



What will fast track tourism sector recovery?



Ag Egptian Ambassador / Counsellor, Mr M o h a m m e d Nazeeh Kilany together with UTB board chairman Daudi Migereko after signing a deal to promote tourism between Egypt and Uganda.

Why we need to focus on Uganda's

Tourism can be considered as a major export item for Uganda. Indeed, NDP 111 and Vision 2040 indicate that with optimal investment in our tourism products and sites, Uganda can earn approximately \$6 billion per year. The package of interventions as directed by H E President Y. K. Museveni on April 20, 2023 aimed at revitalising the tourism sector, which have been highly hailed, if pursued with urgency in regard to follow up and implementation will put the sector on the desired trajectory and enable the sector to realise the earnings envisaged, sooner than later.

For a number of years, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism was Uganda's leading foreign exchange earner. Destination Uganda was also predicted to be among the 10 fastest growing destinations for leisure-travel, spending between 2020 and 2026 in the following order: India, Angola, Uganda, Brunei, Thailand, China, Myanmar, Oman, Mozambique and Vietnam.

Ever since the launch of the country destination brand by His Excellency the President of Uganda in January 2022, the brand has won international awards and the destination has received unprecedented endorsements from leading media houses, globally, including the recent one by CNN. All this should enhance the marketing of Destination Uganda.

Government, the Ministry of Tourism, UTB and the private sector players have been having discussions, generating papers pointing to policies and interventions that must be pursued to revitalise our tourism industry and enable the country to benefit from her tourism attractions given the peace and tranquility that the country enjoys.

We commend His Excellency the President of Uganda, on his directives of March 28 and April 20 2023 geared towards fostering improvement in Uganda's tourism infrastructure specifically the tarmacking of aerodromes in national parks, working on tourism roads and Wi-Fi connectivity in the tourism hot-spots. These directives are timely and will certainly set the pace and momentum for stronger interventions and investment in improving our flagship tourism attractions and eventually enhancing the country's attractiveness as a preferred tourism destination.

Numerous initiatives are underway to position Uganda, alongside other East African Community member states in marketing the region as a single tourism destination. Indeed, the just-concluded Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo (POATE 2023) event held from 26 - 29 April 2023 in Munyonyo, was well attended by all the seven East African Community (EAC) partner Tourism Boards and private sector from the EAC partner states and calls were made to fast track the implementation of the East Africa Joint Tourism Marketing Strategy, among other initiatives.

However for Uganda to maximize returns from this joint initiative and achieve the set tourism targets in NDP III, we must pursue deliberate interventions and strategic investments geared towards improving and enhancing Uganda's Tourism Products holistically to ensure global competitiveness. Many countries, including the oil rich



UTB Board Chairperson Daudi Migereko. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

countries, are investing heavily in tourism, precisely because they want to be the best, most competitive and are targeting the high returns associated with tourism investments.

Research shows that successful destinations provide visitor experiences that meet the visitors' needs, expectations and are true to the promises of their brand. They continuously maintain and enhance their existing products and where there are gaps or opportunities, they invest in new products, infrastructure, services and amenities that strengthen the destination's appeal and competitiveness.

Following the Presidential Directives, all we need to do now, is to focus on the

priority areas/ items/ things for intervention and immediately start working on them, in line with the resources we have, at a given time. We should be certain of the impact or multiplier effects they will create, the returns we shall get and the benefits should be well articulated.

Attraction and competitiveness:

The popularity of tourism destinations can be enhanced by a combination of the factors of competitiveness and attractiveness. The competitiveness elements are derived from the supply side while the attractiveness ones from the demand side of tourism. Competitiveness and attractiveness can help us

view destination Uganda from two different yet reinforcing perspectives: one from the tourist perspective (attractiveness), and the other from the destination perspective (competitiveness). The attractiveness of a destination is enhanced by its ability to provide facilities that tourists can use at the destination. Competitiveness of a destination is achieved when the provision of services and facilities are more competitive compared to alternative destinations.

Combining these perspectives is one sure way to come up with a holistic understanding of the destination popularity dynamics. The input of both tourists and tourism facility operators is necessary for any destination to man-

age and enhance its competitive advantage. Therefore, the evaluation of Uganda as a tourism destination should be approached by symmetrically assessing destination attractiveness and destination competitiveness as related and complementary dimensions. This approach allows comparisons to be made about the congruency between what we invest in as a country and what our tourists are looking for in Uganda.

Research has demonstrated that 70% of all tourists visit the 10 major world tourist destinations, leaving the rest of the world to share the remaining 30% of tourists. This indicates the intensity of competition for the other less known destinations. With this, the attractiveness factors weigh in. The more a destination is able to meet the needs of the tourists, the more it is perceived to be attractive and the greater are the chances that the destination is likely to be chosen. The attractiveness of a tourist destination encourages people to visit and spend time at the destination. Therefore the major value of destination attractiveness is the pulling effect it has on tourists. Without the attractiveness, tourism does not exist and there could be little or no need for tourism facilities and services. As a country, we need to be more purposeful and invest in those facilities or infrastructure that attract and help to retain visitors.

1. Product Development

Arguably, Uganda is a very beautiful country that is greatly endowed with natural attractions and human related offerings; culture, weather, heritage that make the country unique in its own way. From the snowcapped mountain Rwenzori to the grasslands of Kidepo, we must all agree that Uganda is a beautiful country.

However, our products need to be developed to expected standard to promote repeat visits. A case in point, Uganda is yet to develop cultural villages or tourism parks where a tourist experiences the destination for a whole day and spends as much money as he has on the experience and items on offer.

We are working on enhancing the potential of tourism sites such that they meet internationally acceptable standards. This will ensure that we create competitive local and international demand for our tourism products. This will ultimately enhance our tourism earnings.

For example, the Source of the Nile, the Equator, the urgent need for a National Convention Centre, the untapped opportunities in marine tourism on Lake Victoria and River Nile, the Rwenzori mountaineering circuit, Namugongo/ Munyonyo and other religious sites, among others, if carefully attended to will greatly enhance our product range and competitiveness of Uganda as a Tourism Destination.

Equally important, is the cleanliness and beauty of our cities and urban centres. The cleanliness, hygienic standards and safety of our major tourism and urban centers is going to be critical in attracting more tourists to Destination Uganda. This is closely tied to the establishment of infrastructure that is accommodative of the massive urbanisation across cities in Uganda. This would reduce inefficiencies associated with

tourism infrastructure

the apparent congestion in the consumption of public services in cities.

A team of government, private sector and other stakeholders can be constituted at national and regional levels to ensure follow up and timely implementation of whatever is agreed. A mechanism for rigorous monitoring and supervision will also need to be put in place.

2. Infrastructure:

Accessibility to our tourism sites/products is critical. For a number of years, some tourism roads have been prioritized in the annual budgets and work plans. However, a good number of these roads are yet to be worked on and are in a sorry state. Many tourism sites could not be accessed, this last peak season, leading to loss of revenue and related negative effect on our tourism.

The recent Directive by H E the President on tourism roads, did cover the key tourism areas of: Kisoro/ Bwindi, Kasese/ Kanungu/ Bwindi, Kitgum/ Kidepo, Kampala/ Jinja/ Itanda, Pian Upe. Obviously, Ministry of Works and UNRA will need to expedite implementation of their retarmacking, upgrading their capacities and tarmacking. It may also be prudent to maintain an emergency road repair unit to service the tourism areas.

Domestic air transport and connectivity; this should readily complement road transport or provide a faster and more convenient alternative to the var-

ious tourism destinations in the country. Very few tourists want to spend 12 hours on the road, to reach one area of tourism attraction.

The Directive issued by H E the President on 28th March and 20th April to revitalize some airstrips/aerodromes, code them and enable them to handle charter, domestic, regional and international flights will go a long way to ease accessibility and connectivity for tourists who come to Destination Uganda. If this directive could be handled expeditiously, this would make it easy to optimally plan /arrange for the visitors who will be here to attend the Non-Aligned movement (NAM) Conference, the Pan African Parliament and the Commonwealth Speakers' Conference to visit most areas of touristic attraction in the country. The benefits and earnings for the country will be considerable.

ICT/Internet Capacity: Since the outbreak of Covid-19, internet usage has become a way of life. Therefore, every tourism facility must have fast internet connection and the requisite capacity to handle the multiple users. This enables tourists to share experiences, participate in meetings and conferences from wherever they may be. This will also help us to enhance our business and conference (MICE) tourism competitiveness.

Our national broadband, needs to take this new reality into account and the program to enhance capacity needs to be immediately embarked on.

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1. Capacity building:

World over, the tourism and hospitality sector is impacted by the level of services offered by the persons involved in the value chain. That is the reason why government has invested funds to upgrade the Uganda Hotel & Tourism Training Institute (UHTTI) in Jinja and supported other facilities established by the private sector.

Upon completion, UHTTI will provide the necessary skills training to the young people across the tourism value chain. That is from the front desk, chef, etc up to the tourism entrepreneur.

The courses will need to be reviewed, aligned to the international standards and other international languages to be taught for the marketability of our human resource. The skilled staff should be qualified and suitable for employment in any of the five-star hotels around the world and fetch revenue for the country through remittances. Many countries suffered serious manpower shortage, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and are in dire need of skilled manpower.

Capacity building is also important in classification of tourism hotels and restaurants. The country needs standards in what should constitute tourism service providers across the accommodation and restaurant value chain. Such that when a tourist settles for a given classification of a hotel, the quality of services should be consistent with the tourist's expectations. A five star experience should be what it is; while a three star experience should be at that level. However, no accommodation service provider should market themselves as such yet the experience is worth a 2 star facility.

Credit to the Sector:

The private sector is finding it difficult to access credit on affordable terms. This affects the industry's ability and capacity to offer the desired range of services, to expand and remain competitive. Today, most domestic tourists are insisting on staying in hotels and lodges which have a swimming pool and health club. Foreign tourists are in addition insisting on a golf course and tennis court in the vicinity of the hotel or lodge before they are to check in. These amenities are now becoming a necessity but difficult to finance without long term affordable credit for the tourism sector.

UDB has taken the lead in financing the sector; however the resource available for lending to the sector need to be enhanced and made more concessional or affordable.

Government, should in the meantime consider establishing a Tourism Support facility similar to one for the Agricultural sector which is under the supervision of Bank of Uganda. This will go a long way in addressing the plight of the private sector, regarding credit, in the tourism industry. It will also enhance the capacity on the part of industry players to contribute more to the development of the industry. Besides, the sector players have always demonstrated a good capacity of honoring their obligations.

Daudi Migereko is the chairman, Uganda Tourism Board

SONA: WHAT PRESIDENT MUSEVENI SAID ABOUT TOURISM



President Museveni. PHOTO/COURTESY

Last week, President Museveni delivered the annual State of the Nation Address in which he appreciated the role of tourism in the country. Below is part of his speech.

Tourism is another area which has significant potential for the economy. We have the best tourism sites, including: our National Parks of Kidepo, Murchison Falls, Queen Elizabeth, Lake Mburo, Elgon, Rwenzori, Kibaale Forest, Bunyonyi and many game reserves across the country. Uganda's tourism sites, rank highly in international media outlets and global tourism agencies.

Despite the global lockdown, we received about 500,000 tourists in 2021 and revenue of US\$530 million. The number of tourists coming here, has recovered since the lifting of the Covid-19 lockdowns to 814,508 by December, 2022 and earned US\$1,014 million in the calendar year 2022.

To harness the tourism potential further, Government is undertaking the following interventions in the tourism sector:

- i. Ensuring security of the Country and tourism sites;
- ii. Construction of tarmac roads from Kitgum to Kidepo (116Km), Lake Bunyonyi-Kisoro-Mgahinga (74Km), Karenga-Kapedo-Kaabong (70Km), Kisoro-Rubuguri-Muko (65Km), which are soon starting;
- iii. Wildlife conservation, especially of Mgahinga, Lake Mburo, Semliki, Kibaale, Murchison, Kidepo Valley, Katonga, Toro Semliki and Queen Elizabeth;
- iv. Preventing the conflict between wildlife and human activities;
- v. Enhancing digital destination marketing using modern ICT (online) technologies; and
- vi. Strengthening enforcement and adherence to tourism standards through a strict licensing regime for service providers in the sector.

Achievements:

I. Tourism directly employs a total of 1.55 million people in Uganda along the entire tourism value chain and contributes 6.7 percent of the country's GDP;

II. In the year 2022, Uganda's National Parks hosted 367,869 visitors surpassing the pre-COVID-19 levels of 323,861 visitors recorded in the year 2019. 63% of these were domestic tourists;

III. The international visitor arrivals, increased to 815,000 in 2022, up from 473,000 in the year 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there is recovery, the performance is still lower than the 1.543 million tourists recorded in 2019. Full recovery is expected in the year 2025;

IV. Leisure and Holiday visitors stayed longer (11 nights), in 2022 compared to 7.6 nights in 2019 and spent higher daily at \$172 per night compared to \$168 per night in 2019;

V. The wildlife populations for most animals, have increased. For example, the number of elephants increased from 5,700 in 2011 to 8,000 now; while buffalos increased from about 36,953 to over 44,000, during the same period. Mountain gorillas in Bwindi-Mgahinga Conservation area, have steadily increased over time from just 200 in the 1990s to about 459 now.





tubing is one of the several activities that can be carried out on the River Nile. PHOTO/COURTESY

What will fast track tourism sector recovery?

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It is estimated that Uganda was expected to lose about one million incoming foreign tourists owing to the closure of Entebbe International Airport. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) noted that travel restrictions and border shutdowns were likely to see international tourist arrival decline by between 58 and 78 per cent globally.

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, Doreen S. Katusiime, observed that by the end of June 2020, the pandemic had brought international travel to an abrupt halt and significantly impacted the tourism industry.

Her observations were captured in the 'Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism Businesses in Uganda' report released by the ministry which detailed how hard hit the lucrative sector was with a sharp drop in demand and a surge in job losses at national, regional and global level, putting many SMEs at risk.

Covid-19 broke out in December 2019 and led to a national lockdown March 2020, including the closure of

Entebbe International Airport. Three year on, efforts to track the recovery of the tourism sector are being undertaken.

Uganda Tourism Association (UTA), an umbrella organisation that brings together all tourism associations in Uganda, introduced the COVID-19 Economic Recovery and Resilience Response Program (CERRRP) supported by the Private Sector Foundation of Uganda (PSFU) for entities in the tourism sector.

Richard Kawere, the project's coordinator said that the beneficiaries of the project were to be picked, focusing on the sector's value chain using the different trade associations that comprise UTA.

UTA's president, Herbert Byaruhanga says that one way Uganda's tourism sector can recover would be government coming to the realization that the sector is a hanging fruit by exploiting the generosity of Mountain Gorillas, birds, mountains, rivers

"Setting standards for all occupations will keep us ahead of others," Byaruhanga adds.

Tours and travel operator, Yvonne Hilgendorf says that the recovery is promising with many many inquiries and bookings coming from German speaking

HE SAYS



The brand promises a lifetime adventure to guests that explore the country. The brand is positioning Uganda as a competitive destination that offers a lifetime experience to our guests. The institution is working with all partners, hoteliers, tour operators and stakeholders to prepare our guests for an all-round experience as a stand out of our brand.'

Mr Simplicious Gessa, UTB Spokesperson

countries. "... and usually, it is the Best of Uganda Tour 10 to 14 Days," the CEO of Manya Africa Tours says, adding that the news of the budget cuts by the government towards the tourism sector is a step backwards and outright frustration.

In a rejoinder, Jean Byamugisha, Executive Director of Uganda Hotel Owners Association says that the budget cuts is a cause for concern because for Uganda to reap from tourism it requires government investment in terms of a big budget for constant and consistent marketing campaigns in our destination countries.

She explains, "An industry that contributes \$1.6BN deserves commensurate facilitation to continue growing and contributing more to the economy. The tourism sector is still in recovery taking a few steps back every time. We are hit with bad news in the country notably the recent Ebola outbreak which has since triumphantly been handled."

To fast track tourism, there is a need for increased marketing and Public Relations (P.R) budget for the tourism sector, review of the tax regime to ensure more local investment in the sector, for example hotels pay 25 different types of taxes and licenses which makes it one of the most taxed sectors in the country.

Byamugisha also recommends need for access to training and capacity building programs to discourage over reliance on expatriate manpower, a credit line for investors to borrow money for investment in the sector esp for confirmation and renovation of existing facilities and prioritisation of tourism roads in key destination areas especially the access to the gorillas which are our key tourism product.

According to Simplicious Gessa, Public Relations Officer (PRO) of Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), the agency in charge of marketing Destination Uganda, is focused entrenching the roll out the Explore Uganda – The Pearl of Africa brand in all its source markets.

"The brand promises a lifetime adventure to guests that explore the country. The brand is positioning Uganda as a competitive destination that offers a lifetime experience to our guests. The institution is working with all partners, hoteliers, tour operators and stakeholders to prepare our guests for an



Tourism State minister Martin Mugaraa (C) has championed domestic tourism. PHOTO/COURTESY

all-round experience as a stand out of our brand,” Gessa explains.

He adds, “As we promise people locally and internationally of an exceptional adventure, focus should not only be on tourist sites and attractions. It should begin from the Airport to hotels where they’ll stay, transportation to sites to have a holistic experience.”

Byaruhanga says that Uganda would do well through increasing its visibility in the major tourist source markets as a must-do, something Gessa says is high on their agenda, adding that UTB is aggressively highlighting destination Uganda through participating in International Exhibitions like World Travel Market London, ITB Berlin Fair as well as regional expos for the marketing mileage in source markets.

Domestically, the institution hosts the Pearl of Africa Expo. UTB’s PRO says the annual event held in April this year increased numbers of both domestic and international visitation.

25
TAXES PAID BY
HOTELS

“POATE is key in showcasing Uganda in the foreign markets because hosted buyers are brought in the country to meet tour operators and partners involved in the tourism value chain. A lot of engagement has been done with tourism partners and stakeholders involved in initiatives that market the country.”

Gessa adds, “We have undertaken digital marketing and content development to reach out to the online market about our destination brand. We are creating fresh and attractive content as well as taking high resolution pictures to sell destination Uganda both locally and internationally. The digital online interface is ongoing through online engagements that offer timely responses to issues posted digitally. The platform has offered a lot of visibility of our brand on Social Media Platforms like Facebook, twitter, instagram where a great number of following has been observed.”

He also discloses that UTB is setting up a Digital hub where several marketing initiatives will be consolidated into one center as well as establish databases for content sharing housed within Market Destination Representatives (MDRs) that UTB commissions to market the country.

Tourism sector to fully recover in 2025

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is expected in the year 2025.

Sustainable tourism

In January 2023, Cable News Network (CNN) listed Uganda among top global tourist destinations. In the article titled, ‘Where to travel in 2023: The best destinations to visit’, CNN cited the Uganda’s expansive shores of Lake Victoria, snowy Rwenzori mountains and healthy wildlife as some of the reasons to visit Uganda.

“There’s considerable change brewing in Uganda’s travel offerings at the moment with the East African country looking beyond the traditional staples of safari and wildlife spotting to appeal to both regional and international visitors. Keen to revitalize post-Covid tourism in all corners of the country, not just the big-ticket businesses offering wealthy visitors a glimpse of the Big Five beasts or mountain gorillas, it’s turned to marketing its other attributes,” the article reads in part.

“And why not? From the expansive shores of Lake Victoria to the snowy Rwenzori Mountains, Uganda is a beautiful wilderness playground, with opportunities for adventure including treks through the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest or up to the craters of the Virunga volcano chain or whitewater rafting along the Victoria Nile.”

But that is not all there is to offer.

Over the years, the wildlife populations for most animals in Uganda have increased. For example, the number of elephants increased from 5,700 in 2011 to 8,000 in 2023; Buffalos rose from about 36,953 to over 44,000 in the same period while Mountain gorillas in Bwindi-Mgahinga Conservation area also increased from 200 in 1990s to about 459 in 2023.

Tourism significantly contributes to the potential of the economy. It employs 1.55 million people in Uganda both directly and indirectly and contributes 6.7 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product.

Recovering from Covid-19

According to the tourism report from the state of national address by President Yoweri Museveni on June 7, 2023, Uganda received about 500,000 tourists in 2021 and revenues of US\$530 million which is approximately Shs1.961 trillion. The number of tourists has continuously increased since the lifting of Covid-19 lockdowns to 814,508 by December, 2022 and earned US\$1,014 million (Shs3.753 trillion) in the calendar year 2022.

In the year 2022, Uganda’s national parks hosted 367,869 visitors surpassing the pre Covid-19 levels of 323,861 visitors recorded in the year 2019.

According to Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) CEO Lily Ajarova the country was greatly affected by the pandemic.

“From that figure, we went into total lockdown in 2020 and only received 473,000 visitors that earned us about \$500M as opposed to the \$1.6 billion. In 2021, we got 512,000 visitors, then in 2022 we got about 600,000. The occupancy rate in hotels dropped from 70 percent in 2019 to 30 percent in 2020 and 2022 it went to 39 percent heading into recovery,” Ms Ajarova said.

President Museveni says full recovery

is expected in the year 2025.

According to Ms Ajarova, UTB is calling on all players in the tourism sector value chain to prioritize environmental protection, good business governance, and respectful co-existence with the host communities in the areas where they operate.

This emphasis on these three aspects is part of the board’s new strategy aimed at creating a viable and vibrant tourism sector, despite the threats posed to it when these factors are neglected.

According to Lily Ajarova, the CEO of UTB, the sector players, both in the government and private sector, must closely monitor these aspects because the industry’s future is premised on them.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as tourism that takes into full account its current and future economic, social, and environmental impact, addressing the needs of visitors, industry players, the environment, and host communities. The UTB aims to achieve this in the sector.

Ajarova emphasizes that the country needs to establish a proper balance between the three dimensions, including making optimal use of environmental resources, maintaining essential ecological processes, as well as conserving natural heritage and biodiversity to ensure the sector thrives longer.

“These aspects are not new to the industry, but they are emerging issues that have to be tackled. It was intentional to bring them to the forum, take action, and actually change the behaviours and lifestyle of a whole country,” Ajarova explains.

She adds that the guidelines and management practices apply to all forms of tourism and all types of destinations, and they are not exclusive to the tourism sector but are now essential to every corporation in any industry.

Regarding the relationship between tourism and the environment, Ajarova notes that since Uganda’s tourism is mainly nature-based, climate change poses a threat to the sector, and the effects the sector has felt so far are heavier than the scars left by the Covid-19 lockdown.

“Tourism is a threat to the environment if not well managed, and based on what climate change effects have done to the sector, it should be a wake-up call that more should be done in tourism business operations to intentionally conserve and protect the environment, as we highly depend on nature for survival as a sector,” Ajarova said.

Basil Ajer, the director of tourism in the tourism ministry says the ministry and its sector agencies intend to continue marketing and promoting domestic and international tourism, training and capacity building of tourism actors along the tourism value chain.

They will also upgrade protected areas to ensure improved wildlife conservation and tourist experience.

The ministry also plans to continue deploying promotion representatives in core and emerging markets like North America, Japan, China, Gulf States, UK & Ireland, Germany, Austria & Switzerland to promote Uganda.



Mugaba Palace in Mbarara City is one of the several attractions being visited by tourists from across the country. PHOTO/COURTESY

Five days of northern craze that

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Northern Uganda for decades was the epicentre of the infamous Lord's Resistance Army war that pitted the government forces against the LRA rebels, leaving thousands dead, millions into IDP camps and several others abducted. However, that has since changed after the rebels were driven out in early 2000, and with that, the return of fun, development and all the positives that come with return of peace.

On May 30, 2023, a convoy of busses, Coasters and tourist vehicles snaked their way through Kampala traffic jam, heading north until they reach Gulu City in Northern Uganda after 9pm East African time.

The convoy mainly comprising youths, travel and conservation journalists, social media influencers and a host of officials from minister of tourism led by the state minister of tourism Martin Magara and agencies and the ministry.

This marked the beginning of an eventful week, lasting until Saturday June 3, 2023 when the convoy snaked back to Kampala from where the journey started.

Under the Hashtag #ExploreNorth, the focus of the adventure was to showcase the tourism potentials in the north and encourage domestic tourism. Latest data from the ministry of tourism, wildlife and antiquities indicates that Uganda's tourism sector recorded a total of 814,508 in 2022, with 63 percent of them domestic tourists visiting different tourism sites.

For the northern Uganda that braced more than two decades of the LRA war, the venture breathes fresh air to promote the region that has abundant tourism potentials. The iconic Murchison Falls National Park strides across Nwoya and Buliisa districts, separated by the mighty River Nile snaking in between the two.

The rich Acholi culture, the Fort Patiko, Aruu Falls, the Nyipir-Nyabongo squabbles that led to their separation with burying of axe in the middle of the Nile at Pakwach caps off a very rich experience for the travellers.

When the convoy finally hit the streets of Gulu city, they were met by excited crowds that drove through city with music blaring for truck mounted music system.

James Ojiki, one of the revelers who welcomed the Kampala team to Gulu just said: "this is what we have been waiting for. We shall show the visitors that Gulu is a place to be and they will go back with memories they will never forget."

True to his words, the team that stormed Gulu city went away with memories to remember for a much longer time.

Joan Nekesa who travelled all the way from Mbale City says the trip was worth the hype. Nekesa who travelled to northern Uganda for the first time said she was wowed by the beauty of Gulu city and vastness of Murchison Falls National Park.

"I have a lot of stories to tell to my friends who almost stopped me from coming on this trip. They told me there is nothing to enjoy, but here I am on one of my best travels," she said.

With Explore West Nile and Karamoja next on the card, Nekesa said she will not miss the two.

"I mean there is so much fun and traveling has broadened my knowledge on my country. Let the UTB people bring Explore West Nile forward and we hit the road again," she said.



Ninsiima Yvonne who braced the trip from Mbarara to connect to north said there has been nothing better than the northern experience.

ATTRACTING VISITORS

According to CNN, Uganda is a beautiful wilderness playground, with opportunities for adventure, including treks through the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest or up to the craters of the Virunga volcano chain or white water rafting along the Victoria Nile.

rience. "Traveling with very energetic youths from diverse background and regions has been the highlight for me. When we reached Gulu, the place was clean and beautiful. I vote Gulu to be the cleanest and the most beautiful city in Uganda," she said.

What would I be doing in Mbarara this time if I did not travel? The fun, the long journey, the wild celebrations in the bushes and the Aruu falls and Fort Patiko all added to the fun and when I go back, my friends will envy me because already started with my social media

posts," she added.

The Kampala craze Vs Acholi Craze.

Before takeoff from the Uganda Museum, the majority youth travelers were already wild with excitement. The organisers did not disappoint. They showcased what the tourists would come face to face with when they hit the ground to the north and each unfolding event was met with wild cheers, setting the tone of what the next five days would be like.

Tony Mugabi from Makndye division in Kampala said the trips should be monthly so that Ugandans can travel from one part of the country to another and explore the beauty.

"Let them make the last weekend of every month travel time for us. We shall make sure we travel and promote the beauty of this country. My friends from many countries are already calling me and asking whether foreigners can come and join these trips," he said.

Wherever the next explore campaign will be, I will not miss and I will make sure I mobilise more friends so that we can storm together," he added.

With the music, comedy and kick-boxing icons on, the event delivered more than it had promised. From the launch at Sheraton Hotel Kampala, to the take off day at Uganda Museum, Moses Golola, Jose Chameleon and teacher Mpamiire kept the crowd on their edge. The ever energetic Golola did not only excite the crowd, but made them appreciate the beauty of Uganda and why they must visit the different parts of the country.

"I am the Labongo so we are going to fight with Gipir and bring him back," he told the cheering crowd.

Teacher Mpamiire took to his usual mimicking of president Museveni and ensure that rev-

t left domestic tourists in awe



About 350 local tourists descended on northern Uganda for the third installment of Explore Uganda. PHOTO/FRANKLIN DRAKU



elers laughed at every opportunity buses stopped for refreshments and calls of nature.

At Gulu City, Chameleon crowned it all with a grand performance that left Gulu city yearning for more. Ahead of his grand show, Rita dancehall took the floor by storm, shaking what her mama gave her to the wild cheers and celebrations of the revelers. Joined by Golola, Rita gave an electric performance, setting the tone for what would follow, till the end.

Tourists had a taste of how slaves exited Uganda on their final journey through Fort Patiko to the rest of the world, while Aruu Falls offered the natural swimming which in Kampala, you hardly get. At Murchison Falls, wildlife greeted Ugandans with cheers, capped off by a grand boat ride to the foot of the falls, later on connecting to the top of the falls, on the newly tarmacked road.

Emmanuel Orach, the Nwoya district chairperson said the move to drive

tourism traffic to the north has been long overdue. He said with vast tourist potential in the area, it was only natural that numbers would increase.

"I thank ministry of tourism and UTB for this wonderful opportunity. This will open up opportunities for many people and will also open up the region to the international tourists. People used to come here to support war victims, but now they will come to enjoy the beauty of the region," he said.

Daniel Irunga, the Marketing Manager of Uganda Tourism Board said the trips are to showcase different parts of the country both domestically and to the rest of the world.

"Explore North, campaigns in East, North and West come on the back of Tulambule and the Take on the Pearl Campaigns. We have seen travel demand increase. The objective is to create awareness and drive traffic to the attractions within the country. According to WTTC, 35 per cent of tourism rev-

enue was from domestic tourism and domestic tourism campaigns have contributed to these milestones," he said.

Irunga said the campaigns will be quarterly, with different categories of participants. He however said the campaign has been a great success with valuable lessons learnt along the way.

"Explore North was a great success, but there were lessons to learn and we will use the lessons to plan better for Explore North West in the new financial year. Chameleon was excellent. He thrilled the participants throughout the trip. Tr Mpamire cracked our ribs, and Moses Golola is full of life. I appreciate the 300 travelers that spent time to travel to Gulu and Murchison Falls National Park," he said.

He said Ugandans should explore their own country and feel the beauty that nature has ordained the country with.

Martin Mugarra, the state minister for the Tourism, as the parent ministry,

they will support all sector players in the tourism sector to promote Uganda as a preferred destination.

"I can assure you that we shall do all it takes to promote this country. With our young and vibrant population, we shall visit all regions of this country and explore the cultures, the natural beauty and different aspects. I ask you to take part in promoting this country," he said.

"Responsible Tourism is about 'making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit.' Responsible Tourism requires that operators, hoteliers, governments, local people and tourists take responsibility, take action to make tourism more sustainable," he added.

Tourism numbers

Since government lifted Covid-19 induced lockdown in 2021, the number of tourists has once again picked up, surpassing the pre-Covid-19 figures. Dur-

ing the state of the nation address on Wednesday, President Museveni said despite the global lockdown, Uganda received about 500,000 tourists in 2021 and revenue of US\$530 million. The number increased to 814,508 by December, 2022 and earned US\$1,014 million in the calendar year 2022.

He said tourism is an area which has significant potential for the economy, with Uganda having the best tourism sites.

Uganda's tourism sites, rank highly in international media outlets and global tourism agencies. To harness the tourism potential further, Government is undertaking the following interventions in the tourism sector: Ensuring security of the Country and tourism sites; Construction of tarmac roads to tourism site; Wildlife conservation, especially of Mgahinga, Lake Mburo, Semliki, Kibaale, Murchison, Kidepo Valley, Katonga, Toro Semliki and Queen Elizabeth; and Preventing the conflict between wildlife and human activities," he said.

Museveni said tourism directly employs a total of 1.55 million people in Uganda along the entire tourism value chain and contributes 6.7% of the country's GDP;

"In the year 2022, Uganda's National Parks hosted 367,869 visitors surpassing the pre-COVID-19 levels of 323,861 visitors recorded in the year 2019. 63% of these were domestic tourists," he said

According to the figures presented by the president, the international visitor arrivals, increased to 815,000 in 2022, up from 473,000 in the year 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. He however said although there is recovery, the performance is still lower than the 1.543 million tourists recorded in 2019 and that full recovery is expected in the year 2025;

"Leisure and Holiday visitors stayed longer (11 nights), in 2022 compared to 7.6 nights in 2019 and spent higher daily at \$172 per night compared to \$168 per night in 2019; The wildlife populations for most animals, have increased. For example, the number of elephants increased from 5,700 in 2011 to 8,000 now; while buffalos increased from about 36,953 to over 44,000, during the same period. Mountain gorillas in Bwindi-Mgahinga Conservation area, have steadily increased over time from just 200 in the 1990s to about 459 now," he said.

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Showcasing Africa to the world

Wonders. We have unique cultural traditions, it's an opportunity to share with the world, writes **Edgar R. Batte.**

“After everything else, we need a human connection. Nothing does that better than when you go out to interact with those whose norms are out of your regular lifestyle especially those whose ways are still purely dependent on nature,” explains Dancan Kiiza, managing director of Signature Africa Safaris about his tourism business motivation.

He would like to have someone seeking to have extraordinary experiences on a cultural tour. He usually has a travel window between March and April. Kiiza has taken such trips and when asked the particular cultures and traditional communities that have left a lasting impression on him.

“It is difficult to answer this one. However, I loved the resilience of most communities in Congo, the most hardworking are the Mundari, and the happiest are the Toposa. They have a dating season which is mostly for matchmaking. Then, the Turkana are colourful. You would also love to meet the Fulani,” Kiiza explains.

“We are groomed to be resilient and hardworking; we are also hospitable and generous. These are some of the



traits I do appreciate about our Ugandan cultural heritage in general,” Kiiza says.

Uganda can do better

There are things he would like to see done better in positioning Uganda's cultural identity and richness. Various cultural festivals need to be arranged and communicated in advance.

He explains, “Chad is very popular for its Gerewol festival. Some community experiences probably based on natural life need to be intentionally created for guests to experience our culture. And they will pay for it and stay a little longer. Just like the Masai experiences in Serengeti and the Masai Mara.”

The founder of Signature Africa Safaris

HOT TIPS

“How would Dancan Kiiza like to be treated while on such a safari and which foods he would like to have?”

“Just like we do for our guests, I would also keep one of our private chefs that does it as I would like every day and make sure my favourite drinks are well stocked and kept cold,” he delightedly discloses.

plans and makes unforgettable travel experiences in Africa. That includes the undiscovered areas to the furthestmost to reach in Africa, stretching from Karamoja in northern Uganda to the Mundari in South Sudan that are pure nomads to the Fulani people in Sahel and West Africa, the Turkana in northern Kenya, the Omo valley in southern Ethiopia, the Baroro in Chad, the forest people of Central Africa and the Himba in Angola and Namibia.

Kiiza pursued Tourism and Hospitality at Makerere University and later worked with some of the best tour operators in Uganda which was fundamental for him to learn and get exposure.

When he was ready to set up his own safari company, he wanted to make uniquely memorable experiences for guests that booked through his company.

He uses his first-hand, in-depth knowledge of East Africa to cater to is well-travelled and exposed clientele. He listens to them to get an idea of their personal interests. The rest is logistical including how many they are and how much time they have for the trip. Going out on a trip is not just a tour but ensuring it is an experience.

For that, his company just got awarded by the *Luxlife Magazine* in the UK as The Best Tailor-made Tour Operator in East Africa.

“We mostly work with high end clients who require more attention to details and are specific with their needs,” he explains about the niche he has cut out in the tourism and travel industry.

Popular travel itinerary

“Depending on the destination, each region has different itineraries which also depend on the season. Uganda and Rwanda have an advantage of primates and diversity over the others, Kenya and Tanzania are big on wildlife and nature safaris, the rest of the places we go to are mostly for tribal and conservation experiences.”

The feedback which he has received from tourists who have taken trips on the cultural and community tours is appreciation that in the most difficult conditions, they are able to take a comfortable trip that has helped them reach the rare places and made connections with the unique tribes they are taken to.

Passion

He attributes his focus in the tourism business to the sheer wealth of natural attractions in Africa including wildlife, beautiful sceneries, landscapes, and people.

“We have so much to offer and it is an opportunity for us to share the same with the rest of the world,” he adds.

If he were to be a tourist on a fortnight trip, he would revisit at least six of his favourite places, including Kidepo Valley National Park, Serengeti National Park, Chobe National Park, Sossusvlei Dunes, Namibia, Djemaa el Fna, Morocco and Cape Town.

He has taken tourists to some of the multiple destinations on private Jet Safaris, and while there, they usually work with the best properties in the destinations they go to.



Dancan Kiiza with some of his guests. PHOTOS/EDGAR R BATTE.