

RETREAT

RUNNING HOLIDAYS WITH KENYA'S ELITE ATHLETES

Training camps based in Iten and Kaptagat offer perfect locations for a combination of sports and leisure, writes **Doreen Wainainah**

Paula Radcliffe and Mo Farah are some of the big names that have over the years made Kenya part of the training ground for their highly successful athletic careers.

First Lady Margaret Kenyatta in 2014 and 2015 trained in Iten in preparation for several marathons, including the London Marathon and the First Lady Marathon.

The Rift Valley has literally become a playground for international and local athletes in search of the perfect environment, terrain and conditions that create world class runners. Athletes, including Lornah Kiplagat, David Rudisha and Wilson Kipsang, have trained locally and gone as far as to take gold and even break records.

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It was this combination of factors that prompted Robert Ruto, a tourism professional, to offer packages that would attract inbound sport tourism

by athletes, individuals and corporates that were looking to train with the champions.

"People travel to Kenya to experience distance running.

"They also come here to witness how champions are made," he says.

With his passion for sports and his background in tourism, the former hotelier came up with the concept of Wilderness Breaks that would allow professional and amateur athletes



ON TRACK Paula Radcliffe trains in Iten. FILE

to train on the same grounds as Kenyan sportsmen.

The training camps in Iten and Kaptagat have been offering the perfect locations for a combination of sports and leisure. The two towns sit at between 2,400 metres and 2,800 metres above sea level, making them ideal for those aspiring to be athletes. There are others in Eldoret, Kapsait, Kapseret, Mosoriot as well as Kapsabet and Nandi Hills.

Ruto studied tourism at Utalii College and has worked in various hotels, with his last employer being Panari Hotel before he looked to merge his passion for sports and the industry.

"We have excellent athletes. We want to expose them to terrain and conditions in the Rift Valley," he said.

Wilderness Breaks has partnered with training camps including the High Altitude Training Centre in Iten, founded by Lornah Kiplagat.

The local tourism sector has been



SESSION Kenyan and foreign athletes during a training session at the high-altitude town of Iten.

BELOW First Lady Margaret Kenyatta during a cooling down session on the running track at the Lornah Kiplagat Sports Academy in Iten. FILE

BUILDING SPORTS TOURISM



GREAT BRITAIN'S Mo Farah at the HATC in Eldoret with Paula Radcliffe

TRAINING Sports is now a significant part of the tourism industry in Kenya, with athletes visiting from countries in Europe, Asia, the USA and other parts of the world to train.

struggling to rebound over the past three years with the latest statistics showing that the number of visitor arrivals was at 1.3 million in 2016, up from 1.2 million.

The slow growth in the sector has prompted individuals and corporates to come up with new ideas to attract visitors.

As part of the packages, Ruto has been offering a purely athletic or a combination of athletics and safari in the surrounding areas such as Mara, Nakuru and Naivasha.

In addition to this, there is a corporate team-building package that allows teams to go for onsite

and offsite activities that help build team dynamics. "We expose corporates to sports tourism with the theme 'make champions'," says Ruto. The corporate teams get to interact with champions as trainers and take part in activities that boost healthy competition and strengthen bonds in corporate teams.

Kenya attracts visitors for its sporting events, including Rhino Charge as well as the Lewa Marathon, the Standard Chartered Marathon and Ndakaini Marathon, to name a few, usually to raise funds for a cause. Lewa annually attracts 1,300 runners and has raised over Sh600 million (\$6.1 million) in the 17 years it has been taking place.

Training tourism complements growing local sports tourism, with events like the Safari Rally and marathons allowing locals and foreigners to tour the country on a circuit as they participate or follow their favourite sports.

Safari Rally, held throughout the year in different locations including Kajiado, Nyeri, Voi, Nakuru, Kisumu and Mombasa has gained a keen following of people who travel to see their favourite drivers in thrilling action.

The extreme adventure Rhino Charge pulls huge international and local crowds to different remote parts of the country while the marathons offer scenic runs across the country.

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