

Come to Africa and see our animals... Is that all we have to say?

A little over 10 years ago, a Mexican friend came to visit Africa for the first time. Visiting the continent had long been a major dream for him. He had a long list of things he wanted to do and see. He knew, of course, that he probably would not be able to do and see everything. So he had "must do" and "must see" sub-lists. One thing he was not prepared to let go of was a visit to a national park. He would not compromise on that one, he kept saying.

At some point, in a serious tone, I asked him why on earth that was so important. I am very African in this. Going to a national park is not such a big deal. Until he came, the last time I had been to any of Uganda's national parks had been in my early teens, many years previously. The trip had been organised by my school.

Since then, I had been too busy getting on with life. And like many other Africans, tourism for me is not about going to parks and getting "struck in the bush." I'd rather go "somewhere nice." That means Dubai, London, Paris, New York, Johannesburg, and the like. There, one can see modern buildings in all their concrete and glass splendour. One can ride on modern trains, including those that run deep under the ground, and on trams. And, of course, one can shop.

A well-heeled friend who grew up in a village deep in the countryside, once told me that the idea that he would take a holiday and choose to go to a national park was simply ridiculous. There was nothing for him to see there, he said. He was speaking for many.

Anyway, by way of an answer, my Mexican friend told me that, upon returning home, were he to tell family and friends that he had just come back from Africa, they would ask: "Oh, did you see animals?" His eyes were bulging with



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excitement as he said it. I understood. He was a living example of the success with which Africa advertises itself as a place where people should come for "animal tourism," much as some regions of the world boost their "sex tourism," other their "medical tourism."

Indeed, many African countries have done rather well, attracting large numbers of wealthy and adventurous foreigners who are eager to see or even shoot elephants, lions, buffalos, and

leopards. All that is very well. However, it seems as if, besides sandy beaches and may be a few crater lakes that some countries also offer, there is not much else to see, by way of "organised attractions."

In other words, it seems as if we have laid too much emphasis on animal tourism and neglected to exploit a whole range of other possibilities and in that way, narrowed our options. I have often thought about this while reflecting on the sorry state of museums, national theatres, national monuments, cultural heritage sites and other potential tourist attractions in the African countries I visit.

The same thoughts came to mind recently while on a visit to a West African country. My hosts had taken me to visit a primate zoo. I don't know what the other visitors were looking at besides the wide assortment of monkeys in their metal cages. I was interested in the physical state of the zoo. It was good, but not that good. I never said it to my hosts, but I could have done with not going there. Then we went to the botanical gardens.

I learnt that a European national had founded the gardens way back in 1892. It was here, I was told, that some of the crops that went on to become important exports or staple foods for the locals were first grown and tested for viability. Something struck me right away. For all its historical importance, the place was a monument to the poor maintenance culture that is so common on the continent.

The different trees and plants had labels, but these could hardly be read. The signposting had long been damaged and not repaired. The once-tarmacked paths had long been colonised by weeds. The gardens once had an open-air amphitheatre for hosting cultural events. The

steps that people once sat on are now choking under a heavy pillow of moss.

There is a sizeable river running through the garden. It is full of weeds, plastic bottles and other debris, with not even a "primitive canoe" in sight. Concrete benches meant to seat visitors are covered in thick layers of dirt. An events hall built by donor funding lies idle. It performed its functions while the Europeans who funded it lived and worked in the country. Then they left. The metal door and window frames have

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succumbed to rust, reminding one of the vexed issue of the sustainability of things conceived and funded and for a while run or managed by outsiders.

The gardens may be poorly funded, but they are an idle gold mine, in a country where the government, like its counterparts elsewhere on the continent, is a committed promoter of animal tourism as if animals were all there was to see there.

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Tourist photograph a lion in the Maasai Mara. Pic:File