

Suits, smiles and Skål at tourism's Saturday night out

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BY EDGAR R. BATTE

On a Saturday evening when Kampala was already dressed for the weekend, the tourism fraternity chose to do what it knows best – gather, welcome, and host one another.

The ballroom at Sheraton Kampala Hotel shimmered under soft lighting as Skål International Kampala marked 30 years since its founding in 1994. It was an anniversary, yes but it felt more like a reunion with a room full of people who have spent their careers perfecting hospitality.

If tourism had a dresscode, this was it. Guests turned up in tuxedos and bow ties, elegant gowns, bold African prints, crisp suits and confident heels. The air carried subtle perfume and easy laughter.

It was Saturday and time seemed to be in a hurry. Then came Crystal Newman, the evening's emcee with her

warmth and joviality as she opened the evening with her trademark ease.

There was laughter within minutes. She teased the tables named after Ugandan towns. She explained that "Skål" is not an acronym, but a Scandinavian toast – a word of goodwill and friendship.

And in a room full of travel professionals, the symbolism landed perfectly. Cheers. But what made the evening glow was the beauty of communing. If one did not know someone at their table, this was the perfect place to break ice.

Tourism, after all, is built on strangers becoming familiar, and on introductions turning into partnerships. Hotel managers met tour operators, conservation advocates caught up with travel consultants and government officials exchanged pleasantries with private investors.

Jean-Philippe Bittencourt, President of Skål International Kampala, reflected on that spirit.



It was an evening of pure joy for all. PHOTOS/EDGAR R. BATTE

"For three decades this chapter has brought together tourism professionals who believe in collaboration, friendship and ethical business," he said.

"Tonight is not about looking back. It is about revival." The reminder carried weight. Skål Uganda's journey stretches back to 1994. 30 years is no small achievement in an industry that has seen economic swings, regional competition, reinvention, and a global pandemic that nearly froze movement across continents.

"Our sector was brought to a

standstill," Bittencourt said of the Covid-19 years. "But together, we will not simply rebuild. We will rise." The room understood that pause. For two years, aircraft were grounded. Hotels went quiet. Events vanished from calendars.

The world shrank. So, the gathering felt earned. There were recognitions. Founding members like Dr Professor Wolfgang Thome, were applauded for keeping the club steady and running, even during difficult seasons.

Certificates were handed over

with applause. It was a reminder that associations are sustained by people who choose to keep showing up. Liz Tapawa, the deputy director Region 14 for Skål International Africa, shifted the tone from celebration to challenge.

"Inclusion is not a slogan," she said. "Inclusion is sustainability. Inclusion is smart leadership." Her words hung gently in the air. She urged members to mentor young professionals, to open doors intentionally, to widen the table.

Tourism, she reminded the

room, is one of the largest employers of women globally. Leadership must reflect that reality. It was less a lecture and more a nudge, from one industry insider to another.

And then, of course, there were the winners. Your writer, for the record, became the night's first winner. For a brief moment, professionalism gave way to pure, unfiltered joy.

A small win, yes but the kind that adds sparkle to the night. Dinner followed, as it should in a room full of hospitality professionals. Conversations deepened over plates.

