PAKASA

HOW TO BENEFIT FROM PROJECTED SH14 TRILLION TOURISM EARNINGS

By Julius Luwemba

With Uganda ranking highly as the leading country in with the most outstanding tourist attractions in Africa, according to international tourism agencies, such as Bradt Guides, there is a projection that millions of economic opportunities will be created in the sector in the next five years.

It is upon this background that a new ambitious tourism strategic plan was launched on February 19, at the Government-owned Crested Crane Hotel in Jinja city.

The five-year strategic plan was launched alongside the service standards manual and the clients charter during a three-day top-management retreat organised by the tourism ministry, together with its subordinate agencies, including Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), Uganda Hotel and Tourism Training College and the Uganda Wildlife Research and Training college.

Launched by the tourism minister Tom Butime, the second strategic plan 2025/26-2029/30 aims at increasing tourism foreign exchange earnings to $4b (over sh14 trillion) from $1.025b (sh3.6 trillion) at the end of the next five years.

It also targets to increase the average tourist's length of stay to 10 nights from 7.6 nights, as well as increase the average inbound expenditure per leisure tourist to $2,500 (sh9m) from $1,550 (sh5.5m).

The strategy also intends to increase tourism's direct contribution to total tax revenue to 4.2% from 2.1%, as well as increasing domestic tourism expenditure to sh5.3 trillion from sh3.6 trillion.

According to Butime, the plan operationalises the ministry's mandate with a focus on impact, sustainability and inclusive growth.

"It identifies catalytic interventions required to unlock the full potential of Uganda's tourism sector, driving job creation, enhancing foreign exchange earnings, strengthening national identity and promoting equitable economic opportunities across regions," the minister noted.

This was solidified by the tourism state minister Martin Mugarra, who said the strategy's development was given due attention while recognising that tourism is a key pillar of Uganda's economic transformation, serving not only as a source of revenue, but also as a vehicle to showcase the country to the world.

PHOTO BY JULIUS LUWEMBA



Mugarra (left), deputy head of public service Jane Kwesiga, Butime and Katusiime during the launch of the new Tourism Strategic Plan, Service Standards and Client Charter

"Additionally, it is aligned to the Fourth National Development Plan (NDP IV), as well as the 15-year Tenfold Growth Strategy, which identified tourism as one of the priority investment areas to drive the envisaged double-digit economic growth," Mugarra explained.

Over the planned period, the tourism ministry will continue to harness the country's comparative advantage of spectacular wildlife, nature, good climate, water bodies and diverse cultures with great hospitality.

Much emphasis, according to the strategy, will be placed on building domestic demand for travel, diversifying Uganda's tourism portfolio, wildlife and cultural heritage conservation and fast-tracking the full implementation of the national tourism marketing strategy which was earlier launched by Uganda Tourism Board (UTB).

The strategy will also see investment in critical transport infrastructure, such as roads, stopover points and ICT solutions; addressing the skills gap, strengthening regulation, co-ordination and collaboration within the industry, as well as providing the much-needed support to tourism industry private sector players, especially the community participation and inclusiveness.

CHALLENGES

According to the reports, underdeveloped tourism products and narrow product range limit the duration of stays and overall expenditure of tourists.

"There are also delays in the completion of tourism infrastructure development projects due to under funding and limited access to land," stated the report that followed the 2020/21-2024/25 strategic plan.

It was also noted that the funding of the previous strategic plan was at about 20% of the planned funding, which limited the execution of several interventions.

The launch of the new national tourism strategy comes days after the unveiling of the private sector (Uganda Tourism Association) strategic plan 2026-2030. The private sector tourism strategy is envisaged to feed into the national tourism plan, as well as the national marketing strategy and objectives.

COSTING AND FINANCING

Doreen Katusiime, the ministry's permanent secretary, said the total estimated cost of the new strategic plan over the next five years is sh1.34 trillion.

The Global Agenda 2030, through the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 8.9 and 11.4, underscores the importance of promoting sustainable tourism as a catalyst for job creation, cultural preservation and economic development.

Regionally, the East African Community (EAC) Vision 2050 advocates for joint interventions in competitive, high-return tourism activities, including the implementation of a single East African visa, joint marketing strategies and standardised hotel classification across member states.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The overarching goal of the previous tourism strategic plan for the financial year 2020/21 to financial year 2024/25 was to enhance Uganda's appeal as a preferred tourism destination.

Juliana Kagwa, the UTB chief executive officer, recognised that significant progress was achieved, evidenced by Uganda being voted the "Most desirable country in the rest of the world" by the Wanderlust Travel Awards 2024 and also ranking among the top four places to visit by the Bradt Guides, as well as gaining global visibility through the Netflix documentary, *Chimp Empire*.

"Uganda was also featured as a top travel destination by major international media outlets, including CNN, National Geographic, the *New York Times*, and Lonely Planet. This success was driven by increased visitor numbers, expanded tourism investments, targeted government initiatives to revive the sector following the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed confidence among both international and domestic travellers," Kagwa stated.

According to Katusiime, other achievements include, increase in international tourist arrivals from 473,085 visitors in 2020 to 1,371,895 visitors in 2024 (equivalent to 89.2% of pre-pandemic levels). She noted that there was also an increase in the number of domestic visitors rising to 2.8 million in 2023, surpassing the pre-COVID levels of 2.42 million by 15.5%.

"We also had increased contribution of the tourism industry to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to sh10.6 trillion (5.5%) in 2023 from sh3.91 trillion (2.7%) in 2020 and a significant growth in direct employment along the tourism value chain, with the number of people directly employed along the tourism value chain increasing to 803,691 (7.2% of total population) in 2024 from 573,508 (5.7% of total population) in 2021," she stated.

The previous strategic plan saw an average annual hotel occupancy rate rise from 20.1% in 2020 to 53.2% in 2024, reflecting a strong sectoral recovery.

The high growth is attributed to the expansion of hotel facilities, opening of new eco-lodges and resorts, as well as the upgrading of existing establishments to meet international standards, especially in key tourism hubs such as Kampala, Entebbe, Jinja and the Albertine region.

Uganda's tourism sector also recorded substantial growth in accommodation capacity, with the number of rooms increasing from 146,620 in FY2021/22 to 350,550 in FY2023/24, surpassing the target of 161,161 rooms.