Govt targets regional tourism development

BY TREVOR LUTALO

KAMPALA. The government has turned its focus to regional tourism development as it shifts from post-pandemic recovery to expansion, following a record performance in 2025, when tourism earnings rose to $1.7b, the highest in Uganda's history.

International arrivals jumped from 1.3 million in 2024 to 1.65 million in 2025, marking the first time visitor numbers have surpassed pre-Covid levels, according to Mr Martin Mugarra, the State minister for Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquitie.

"The sector has achieved its highest performance in history. Revenues have grown from $1.28b in 2024 to $1.7b in 2025, and arrivals have increased from 1.3 million to 1.65 million. This is a strong signal that Uganda is competitive again," Mr Mugarra said following a courtesy visit to the Igenge Palace of the Kyabazinga of Busoga Kingdom, William Gabula Nadiope IV, this week.

"Our task now is to ensure that this growth is inclusive. We want regions like Busoga to participate in the tourism value chain fully. That is why we are strengthening partnerships and formalising collaboration with cultural institutions," he added.

The visit coincided with a three-day retreat for top management of the Tourism ministry where officials discussed a five-year strategy to diversify tourism products, improve coordination among agencies, and unlock underutilised heritage sites. At the centre of discussions was a proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the ministry and the kingdom to formalise cooperation in site development, marketing, and conservation.

"We are grateful for the great initiatives and work you're doing for us. Of course, we've partnered in many initiatives before, but I am glad we've already progressed in some of the tourism activities," he said. "We shall look forward to working with you in strengthening our relationship through an official MoU," the Kyabazinga said.

The Kyabazinga highlighted iconic sites such as the Source of the Nile, which he hopes will receive United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) recognition, and Dolwe Island in Namayingo District, already submitted for consideration. He also drew attention to lesser-known historical sites, including the slave caves in Walumbe near Bukaleba Forest.

"Uganda has slave caves. I don't know whether you are aware of them. We feel you should go ahead and promote this tourism site. It has been left out," he said.

Boosting heritage offerings

Minister Mugarra emphasised that the government aims to expand beyond wildlife tourism by boosting cultural and heritage offerings. "As government, we are now moving from recovery to expansion. We are strengthening regional tourism circuits and ensuring that our culture and heritage are showcased globally."

The Kyabazinga said Busoga was ready to play a greater role in national tourism growth and cultural preservation.

"Our focus is on conservation and promotion of key sites, and we believe that if we work together, we shall be able to bring prestige and showcase our culture, our heritage, and the various tourism sites within Uganda," he said, commending the Uganda Hotel and Tourism Training Institute in Jinja for supporting cultural events such as the Kagulu Climbing Challenge and providing full-board bursaries to students from the kingdom. Within the fourth National Development Plan, tourism is projected to generate an ambitious $50b in revenue by 2040, and domestic tourism and cultural heritage are among the cash cows targeted.