Uganda's tourism held back by roads

Uganda's tourism sector is steadily regaining its strength, with rising visitor numbers, improved hotel occupancy, and growing international confidence. Tourism is one of Uganda's leading economic sectors, contributing significantly to foreign exchange earnings, employment, and national development. In 2024 alone, the country recorded over 1.3 million international arrivals and generated approximately $1.3b in tourism revenue.

Yet beneath this recovery lies a quiet but costly problem. Despite this promising growth, the full potential of the sector remains constrained by unreliable and poorly maintained road networks connecting major tourism sites. For many visitors, the journey is as important as the destination. In Uganda, tourism depends heavily on movement across diverse landscapes from national parks and cultural sites to mountains and lakes. When roads are rough, muddy, or impassable during rainy seasons, the entire tourism experience is affected.

Tour operators report longer travel times, higher fuel consumption, and frequent vehicle breakdowns. Visitors, on the other hand, experience discomfort, delays, and uncertainty, which can negatively affect their perception of Uganda as a destination. Over time, such challenges reduce visitor satisfaction and discourage repeat travel.

Ironically, many of Uganda's most visited and high-value tourism destinations are the most affected. Areas such as Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth, Murchison Falls, and the Rwenzori Mountains attract large numbers of tourists and generate substantial revenue. However, access roads to these locations are often degraded, weather-sensitive, and poorly maintained. This creates a mismatch between the value of tourism assets and the infrastructure supporting them.

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> **Asuman Kabuzi**
> Tourism roads



A single road serving a national park does not only connect tourists, it also supports lodges, guides, transport operators, local suppliers, and surrounding communities. When such roads fail, the economic impact is widespread. Poor road infrastructure increases operational costs for tourism businesses. Lodges face higher expenses in transporting supplies, while tour operators spend more on fuel and vehicle repairs. These costs are often passed on to tourists, making Uganda less competitive compared to neighbouring destinations with better infrastructure.

Communities also lose out. Limited access reduces opportunities for local enterprises such as craft markets, cultural experiences, and community-based tourism initiatives. This weakens the ability of tourism to drive inclusive growth and improve livelihoods.

Investors are less likely to commit resources to areas where access is unreliable. Poor roads signal risk, increase operational uncertainty, and lower confidence in destination readiness. As a result, potentially high-value tourism areas remain underdeveloped. Moreover, weak connectivity limits the development of multi-destination circuits, which are essential for increasing visitor length of stay and overall spending. Instead of exploring multiple regions, tourists may opt for shorter, less diverse itineraries.

The challenge is not only technical but also institutional. Road planning does not always align with tourism priorities, and there is no clear framework for identifying and prioritising tourism roads as economic assets. In addition, maintenance is often inconsistent, and climate-related challenges such as flooding and erosion further worsen road conditions.

Therefore, while there is growing recognition that tourism roads should be treated as critical economic infrastructure, not just local access routes. Many experts are calling for dedicated funding for maintenance of key tourism roads; stronger coordination between tourism and transport sectors; prioritisation of high-impact tourism corridors; and investment in climate-resilient road design.

Improving these roads is not simply about transport, it is about unlocking economic potential, enhancing visitor experience, and strengthening Uganda's global competitiveness.

Uganda's tourism sector has proven its resilience and potential. The country boasts world-class attractions, from gorilla trekking to cultural heritage and scenic landscapes. However, without reliable road access, these assets cannot deliver their full value. If Uganda is to position tourism as a driver of sustainable development, the journey must become as rewarding as the destination.

Asuman Kabuzi,
Department of Tourism Management,
Makerere University Business School

Editorial Allan Chekwech 29/35 8th Street, P.O. Box 12141 Kampala, Uganda **Phones** 0312301100/101 **Email** editorial@

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