

MARKETING

Local and regional market the answer to growth of tourism

The traditional remedy for promoting and boosting the tourism industry is to market, market, and market. Tourism Cabinet Secretary Najib Balala has worked hard on this recently and he is to be commended for this.

Marketing Kenya and what it has to offer is largely focused on our traditional overseas markets in Europe and the United States with more and more forays into the Far East, where there is vast market potential.

But as I sat watching the visitors flocking into the recent domestic tourism expo at the Hub in Karen, Nairobi, I realised that it is time we seriously broke out of this box. I am not arguing that we abandon or even slacken the efforts to promote tourism in these traditional or emerging markets.

It is that for a long time attracting residents and visitors from the region to our tourism product was regarded as a useful top-up or filler. This was especially useful during low seasons or when for some reason the number of international visitors was down.

Indeed, there were, and still are, times when residents are clearly discouraged from going to certain domestic destinations due to a discriminating price structure.

I would argue that we have our priorities mixed up and that it is time the industry as a

whole, as well as the individual players, worked on the basis that the largest markets, and the ones with massive growth potential, are the domestic and regional ones.

Kenya is a regional and communication hub serving a vast area of eastern Africa in its own right. It is used by many as an entrepot and gateway to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, eastern Congo, Somalia, southern Sudan, and northern Tanzania.

Kenyan hotels play host to an assortment of domestic and regional visitors as well as those from overseas.

Why should we be putting more time and energy into this segment of the market? First there is the growing contingent of middle-class Kenyans who are becoming more intrepid and adventurous with their holiday time. Then there is the local and regional expatriate community, including a considerable number of people affiliated to the UN and various NGOs. Their friends and relatives come visiting and obviously want to enjoy Kenya's tourism product.

Another increasingly important component of this equation is the many diaspora Kenyans, who come to visit and holiday.

These may appear rather obvious observations, but they should not be taken for granted. To see the difference we should compare ourselves with some



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of our competitors such as Tanzania that do not have such a catchment.

Contrary to overseas tourists, the domestic and regional visitors are more flexible in their times and dates. They are also less prone to being put off when there is some actual or perceived security concern.

Access is relatively good, especially with the increasing competition among the airlines plying the Malindi, Lamu, and Ukunda routes.

So what are the catches? Overall, the industry needs to embrace the concept that domestic and regional tourism is

not only its bread and butter, but that it should be pursued.

I get amused, sometimes irritated, when I enquire about a place and I am fobbed of by getting quotations in US dollars and then looked at as if I cannot even afford the deposit.

The recent domestic tourism expo was a sorry shadow of what Kenya has to offer and did not do justice to our rich and diverse product. A much more enthusiastic and holistic domestic marketing policy is needed and, indeed, one that would cost a fraction of what we currently spend on promoting tourism abroad.

There is also the issue of price. Kenya is generally not regarded as a cheap destination. Then there is often the pretension that residents' rates are a good deal. Not long ago I went somewhere on a supposed resident's rate only to find out that fellow visitors from abroad were paying less per night than myself!

Last, but not least, is that tourism is a key economic driver with the advantage that it has a large multiplier effect among the population. That is all the more reason we need to work on making it more attractive to its largest customers here and in the region.

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