

BIG
THE
CUTLINE

Talk about 2016 and memories of Uganda being showered with many tourism accolades jumps to mind. The authorities had no room to bask in pride, but to embark on improving what is in store in the Pearl of Africa. Titus Kakembo writes

Uganda: Unearthing the hidden

After years of silence, Uganda has finally found her footing in the tourism circles. The Pearl of Africa alongside Namibia was named among top tourism destinations in the world. Tourism is expected to create more than 592,000 jobs per year besides contributing sh6.5b to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) was attributed to an increase in the number of tourists who came to Uganda, because of better marketing strategies and an improved infrastructure.

Complementing the good job done recently by the private sector, the Government partnered with them and allocated sh188.8b to tourism this financial year.

Presidential nods

In 2016, President Yoweri Museveni consistently promoted tourism and marketed Uganda. During a week-long security assessment of the Rwenzori sub-region in April, he toured Queen Elizabeth National Park.

After deployment of specialised mountain forces in the Rwenzori area, President Museveni said, "Uganda has a robust security system and whoever tries to play around with the prevailing peace will be dealt with decisively."

He urged the people of the Rwenzori to maintain peace and allow tourism to flourish so that they can earn income.

His trip was crowned by a boat cruise on the Kazinga Channel where he addressed communities residing in the park after viewing wild animals and birds. He also toured the Sertipaya tourist site in Bundibugyo district and Nyanzindi hot springs in Semliki National Park.

In the same spirit during a trip to Busoga in May, Museveni took part in the Kagulu rock climbing expedition. Museveni called on the citizens to tour their backyards before opting to go abroad.

"Busoga is Uganda's most endowed tourism gem," Museveni said. "We ought to introduce cable cars to ease the experience and attract more elderly and physically challenged guests."

Visa fees

While listing what the Government had done to improve tourism in Uganda, the tourism minister Ephraim Kamuntu said: "The reduction of the visa fee from \$100 (about sh350,000) to \$50 (about sh175,000) is a step in the right



UGANDA FACT FILE

- Gorillas draw many tourists to Uganda. You can see rare mountain gorillas in two of Uganda's national parks: Bwindi and Mgahinga.
- Uganda's national parks offer excellent safaris and great birding opportunities.
- Rwenzori mountains, one of Africa's finest tourist destinations, that offer scenery of snow-capped peaks and fantastic trails.
- Civis can be got online

White water rafting on the Nile is a favourite sport for tourists

direction." "On top of that, the new e-visa system is effective. With it, after submitting an application, all one does is wait for approval and notifications are sent to them. The visa is issued either at the border points or embassies."

The process is not only cheaper, but faster and more convenient to tourists from abroad.

Previously, tourists used to process the documents at the points of entry. The tedious process took long and was more expensive than in other competing destinations.

Talking about promoting local tourism, Uganda Tourist Board's (UTB) John Sempachwa said the body has created individual clusters.

"The clusters are Kyagye, western, eastern and northern Uganda. Few Ugandans can afford a trip to the national parks."

"Clusters are not only pocket friendly but accessible. There is a determination to change the image of tourists being bushy bearded Europeans, to include domestic travellers. All the destinations are endowed with a wealth of culture, history and oral thrilling literature."

Getting women on board

Casa De Tourista owner Saleh Namanya, a member of the eastern cluster, says, "Last year I witnessed female travellers get bold and independent. They come in categories.

This year, I have witnessed female travellers get bold, independent and want new experiences

Some are single mothers, married or youth - travelling solo is in vogue for them," confides Namanya. "These types of clients were more interested in customised trips, where they rode bicycles, ate local cuisines, hiked and

met the local people." Not interested in spa nights or the conventional gender trips that are often marketed to them, UTB offers an alternative menu of attractions comprising Imbalu (initiation to manhood), kadodi dance, coffee farming, the Abayudaya (Uganda Jewish Community) and abseiling at Sipi Falls in eastern Uganda.

Infrastructure

At a glance, it is evident that the infrastructure in terms of road networks and aviation has never been better as any destination is accessible by public or private means of transport.



Queen Elizabeth National Park is one of the few places in the world with the tree climbing lions

TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS SPEAK OUT ON 2016



Lilly Ajarova, ED Ngamba Island Chimpanzee sanctuary

At the sanctuary we help salvaged chimps relocate to the wild as poachers get new tactics of catching the primates and security organs toughen up on them. There are challenges of acceptability, but we are surviving.



Amos Wekesa, ED Great Lakes Safaris

We pray for no repeat of the recent Rwenzori palace raid in Kasese. We have had many cancellations of bookings. The damage is immediate, but the recovery takes decades. It affects the employment opportunities.



Herbert Byaruhanga, USAGA chairperson

The Queen of hotwax movie was an opportunity for us to showcase the attractions the country is endowed with. High taxes made the movie directors opt for scenes in South Africa. The authorities ought to revise the laws and tax regime.



Vianex Watebawa, director Rwenzori Tours

We need to handle security issues in the Rwenzori sub-region carefully. A cancellation of a booked trip means business drying.

Marketing Uganda
Nature and religious tourism were part of the key products that Uganda marketed from across the country. Ministry officials joined their counterparts in the continent to deliberate on selling Uganda as one tourism bloc. It was agreed that, for Africa's tourism to grow, the barriers in air travel must be abolished to enhance the linkage of different countries.

Challenges

But it has not been a bed of roses for the tourism industry as there were negative incidents that have made headlines.

During the month of August in Nwoya district, bordering Murchison Falls National Park, the Police arrested Francis Okello and his wife Conny Lamwaka of Koch Goma sub-county with pangolin scales weighing 25kg and valued at \$70,000 (sh251m).

According to International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), for the scales are sought after in the east Asia for medicinal purposes. The animal's scales have been used for centuries in traditional Chinese medicine for unproven health benefits.

In Asia, pangolin meat is a delicacy that can cost over \$150 (sh600,000) per kilo in restaurants. Unfortunately, the arrests and seizures of pangolin scales were overshadowed by the degraded elephants and rhino poaching.

The poaching of wildlife, which is a main tourist attraction in the country, continues to shoot up. It is a drop in performance following a Gold win last year. This year, it trailed Kenya, which



A young elephant being fed at a rescue centre

civil wars such as DR Congo, Burundi, South Sudan and Somalia has turned Uganda into a key transit route for illegal game trade. The other failure was during the third largest annual 37 edition of Indaba hosted at the Inkosi Albert Luthuli International Convention Centre. This was in January in Durban South Africa where Uganda got a silver award.

This was a drop in performance following a Gold win last year. This year, it trailed Kenya, which

emerged the best exhibitor with a platinum award. Rwanda won Gold for being second best exhibitor.

The elections lowered tourism inflow as tourists were not sure of the outcome. Tour operators, hoteliers and all the other stakeholders in the industry were not sure of what was likely to happen in terms of peace and stability, during and after the elections.

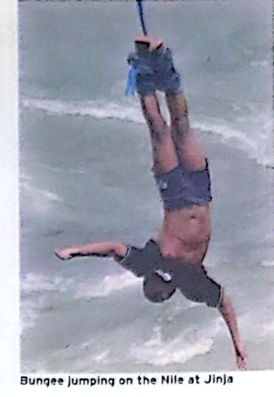
Consequently, there was a decrease in the desire by private sector investment in the tourism industry.

Throughout the year the Uganda shilling depreciated against the dollar affecting tourism as Uganda became an expensive destination compared to other African options such as South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda.

Seguya says Uganda has reason to celebrate the two new babies, given the fact that there are only 880 mountain gorillas left in the world.

"I think Odongkara is the best Miss Tourism since former minister Maria Mutagamba initiated the project," said a bird guide Hassan Mutebi. "She is decent, educated and brainy."

gem in tourism destinations



Bungee jumping on the Nile at Jinja

What the media says

CNN on rolex

In June, CNN named Uganda's Rolex as one of the African foods that are finally taking off, although it has been slow in catching up globally. The Rolex continues making its indelible mark on menus around the world. It is a combination of chapati, vegetables and fried eggs, which continues to gain popularity. Today it is prepared at

roadside kiosks and in five-star hotels. Dating back to 2005 as a delicacy for Makerere University students, Rolex went viral on social media in 2016. Tourism state minister, George Kiwanda, presided over the Rolex Day held at the Uganda Museum on August 21. There, a variety of Rolexes were prepared.

Then, came the Big Birding Day on November 7, in Mabamba Landing site. The annual event attracted birding enthusiasts, professional bird guides and the media. It was organised by Uganda Tourism Board, Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Uganda Safari Guides Association (USAGA), Uganda Women Birders, the environment ministry and Nature Uganda. USAGA chairperson Herbert Byaruhanga, told participants how the Mabamba wetland is rich in bird species the shoe bill and the Sitanunga locally known as Njibe.

The view from the countryside

Birds, newborns and beauty queens

from the UK, US and Asia to see a shoe bill, goliath heron, malachite kingfisher, long-tailed cormorant, squacco heron, saddle billed stork, spur-winged lapwings, african jacanas, lesser jacanas, great blue turacos and the crown-jewel, then go back satisfied," Byaruhanga says. "This year we logged more than 600 bird species," Byaruhanga says. Then Businze, a female gorilla from the Rushegura group in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. This was the second baby to be born last year.

The executive director of UWA, Dr Andrew Seguya, says for the last 10 years, the destination

Uganda has been leading the drive to preserve mountain gorilla habitats. Earlier on, the dominant silverback, Kabukoko welcomed the infant to the family, bringing the Rushegura group to 17 members. Rushegura is one of the three habituated gorilla groups living in the Buhoma section of north Bwindi.

Mountain gorillas are members of great apes and are known to live in only three countries in the whole world - Uganda, Rwanda and DR Congo.

Seguya says Uganda has reason to celebrate the two new babies, given the fact that there are only



Contestants of Miss Tourism

880 mountain gorillas left in the world. Miss Tourism running under the theme Let The Pearl Shine, was won by 23-year-old, Eldad Odongkara, who beat 12 other contestants from different parts of the country.

Eloquence, brains, beauty and humour are mixed in her. Each region picked their best and sent them to Kampala for the boot camp before the finals.

"I think Odongkara is the best Miss Tourism since former minister Maria Mutagamba initiated the project," said a bird guide Hassan Mutebi. "She is decent, educated and brainy."