



UNTAPPED BILLIONS OF



EXPLORE
UGANDA
THE PEARL OF AFRICA

By Ali Twaha
and Moses Mulondo

When former British prime minister Winston Churchill called Uganda the Pearl of Africa, his narrative was simply to tell the world that Uganda is the most naturally endowed country in Africa and that gives Uganda a competitive advantage in tourism globally.

Uganda is blessed with an exceptional abundance of natural, cultural heritage and historical resources that should provide an excellent platform for a flourishing tourism sector.

Everything about Uganda is designed to overwhelm your sense of discovery (Pike, 2016).

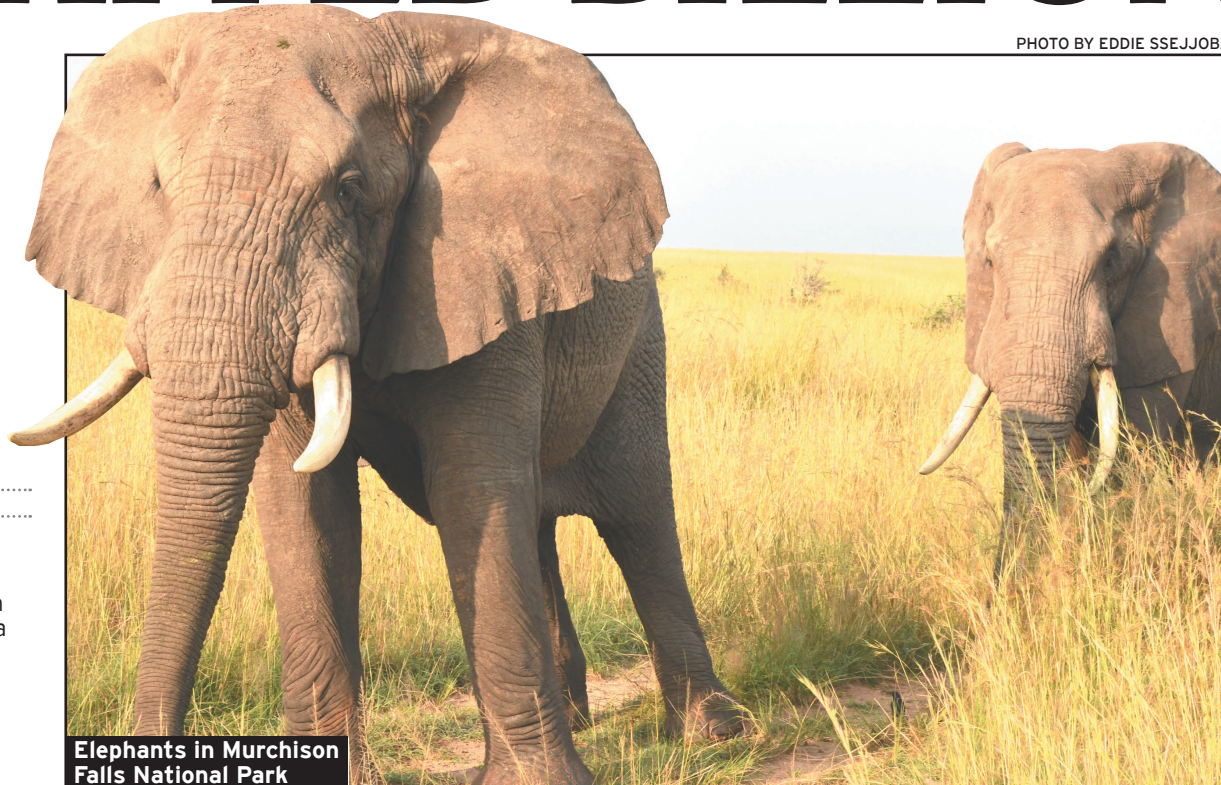
It is upon this background that various international agencies like Lonely Planet, Rough Guides, and CNN have separately ranked Uganda as one of the top five countries in the world with the most outstanding tourist attractions.

Cognizant of Uganda's enormous potential in the tourism sector, President Yoweri Museveni in his recent State of the Nation Address gave prominence to the tourism sector and emphasised the need for all stakeholders to prioritise it.

"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," Museveni stated.

The President made a commitment that his government would undertake all the necessary interventions to ensure the country taps the untapped billions of dollars in the tourism sector.

The President said government would undertake several interventions including ensuring security of the country and tourism sites, construction of tourism roads, developing tourism sites, training tour guides, creating more tourism facilities,



Elephants in Murchison Falls National Park

UGANDA'S OUTSTANDING NATURAL FEATURES GIVE HER A COMPETITIVE EDGE IN TOURISM

It is the only country in the world where the Big Five and the Mountain gorillas are found. It has the biggest variety of bird species in Africa, the highest mountain range, the biggest lake, the official Source of the Nile, numerous wildlife parks and forest reserves, some fascinating cultural heritage and history, complemented by an attractive climate that allows tourism all year round and friendly and hospitable people.

establishment of regional airports and many other interventions which will catapult the tourism sector to greater heights.

Over the past 10 years, Uganda has seen steady growth in its tourism, supported by increased investment by the Government as well as private sector players.

COVID-19 which broke out in 2020 brought the tourism industry to a standstill globally and greatly reduced the number of tourists.

Many countries, including Uganda, have mooted various special interventions for their tourism sectors to recover from the effects of COVID-19.

In the next financial year, Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) chairman Daudi Migereko said, the tourism sector has planned to undertake so many aggressive activities for promoting Uganda's tourism globally, training tour guides, conducting research, engaging stakeholders in the sector especially on developing new tourism products and improving existing tourism products.

The National Development Plan III (NDPIII) identifies tourism among the primary growth sectors and proposes a number of strategic interventions to increase the sector's contribution to the country's socio-economic

development. Equally, Vision 2040 provides a 30-year strategic direction for the country and identifies tourism as one of the sectors with high potential to catapult Uganda's economy to greater heights.

According to the mid-term review of NDPIII by the National Planning Authority, with the outbreak of COVID-19, some of these strategies were suspended. For example, the externalisation of labour to countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Afghanistan and Iraq was suspended.

"People working in the aviation, tourism and hotel business were terminated because their employers were not making any profits and thus unable to pay salary obligations during the pandemic," the report noted.

"The entertainment industry, including musicians, comedians, and bar owners, were not working and thus unable to sustain their employees. The COVID-19 pandemic heavily affected the horticulture industry, and many farms exporting flowers laid off their workforce due to the inability to sustain salary payments."

EXPLORE UGANDA BRAND.

Last year, President Yoweri

Museveni launched Explore Uganda, the Pearl of Africa brand, which aims to increase Uganda's attractiveness as a preferred tourism destination in Africa.

According to UTB, the new brand acknowledges and seeks to differentiate Uganda as a destination of multiple experiences in one unique place - and position the country as the most competitive destination in Africa and the world to tourists and tourism investors alike.

"We do believe it will make us stand out in the market and in the minds of customers. How well we sustainably convert that into sustainable wins in the hearts and eventually the wallets of tourists, remains a lifetime pursuit and the individual work of each of us and the millions of Ugandans out there," says Lilly Ajarova, the chief executive officer of UTB.

According to the mid-term review of the NDP III report, the new efforts are expected to: Increase annual tourism revenues from \$1.4b to \$1.8b, maintain the contribution of tourism to total employment at 667,600, maintain the average number of international tourist arrivals from the US, Europe, Middle East, China and Japan at 225,300 tourists.

Others are increasing the inbound tourism revenues per visitor from \$1,052 to \$1,500, increasing the proportion of leisure to total tourists from 20.1% to 30% and growing the number of direct flight routes to Europe and Asia from six to 15.

INCREASED TOURISM BUDGET

With increased advocacy from tourism sector players, Parliament, civil society and many other stakeholders, funding for the



Lilly Ajarova

A UNIQUE DESTINATION

Unlike many countries on the continent and indeed the world, Uganda is a destination that is not only packed with everything rare, precious and beautiful in Africa, but these resources are also concentrated in an even smaller geographical area. This creates higher value for money and return on investment because tourists experience more variety and diversity on any one safari than anywhere else on the continent," Lilly Ajarova, the chief executive officer of UTB, says.

tourism sector has increased from sh189.9b in 2022/2023 to sh248b in the next financial year.

The tourism minister, Tom Butime, notes in the sector's 2023/2024 ministerial statement that the NDPIII proposed allocation to the tourism sector for the next financial year is sh696b.

As we prepare to enter the fourth year of the five-year plan next month, it is imperative to note that the midterm review report puts NDPIII performance at only 17% and the major reason for the poor performance is the failure to align the national budget to the priorities and recommendations agreed upon in the plan.

Migereko notes that any additional funding "allocated to the tourism sector will bear positive returns".

The executive director of Great Lakes Safaris Ltd, Amos Wekesa, says from the studies they have conducted as stakeholders in the tourism sector, if the Government of Uganda can invest between \$30m and \$50m in the next five years, the country's earnings from tourism would rise from the current \$1.4b to more than \$12b annually.

CHALLENGES IN THE INDUSTRY

Apart from the funding challenges, the tourism sector also grapples with a range of challenges that have impacted