

Fighting over tourists puts EAC in bad light

In the good old days East African tour operators could sit back and know that eager visitors will come to sample the region's spectacular offerings both for scenic beauty and the singular experience of seeing animals in the wild.

Like clockwork, the regional industry and especially in Kenya and Tanzania, could expect good revenues in the high season and pick up some business in the low seasons by virtue of arranging special packages. Indeed the word 'safari' took on international prominence, because of East African tourism. To a large extent, the likes of Ernest Hemingway and such classic movies as the 'African Queen' also helped matters along.

Today, that complacency and sense of smugness is foolhardy. The world has changed during the past half century and not always for better. International tourism is now a cut-throat industry and if East Africa wants a play an active part, it has to work for it. Economists call travel a "superior good", meaning that as people's incomes grow, they spend a greater proportion of it on travel.

The welcome mat is not enough anymore. You have to go abroad and aggressively flap it about to gain attention. These days you almost literally have to drag the tourists to come and it is not cheap. A television 30-second spot on a leading European, American or Japanese broadcaster can cost a couple of million dollars. That is why when tourism agencies ask for marketing funds, governments should not raise up their hands in despair. The important point is to target your spending; is it the young adventurous segment, family package, the retirees or the high rollers who only want luxurious amenities.

Then there is the competition. Those who discount the threat of zoos, better think again and especially keep an eye out for the expansion being done in Dubai. Why fly all the way to Africa when Dubai has it all?

Leisure travellers are much pickier because the choices are that much greater and they want value for every dollar spent. Add to this complicated mix is social media which can either turn for you or against you within minutes rendering months of planning and preparation into multimillion dollar losses.

Outside of South Africa, East Africa has the most developed tourism infrastructure in sub-Saharan Africa, but one must question the region's desire or ambition to compete considering what's at stake. For one thing, there is too much lip service given to an East African common destination, but the back-room bickering shows no signs of going away any time soon. The Single Tourist Visa is a great idea which even won praise from the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, but Tanzania does not trust it. This is unfortunate, because it would make East Africa very competitive as a holiday destination when holiday discover the convenience of applying once for a visa. Kenya and Tanzania have long had their differences when it comes to tourism, but funny enough the annual wildebeest migration still takes place. Its time to look ahead because there are enough pickings for all East African Community member nations.

International tourism has grown from 25 million globally in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, 674 million in 2000 and 1.19 billion in 2015, says the UN-WTO. International tourism receipts have surged from \$2 billion in 1950 to US\$1.26 trillion in 2015. Africa, where an outbreak last year of Ebola in West Africa caused tourists to shun travel to the entire continent, posted a 5% rise in international arrivals, with sub-Saharan African "recovering vigorously" with a 12% increase. The UN body said it expects the figure will grow again by 4.0% this year with the Chinese continuing to be the top high flyers.

Plenty of people involved in the regional tourism industry think their governments can do much more. Probably not because there are many other priorities but governments can ensure security.

Truth of the matter is no one EAC country has it all in terms of tourist attractions. But together the region can offer visitors far more than anyone else be it sub-Saharan Africa and even the world. That is what we all should be working towards.

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OPPORTUNITIES TO WATCH

Regional farm talks set for Uganda

BY SAMUEL NABWIISO

■ **KAMPALA, UGANDA**--Discussions surrounding the commercialisation of regional agriculture and the difficulties involved are to take place in Kampala in late November.

"Moving the Agribusiness Congress East Africa to Uganda will once again extend the opportunity to set the spotlight on the rapid expansion of the agriculture industries within East Africa," Jon McLea, Director of Agricon, said in the run-up to the event.

The fourth Agribusiness Congress East Africa conference will take place in Kampala from November 29-30. It is the first time that the event is being hosted in Uganda.

■ **30%**
GDP anchor

Agriculture accounts for almost 30% of GDP in East African countries while staple foods represent 75% of products traded.

■ **200m**

Potential investors can talk economies of scale in addition to Ethiopia and South Sudan the market covers 200 million people.



MORE EXPERTISE: The Congress is one way to get people with know-how together with those who need it and quicken commercialising agriculture.



The Congress strives to set progressive action for the commercialisation of the farming industry

He said, "The Congress strives to set progressive action for the commercialisation of the industry by exchanging knowledge, best practices and dynamic conversations whilst showcasing leading agri technology to highlight the right tools for East Africa's agri sector."

According to the organisers, Spintelligent, Uganda was selected due to market access through treaties and agreements: Uganda is part of the free trade areas of East African Community, the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Southern African

Development Community (SADC).

Uganda is a signatory to major international investment and business protocols, and has a totally liberalised foreign exchange regime.

Other industry organisations that are official partners include the East African Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, National Agricultural Research Organisation, Uganda Investment Authority, Uganda National Farmers Federation, Uganda Seed Trade Association and Agricon.

Yolanda dos Santos, the Event Director said, "We are just as excited about organising the Agribusiness Congress East Africa in Uganda this year. We look forward to bringing together national, regional and international commercial farmers, donors, stakeholders, investors, policy advisors, commodity traders and industry professionals."

Global players in agriculture services are expected to make an appearance, including seeds and pesticide manufacturers, makers of agro-processing equipment, and a host of companies dealing in post-harvest storage infrastructure.

Well-known agri-suppliers Engsol, Mascor, John Deere and Chief Industries have already signed up as event sponsors.

Agribusiness Congress East Africa will offer market access to more than 200 million people through Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and South Sudan. Agriculture accounts for almost 30% of GDP in East African countries while staple foods represent 75% of total agricultural products traded. Agriculture employs more than 60% of the population in the region.

Robert Mwanje, the Grain Council of Uganda Board Vice Chairman, said, "The success of the event in the East African region has given the Grain Council of Uganda the confidence to host the upcoming edition in Uganda, setting it as a key entrant into the national annual calendar."