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POATE@10: From tourism fair to Uganda's global experience marketplace



President Museveni shares a moment with members of the Pan-African Movement during the opening ceremony of the Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE) at Speke Resort Munyonyo on May 21, 2026. PHOTO/TREVOR LUTALO

According to UTB's Juliana Kagwa, POATE has shown us what is possible. The next step is to ensure that Uganda is not just seen once a year at an expo, but experienced every day by travellers from around the world.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

When the Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE) first opened its doors a decade ago, it was a modest tourism fair. Uganda's safari operators, hotel owners and travel agents would gather with brochures, pitch packages, and hope to attract a few international buyers.

Ten years later, the story is very different.

The 2026 edition of POATE, held at Speke Resort Munyonyo, marked a clear turning point. What began as a marketing event has grown into a regional trade, investment and experience marketplace — a platform where tourism, culture, business, and diplomacy now intersect.

Thousands of participants attended this year's expo, including hosted buyers, investors, tour operators, journalists and exhibitors from more than 40 countries. The scale,

reflected not just growth in attendance, but a deeper shift in ambition: Uganda is no longer just showcasing attractions, it is selling a national experience.

A decade of reinvention

The biggest change in POATE's 10-year journey is not size, but purpose. In its early years, the expo focused on visibility. Uganda was trying to compete in a region dominated by established tourism brands like Kenya and Tanzania. The message was simple: come see Uganda's gorillas in Bwindi, the Nile in Jinja, the wildlife in Queen Elizabeth National Park, and the peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains.

That message still exists, but it is no longer enough. Today, POATE is being reshaped by the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) into a platform for experience tourism. The focus has shifted from sightseeing to immersion

— food, culture, music, film, fashion, and community life.

As UTB Chief Executive Officer Juliana Kagwa put it during the 2026 edition, the transformation is deliberate.

"We are no longer just marketing Uganda as a destination to visit," Kagwa said. "We are positioning Uganda as a place to experience, to feel, and to connect with. That is where the future of tourism lies."

This shift was visible across the exhibition halls. Alongside traditional safari packages were stalls promoting Ugandan coffee, cultural tourism villages, film production opportunities, and fashion showcases. The message was clear: Uganda is packaging itself as a full lifestyle destination.

A bigger stage, a broader ambition

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Looking back, POATE's transformation reflects a wider shift in Uganda's tourism thinking. It is no longer just about promoting attractions. It is about positioning Uganda in a competitive global market where travellers have endless choices. Natural beauty alone is not enough; experience, branding and access matter just as much. Uganda is also learning to think of tourism as part of a larger economic ecosystem — one that connects hospitality, transport, creative industries, and investment.

Uganda has. It is about creating partnerships, closing deals, and building long-term business relationships that grow tourism arrivals and investment."

Hosted buyers came from Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Ugandan exhibitors represented a wide mix of sectors — hospitality, aviation, conservation, creative industries and community tourism initiatives.

From wildlife to experience economy

One of the clearest transformations at POATE over the years has been how Uganda defines tourism itself. A decade ago, wildlife dominated the narrative. Gorillas, elephants, lions and the River Nile were the main attraction. While these remain central, the 2026 edition deliberately expanded the story.

Visitors moved through curated spaces showcasing Ugandan cuisine, traditional music, fashion design, storytelling, film production and community tourism projects. Cultural performances from different regions filled the expo village with colour and sound.

This reflects a global shift in tourism. Travellers are increasingly seeking experiences rather than just destinations.

Kagwa noted that Uganda is responding to this demand by repositioning its offer.

"The modern traveller wants to live the destination," she said. "They want to engage with people, taste local food, learn culture and take part in everyday life. Uganda has that richness, and POATE is helping us bring it to the world."

Tourism as an economic engine

Behind the cultural showcase, POATE 2026 also carried a strong economic message. Tourism has become one of Uganda's fastest-growing sectors, contributing significantly to foreign exchange earnings and employment. Stakeholders at the expo pointed to steady post-pandemic recovery in arrivals and growing interest in Uganda as a regional destination for both leisure and business travel.

This is where POATE plays a strategic role, not just as a marketing platform, but as a pipeline for investment and growth. Nyende explained that the integration of investment forums into the expo is intentional.

"Tourism is no longer working in isolation," he said. "We are linking it with infrastructure, ICT, agriculture and creative industries. When investors come to POATE, they are not only looking at safaris. They are looking at hotels, transport, events, and broader opportu-

nities."

Preparing for AFCON and global attention

A recurring theme at this year's expo was timing. Uganda's co-hosting of AFCON 2027 is expected to significantly raise the country's international visibility. Tourism stakeholders see POATE as part of that preparation — a rehearsal ground for the global attention that will come with the tournament.

New hotels, improved infrastructure and expanded airline connectivity are all part of the broader readiness strategy. Kagwa linked POATE directly to this national moment.

"We are preparing Uganda for a global spotlight," she said. "Events like AFCON and platforms like POATE are helping us build visibility, confidence and capacity. We are not waiting for the moment; we are building towards it."

Storytelling as strategy

Perhaps the most important shift at POATE over the last decade is not physical, but conceptual. Uganda is increasingly selling a story, not just a location.

The country is positioning itself as a destination where culture, nature and modern life intersect. This requires more than brochures and packages — it requires narrative building, branding and consistent messaging.

Nyende said storytelling has become central to Uganda's tourism strategy. "Every destination has attractions," he said. "What makes the difference today is the story you tell about those attractions. At POATE, we are teaching our partners how to tell Uganda's story in a way that connects emotionally with travellers."

The road ahead

As the 10th edition of POATE comes to a close, stakeholders agree on one thing: the journey is still in its early stages.

The challenge now is consistency — turning the energy, partnerships and visibility generated at the expo into long-term growth in arrivals and investment.

If the past decade was about building the platform, the next will be about scaling it.

As Kagwa summed it up: "POATE has shown us what is possible. The next step is to ensure that Uganda is not just seen once a year at an expo, but experienced every day by travellers from around the world."

Uganda is no longer content with being a hidden gem. It is actively building itself into a global experience marketplace, one story, one visitor, and one partnership at a time.