

By Gerald Kikulwe in
Mbarara

For the second consecutive year, Pearl of Africa Uganda Rally returned to Mbarara, further affirming the city's rising stature as one of Uganda's fastest-growing urban centers, both in infrastructure and in its demonstrated capacity to host events of continental significance.

More than just a motorsport competition, the rally that was scheduled to end on Saturday, unfolded as a vivid convergence of precision logistics, community enthusiasm and economic vitality.

Since the event's scrutineering on Wednesday, an unmistakable sense of anticipation gripped Ankole region. Across villages and townships, residents have embraced the occasion with remarkable warmth, eager to extend hospitality to drivers, teams and spectators. What has emerged, has not been merely an organised sporting event, but a communal celebration, one that has blended grassroots passion with an increasingly refined approach to hosting large-scale international gatherings.

The ceremonial flag-off once again came alive at Lake View Hotel, where colour, pageantry and national pride set the tone for the days ahead. Meanwhile, Mwesigwa Eco Resort reprised its role as host of the super special stage, drawing vast crowds of spectators.

For many, this has been a rare and exhilarating opportunity to witness rally cars in full flight, machines they had previously only followed through radio commentary or television broadcasts. The spectacle was electric, the atmosphere charged with awe and excitement.

The rally route itself was thoughtfully curated, offering competitors and spectators



A vendor selling merchandise during the Pearl of Africa Rally in Mbarara



Ponsiano Lwakataka powers his Subaru Impreza N12B through a demanding section

PEARL OF AFRICA RALLY SPARKS ECONOMIC BOOM IN ANKOLE REGION

alike a journey through the scenic and cultural landscapes of the Ankole region. Stages winding through Nshara and Sanga farms, most notably the Ankole Cow Stage and Kaguta Stage, have presented a unique fusion of motorsport and nature.

Foreign drivers and visiting fans have found themselves immersed in an environment where racing has intersected with wildlife and pastoral beauty: antelopes darting across distant fields, birds in melodic flight, and the iconic long-horned cattle standing as silent witnesses to the high-speed drama.

Beyond the competitive stages, the rally has served as a gateway to deeper exploration. Visitors have since taken time to experience the heritage-rich Igongo Cultural Centre and the tranquil wilderness of Lake Mburo National Park, particularly during the opening days. This blending of sport and tourism has ele-



Lake Mburo National Park hosted one of this year's rally sections

vated the rally from a singular event into a multidimensional experience.

Economically, the impact has been both immediate and profound. Compared to the previous year, when accommodation rates ranged between sh50,000 and sh200,000, this edition has witnessed a sharp escalation, with prices climbing to between sh100,000 and sh500,000 per night. Demand has surged to such an extent that most hotels in the city center have been fully booked

since Monday, underscoring the event's growing attraction and its significance to the local hospitality sector.

The ripple effects have extended across the urban economy. Restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues have been operating at full capacity, particularly in the evenings, when the city adopts a festive, almost carnival-like rhythm. Beverage stocks have depleted rapidly under sustained demand and social spaces become vibrant hubs of

interaction and celebration.

The transport sector, too, has experienced a notable boom. Bodaboda riders have throughout the rally, emerged as indispensable facilitators of movement, with fares rising significantly in response to heightened demand, yet still finding no shortage of customers navigating unfamiliar routes.

Equally striking has been the resurgence of informal trade. Vendors, many of whom had previously faced regulatory restrictions, reclaimed public spaces, lining the streets with a diverse array of merchandise and local delicacies. Women, youth and elderly entrepreneurs alike have seized the economic opportunity presented by the rally, transforming the week into a period of meaningful financial gain.

Creativity and enterprise has flourished in equal measure. Local artisans, including members of the Mbarara City Artisans Cooperative, have

showcased hand crafted products that reflected the cultural identity of the region. Meanwhile, the ever-resourceful street photographers, popularly known as "paparazzi" have captured fleeting moments of excitement, printing and selling photographs almost instantly at the super special stage. These images have become tangible keepsakes, preserving the energy and emotion of the rally for fans and participants alike.

In its entirety, the rally has transcended the boundaries of sport. It has turned out to be a dynamic catalyst, stimulating tourism, energizing local enterprise, and reinforcing Mbarara's evolution into a destination capable of hosting events of international caliber.

Through the fusion of speed, culture, and commerce, the city has once again demonstrated that motorsport, when embraced by a community, can become a powerful engine for growth and identity.