

For all its global significance, the Source of the Nile has long struggled to translate its fame into sustained tourism value.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

In the latter half of the 19th century, British explorer John Hanning Speke stood at the edge of a vast lake and made a declaration that would echo through history: this, he said, was the source of the River Nile. More than a century later, that moment still defines Uganda's place on the global map.

From the calm waters at the edge of Lake Victoria in Jinja, the Nile begins its 6,600-kilometre journey northwards through 11 countries before emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. It is the longest river in the world, a geographical marvel, and a symbol of continuity across Africa.

Yet, for all its global significance, the Source of the Nile has long struggled to translate its fame into sustained tourism value. For years, visitors came, took photographs, perhaps enjoyed a short boat ride, and left. Few returned. Even fewer stayed long enough to meaningfully contribute to the local economy.

Now, the government is attempting to change that narrative, backed by billions of shillings in new investment and a broader rethink of what tourism in Uganda should look like.

A destination visited once and forgotten

According to officials at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, one of the most striking findings from recent sector studies was not the number of visitors to the Source of the Nile, but their behaviour. Most came only once.

"Many of the tourists who came here were not returning visitors," says Permanent Secretary Doreen Katusiime. "In other words, most people who came here never came back, and maybe they didn't even tell other people about it, because there was nothing much to show."

That insight has become the foundation of a new strategy, one that shifts focus from simply attracting visitors to keeping them longer, increasing their spending, and turning them into ambassadors for the destination. It is a shift that reflects a broader global trend in tourism: the move from passive sightseeing to immersive experiences.

Building more than a viewpoint

Central to this transformation is a newly constructed modern tourism complex at the Source of the Nile. Phase One of the project, costing Shs15.9 billion, is now about 98 percent complete. It introduces infrastructure that has long been missing at one of Uganda's most iconic sites.

The development includes a modern pier where boats can dock, a restaurant overlooking the river, upgraded washroom facilities, and a viewing deck designed to give visitors a more immersive visual experience. A glass bridge adds an architectural statement, while improved parking and access roads aim to ease congestion and improve flow.

To the casual observer, these may seem like standard upgrades. But to planners, they represent a deliberate attempt to transform the site from a quick-stop attraction into a full experience hub.

"This is the first time the Government of Uganda has developed serious infra-

Reinventing the source: Out to make the most of the Nile



One of the new facilities at the Source of the Nile which will have a restaurant and dedicated retail spaces. PHOTO/TREVOR LUTALO

structure at the Source of the Nile," Katusiime says. "We are now in a drive to increase the numbers, increase the length of stay and the spend."

The second phase of the project, expected to cost an additional Shs24 billion, will expand the experience further. Plans include floating jetties, nature walkways along the riverbanks, amphitheatre-style seating areas, and enhanced landscaping.

Project manager Caroline Kisauzi of Cornerstone Design and Engineering says the goal is not just completion, but transformation.

"What we have done in Phase One is to establish the core infrastructure," she explains. "The subsequent phase will focus on beautification and additional features that will allow visitors to engage more deeply with the environment."

Jinja's evolving identity

The redevelopment of the Source of the Nile is also part of a broader effort to reposition Jinja itself. For decades, the town has been marketed as East Africa's adventure capital, a reputation built on white-water rafting, bungee jumping, tubing, and quad biking along the Nile.

While that identity has attracted thrill-seekers, it has also limited the scope of tourism in the area. The new strategy aims to broaden that appeal.

By enhancing the Source of the Nile experience, planners hope to attract a more diverse range of visitors, including families, leisure travellers, and cultural tourists, groups that typically stay longer and spend more. It is a subtle but important shift: from adrenaline to immersion, from activity to experience.

The timing of this investment is not accidental. Uganda's tourism sector is experiencing a strong recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic, with key indicators pointing to renewed growth and ambition.

Tourism earnings rose to \$1.7b (Shs6.3 trillion), the highest in the country's history. International arrivals increased from 1.3 million in 2024 to 1.65 million in 2025, reflecting growing global interest in Uganda as a destination.

Employment in the sector has also expanded significantly. By 2024, tourism supported 803,691 jobs—about 7.2 percent of the population, up from 573,508 in 2021.

These figures underscore the sector's importance not just as a source of foreign exchange, but as a driver of livelihoods. Yet, despite this growth, Uganda still faces a fundamental challenge: how to increase the value derived from each visitor.

The \$50b ambition

Under Uganda's long-term development framework, tourism has been identified as a key pillar in the country's ambition to grow into a \$500 billion economy by 2040.

The sector itself has been tasked with generating \$50b (Shs186.9 trillion) in annual revenue by that time, a target that will require not just more tourists, but higher-value tourism.

This is where projects like the Source of the Nile redevelopment come in. By improving infrastructure and diversifying experiences, the government hopes to move beyond traditional nature-based tourism and tap into new segments, including domestic tourism, cultural heritage, and experiential travel.

The logic is straightforward: a visitor who stays longer, engages more, and spends across multiple services contributes far more to the economy than one who simply passes through.

But the success of this strategy is not guaranteed. Globally, tourism experts have long cautioned that infrastructure alone does not create memorable destinations. What matters is how that infrastructure is used to craft meaningful experiences.

A modern pier may improve access. A glass bridge may enhance views. But without storytelling, programming, and engagement, they risk becoming underutilised assets. This raises a critical question for Uganda: is the country building infrastructure, or is it building experiences?

The planned additions in Phase Two, nature walkways, amphitheatres, and

interactive spaces, suggest an awareness of this distinction. They open the door to guided tours, cultural performances, and educational experiences that could bring the site to life. But execution will be key.

Owning the Nile story

There is also a deeper issue at play: narrative ownership. The Nile is one of the most famous rivers in the world. Its story has been told in books, documentaries, and classrooms across the globe. Yet, much of that narrative has historically been associated with countries downstream.

Uganda, despite being home to the river's source, has not fully capitalised on this global recognition. The redevelopment of the Source of the Nile offers an opportunity to change that, to position Uganda not just as a starting point, but as the central storyteller of the Nile's journey.

This could involve integrating history, culture, and science into the visitor experience, turning the site into both a tourist attraction and an educational destination.

Beyond national ambitions, the project also carries significant implications for local communities in Jinja. Tourism development typically creates opportunities across the value chain from tour guides and boat operators to vendors, hospitality workers, and transport providers.

As visitor numbers increase and stays lengthen, these opportunities are expected to expand. The growth in tourism employment, from just over 573,000 jobs in 2021 to more than 803,000 in 2024, offers a glimpse of what is possible.

For many in Jinja, the redevelopment of the Source of the Nile is not just about aesthetics or prestige; it is about livelihoods.

A defining test

As Phase One nears completion and Phase Two looms, the Source of the Nile project stands as a defining test of Uganda's tourism strategy. It brings together history, infrastructure, policy, and ambition in a single location.

If successful, it could serve as a model for how the country develops other underutilised attractions, turning them into high-value destinations that drive growth and create jobs. If it falls short, it risks becoming another example of a well-intentioned investment that fails to deliver lasting impact.

At the edge of Lake Victoria, where the Nile begins its long journey north, the water moves almost imperceptibly. It is calm, unassuming, and easy to overlook. But as it flows, it gathers force, carving its way through landscapes and nations, shaping lives and histories along the way.

Uganda now stands at a similar starting point. With renewed investment, rising visitor numbers, and ambitious targets, the country has the opportunity to transform one of its most iconic natural assets into a powerful engine of growth.

The question is whether it can sustain the momentum, whether it can turn infrastructure into experience, visitors into advocates, and potential into lasting value. Because just like the Nile itself, what begins quietly at the source can, over time, become something far greater.

SOURCE OF THE NILE

The Nile is the longest river in the world that spits its waters some 6,695km north of its source, in the Mediterranean Sea. On August 3, 1858, John Speke wrote that he had discovered the Source of the Nile. It led to a bitter disagreement with fellow explorer Richard Burton.

\$1.7b

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