



Inside a suite at Chobe safari lodge

Chobe, Mweya eye domestic tourists with friendly package

OUR REPORTER

Luxury lodge group Marasa Africa has seen more Ugandans visiting its Chobe Safari Lodge and sister lodges after introducing a special package for local visitors.

For Shs 390,000 or \$110, a Ugandan can enjoy first-class accommodation, breakfast, lunch and dinner at Chobe Safari Lodge in Murchison Falls national park, Mweya Safari Lodge in Queen Elizabeth national park, or Silverback Lodge in Bwindi national park.

Normally, the price of such a

treat is twice as much but for Ugandan nationals, a weekend get-away package has been in place since 2015.

The idea, says Mako Maradzika, the head of sales and marketing for Marasa Africa, a Madhvani Group outfit, is to encourage more Ugandans to travel and see their country.

"We introduced the special rate in 2015 and envisage to extend the same rate discount just for Ugandans to experience all the Marasa Africa lodges," said Ms Maradzika.

"In order to promote domestic tourism, this package encourages us to experience not only

the splendor of Uganda but the great offering of Marasa Africa lodges," she added.

At the picturesque Chobe Safari Lodge recently, the general manager, James Rattos, told a group of visiting media executives that Ugandans have constituted at least 50 per cent of the clientele over the last one year or so.

Although Rattos didn't expressly state so, it is likely that the discount package has something to do with these numbers.

In luxury hotels and lodges of such calibre across the country, it is not uncommon to find a small minority of Ugandans, if

at all, amongst the guests.

While this is often attributed to the perceived high cost of accommodation in these facilities, it is also true that many Ugandans don't prioritise visiting national parks, preferring to spend their leisure time in other ways.

According to Maradzika, Marasa Africa's package aims to give Ugandans an opportunity to get way and relax on a weekend.

"The rate is a grand 50 per cent off the standard rates available across all lodges: Chobe Safari Lodge, Paraa Safari Lodge, Mweya Safari Lodge and Silverback Lodge. It is a full board rate of

breakfast, bed, lunch and dinner per night," she said.

Stephen Asimwe, the executive director of Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), says domestic tourism is a very critical aspect in the tourism value chain jigsaw.

"It's a misnomer to think that tourism is a high-end affair involving foreigners," Asimwe said, adding that the tourism economy is boosted when more locals participate.

"Tourism as a value chain is bigger than any other, and includes food, transport and crafts, among others," he explained.

To promote domestic tourism, UTB and Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) last year introduced Tulambule, Luganda for 'Let's tour', an initiative to encourage Ugandans to tour different parts of the country and stimulate awareness.

"Be part of this great team to tour our country, local tourism starts with us, we're the ones to tell our own story," said Godfrey Kiwanda, the minister of state for tourism, during the launch of Tulambule in September 2016, which targeted Uganda's 10 national parks.

To stimulate domestic tourism further, UWA has a special lower rate for Ugandans and East Africans (Shs 15,000) entering national parks, which is also charged in local currency as opposed to foreigners who are charged up to \$40.

School children traveling in groups have an even friendlier rate of Shs 2,500. There is, however, a separate charge for vehicles; Shs 20,000 for saloon cars, Shs 30,000 for omnibuses and Shs 50,000 for school buses.

Commenting on Marasa lodges' special package, UTB's Asimwe said it was a good and sustainable strategy as it helps the industry deal with its seasonal nature.

Indeed, tourism is an industry that is not only prone to high and low seasons, but also sensitive to happenings such as political unrest and disease outbreak.

Thus, besides getting Ugandans to discover their own country, a healthy flow of indigenous guests is good business as it helps mitigate possible losses.