

Mountaineering could be boosted as

IMPOSING: Uganda is blessed with unique mountainous features, among them, the Rwenzori Mountains. With the right marketing strategy, these could be the country's next big tourism product.

BY ERIC NTALO
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On May 15, 2006, Ravichandran Tharumalingam, popularly known as Ravi, reached an altitude of 8,843.43 m of Mount Everest, unaccompanied.

Everest, located in Nepal is the highest mountain on earth above sea level and has registered more than 290 deaths of persons trying to climb it due to injuries from fall, ice collapse, avalanches or health problems. Unfortunately, Ravi lost eight fingers as a result of frost bite on his climb to the summit.

Ravi has scaled mountains in Nepal, Tibet, Russia, Argentina, Peru, Turkey, Iran, Japan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Mexico, USA, and Indonesia among others. Recently, the world famous Ravi, a Global Expedition Club leader in Malaysia, embarked on an eight-day climbing expedition to the Mountains of the Moon under the guidance of Rwenzori Trekking Services (RTS) climbing to boost government's strategy to market and promote the Rwenzoris.

Uganda has the potential to stand out as a world-class mountaineering destination on the adventure map. The country is endowed with a vast array of spectacular mountains and ranges. Mountaineering is described as the ascent of any mountain where the gradient and severity of the terrain requires some form of climbing and sustained use of technical equipment such as; rope, harness, karabiner, helmet, ice axe, crampons.

Promoting mountain tours

Uganda Tourism Board has just completed a comprehensive marketing strategy to promote the whole region as a prime mountaineering and cultural tourism destination. "This promotion by prominent climbers like Ravi is timely and in sync with the work we are doing at Uganda Tourism Board (UTB)," says Dr Stephen Asiimwe, UTB Chief Executive Officer.

The Mountain climber was invited by the Uganda High Commission in Malaysia, hosted by the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities and its agencies. "The mission worked together with the Malaysian organisation to identify a high profile individual to promote Uganda as a tourism destination," said Dorothy Samali Hyuha, High Commissioner of Uganda to Malaysia. The Ugandan diplomat added that the mission has taken up the call to use diplomacy to bring economic benefits to the country by attracting investors and tourists.

Gifted by nature
 The Daily...



World famous Malaysian climber Ravichandran Tharumalingam scales the icy slopes of the Rwenzori mountain ranges in a tourism promotion drive. COURTESY PHOTOS.

large landforms spread in all parts of the country. The Rwenzori ranges are home to Mount Stanley, with Margherita its highest peak reaching an elevation of 5,109m.

The Rwenzoris, famously described by Claudius Ptolemy, a Greco-Roman geographer (AD 150), as the 'Mountains of the Moon' were believed to be the 'Lunae Montes' predicted by

the ancient Greeks to be the source of the River Nile.

In 1864, Baker observed the Rwenzoris and referred to them as the "Blue Mountains". However, he failed to appreciate the importance of the natural feature. Later, European explorer Henry Morton Stanley proclaimed the existence of the Snow mountains and called them the

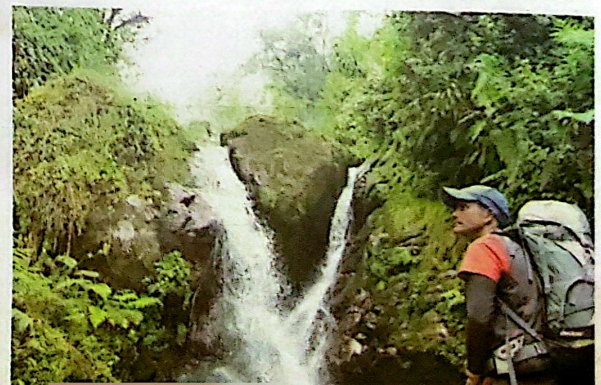
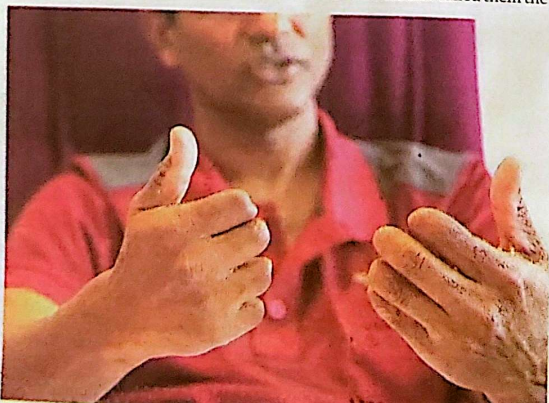
Rwenzoris in 1888 after a local name to mean "the place from where the rain comes". It is believed he could not pronounce "Rwenjura" a name given to the range by the natives.

About the Rwenzoris

The Rwenzoris are located along the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo rise to a

height of about 5,109 metres above sea level. The range is about 120km in length and 60km in width. The beautiful, non-volcanic mountains offer mountaineers a lasting impression about Uganda with the Rwenzori National Park which hosts 70 mammal and 217 bird species, and some of the world's rarest vegetation.

The Rwenzori range is the largest



Uganda's big tourism earner



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STEPHEN ASIIMWE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, UGANDA TOURISM BOARD.



Celebrated Malaysian climber Ravi poses on Margherita, the highest peak of the Mount Rwenzori ranges. COURTESY PHOTO

3633

NUMBER OF TOURISTS WHO CLIMBED THE RWENZORI MOUNTAINS IN 2017

and most important group of snow mountains in Africa with Mount Stanley as the third highest mountain in Africa. The wettest months are March to May and August to December.

Tourism on the mountain

According to Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) statistics, the Rwenzori attracted 3192 and 3633 mountaineers in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Whereas, Mount Elgon hosted 3335 climbers in 2016 and 4391 climbers in 2017.

As part of promotion of the Unesco heritage site, UWA is interested in partnerships with mountaineering clubs around the world for reciprocal or exchange visits. "We shall also promote the mountains through specialist media such as Travelust and NatGeo magazine," says Stephen Masaba, director of Tourism and Business Services.

Masaba expresses concern over the low domestic visitor numbers to the mountains. "Group trips and incentives shall be put in place to enable Ugandans ascend the different peaks in phases. UWA has opened up new trails; Bukurungo and Buhoma, which are attracting more Ugandans lately.

"In future, we shall open a trail from Fort Portal side that will enable persons in districts neighbouring the mountains to access and benefit from the natural feature," he says.

The UWA business director echoes the celebrity climber's concern about

the lack of accommodation and the need to improve safety equipment on the mountain. However, he points out the need for a strong maintenance budget to improve the semi-permanent walking boards. "There are good resting areas, platforms and trails. They, however, need continuous maintenance because it is wet, boggy and hot sometimes," Masaba explains.

Role of the private sector

The private sector is a pivotal partner in the development of Rwenzori as Africa's next premier destination for high altitude mountaineering which requires determination, patience, fearlessness, caution and careful planning. Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) administers the park while two companies are concessionaires; Rwenzori Mountain Trekking Services (RMS) and Rwenzori Trekking Services (RTS).

The RMS prices vary from \$550

(Shs1.9m) for domestic climbers to \$1,365 (Shs4.9m) for the international market through the central circuit. The prices include food, accommodation in the mountain, park entry fees, rescue, VAT, chef, and guide whereas Meanwhile, RTS that manages the Kilembe route charges \$1,200 (Shs4.3m) for one or two persons each and \$1,100 (Shs3.9m) per person for more plus UWA gate entrance fee of \$35 (Shs126,000) per day which is paid separately in cash for an eight-day trek to Margherita peak. Price includes porters, meals, and accommodation while on the mountain.

World class climbers

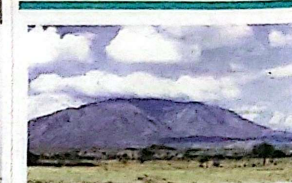
Tour operators have lots of expectations in the climber following the just concluded the Rwenzori challenge. "He should convince mountaineers from Malaysia and the greater Asian region to visit Uganda. We lose nothing in having him on board as an ambassador for Uganda's mountaineering product," says Jonathan Ainebyoona, PRO Association of Uganda Tour Operators.

In November 2010, Beryl Park emerged the oldest climber to reach Margherita peak at 85 years in the wet season of November.

In January 2015, American model Marlina Moreno completed an eight-

If I had to be somewhere in Uganda right now, it would definitely be...

KYANINGA LODGE. The place has huts, which are beautifully lit at night. The huts are surrounded by a small, beautiful lake which livens up the atmosphere. The vegetation in the area is also thick and green making the entire place stand out.
OLIVIA NAKANDI, BUSINESSWOMAN



MT ELGON: I would like to be in Mbale at the Mt Elgon ranges because the weather is captivating; ideal for camping and relaxation. When you get chance to climb these mountains, you can enjoy the aerial view of Mbale town with its amazing green scenery.
SAMSON TEBANDEKE, FARMER



NAMUGONGO MARTYRS' SHRINE

Being at the epitome of Christianity in Uganda fulfils and rejuvenates my spirit. The shrines embody holiness. I would wish to be there to renew my faith. The large timber doors of the shrine are carved with motifs telling the story of martyrs.
LETICIA NAMUSOKE, TEACHER



UGANDA'S MOUNTAINS AT A GLANCE

ACROSS COUNTRY

Rwenzori ranges is home to Mount Stanley with Margherita its highest peak reaching an elevation of 5,109m. It has snow all year round and is home to five other mountains in the range;

solitary volcanic mountain in East Africa and one of the largest volcanic bases in the world. To the North-east is Mountain Zulia (2,149m) and

Morungole (2,750m), both within Kidepo National Park. South of Karanja is Mount Moroto (3,083m) and Kadam (3,063m), Kilak.