to destinations. Rather than simply photographing landmarks, visitors now want to engage with local communities, traditions and lifestyles," said Uganda Tourism Board CEO, Juliana Kagwa.

That trend is influencing how African tourism destinations market themselves.

Countries such as Morocco, South Africa and Rwanda have, in recent years, expanded cultural and heritage tourism offerings to complement wildlife and luxury tourism. Uganda now appears to be taking a similar path as competition for international tourists intensifies across the continent.

Tourism industry players say relying heavily on wildlife tourism alone can limit both visitor spending and the number of communities benefiting from the sector. Cultural tourism, however, potentially spreads economic opportunities across a much wider value chain.

Performers, local food vendors, craft makers, fashion designers, transport providers and cultural entrepreneurs all become part of the tourism economy when visitors are encouraged to engage more deeply with destinations.

The Friday gala at Ndere illustrated that broader ecosystem. Alongside dance performances, guests interacted with local culture through storytelling sessions, cuisine and nightlife experiences in Kampala after the event. Tourism officials say such experiences often leave longer-lasting impressions on visitors and international buyers than conventional destination presentations.

The strategy also comes at a time when Uganda's tourism sector is recovering strongly and seeking higher-value tourism.

According to Ministry of Tourism figures, Uganda earned a record $1.7 billion (Shs6.1 trillion) from tourism in 2025. Sector players now say the focus is increasingly shifting from simply increasing tourist arrivals to raising visitor spending, length of stay and overall destination experience.

POATE itself has increasingly become part of that strategy. This year's edition attracted international buyers, travel media and investors from multiple tourism source markets, allowing Uganda to position itself differently within the competitive African tourism space.

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