

New Vision

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TUGATA

Travel set to get better – TUGATA

Uganda Association of Travel Agents has clocked 20 years this year. Richard Wetaya spoke to Pearl Hoareau Kakooza, the chairperson of the association about the milestones they have achieved and their contribution to the tourism industry in Uganda

O Twenty years down the road, what is there to

celebrate for the Uganda Association of Travel Agents?

There is a lot to celebrate. First, our membership has grown. In 1999, we started with 12 members. Now we are 100. The fact that the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) was recognised by Industry Airlines and Global Distribution System (GDS) Service Providers, such as Amadeus and Travel port Industry Stakeholders is worth celebrating.

In the same breath, we also reckon it is worthwhile to celebrate the recognition; the association has gotten through the years as the voice of Uganda travel agents.

In the 20 years, the association has been able to draft a five-year strategic plan that maps out its strategic direction, set up a functioning secretariat, built capacity for members through trainings and set up a database for its members.

What is the impact of your contribution to Uganda's travel and tourism market?

The association has liaised with the Government and other stakeholders to ensure adherence to professional standards and ethical practices within the tourism industry.

We have also contributed to the marketing of Uganda's premier tourist destinations through the exhibitions we have held.

The country's tourism travel distribution system has grown, over the years. In terms of numbers, how many sector players are running the travel agency economy now?

There are about 400 agents, but officially, 100 agents are registered with the association. We are also working with the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), to ensure that the industry is better regulated.

There is concern that some travel agencies have just made the sector crowded. How does the association ensure that travel agencies are enforcing quality assurance?

The tourism industry as a whole must be properly regulated. We encourage our members and non-members to register their businesses with UTB, so that tourists can have confidence in them.

Our quality assurance team is being reconstituted under UTB. In addition to that, a new code of conduct shall be signed by all travel professionals and with the regulation of the industry starting to take shape, Tourism Police, included, we envisage seeing proper travel professionals who are committed to delivering a good service to their clients. We are working closely with GDSs to ensure that any connected agency meets minimum standards.

The travel industry across the globe has been undergoing changes because of the phenomenal growth and widespread adaption of the information technologies, like the Internet. Hasn't the use of online booking and mobile applications affected travel agents in Uganda?

Amidst the available technology with online bookings, travel agent business is still vital for entities, like governments and non-government organisations because of their payment systems.

They find it convenient to use the services of travel agencies. I wish to give the global examples of Travel Management Companies (TMCs), like Carlson Wagonlit, FCM Travel Services and American Express Travel Services. Why are they still in business, despite the onset of artificial intelligence and other technology available to the individual

HIGH TRAVEL RATES

Some locals complain that they cannot go on holiday or vacations because of the high rates. They say you target mostly foreign tourists. What is the Uganda Association of Travel Agents' stand point on this?

The tourism industry, like any other sectors has seasons, high season and low season. During the high season, demand and prices are high. We, however, advise that travellers should take advantage of low seasons offers when prices are reasonable. Our experience has taught us that Ugandan travellers are 'last minute' travellers. What does this mean? By the time one decides to travel, it is two days to Christmas or New Year. Prices are high at this time.

The association encourages leisure travellers to plan ahead so that they can take advantage of the wonderful deals that are available from various airlines.



Pearl Kakooza

KAKOOZA SAYS TRAVEL AGENTS ARE THERE FOR YOU EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. OUR SERVICE DOES NOT END AT THE SALE OF AN AIR TICKET

high taxes that have made the cost of the airline ticket to be "expensive" for the travelling public.

Request to produce quotations in Uganda shillings, whereas billing and payment of the tickets by travel Agents to International Air Transport Association (IATA) is done in US dollars.

As an association, we have lobbied for generation of invoices in dollars, but due to strict corporate regulations, we have not made inroads.

What determines the quality of a good travel agency/travel agent?
Their knowledge about various destinations. Their ability to understand travellers' requests and to be able to translate it logically, so as to respond with the correct information regarding the traveller's needs.

What does the future hold for travel agency business in Uganda?

With the revival of Uganda Airlines, we look forward to adding the U7 inventory to our portfolios and selling the airline. With regulation of the tourism industry finally becoming a reality, the association looks forward to growing our membership so that the travelling public can only deal with registered legitimate members.

Travel agency is still a viable business. We must keep looking to our global partners, to see what they are doing to continue to be relevant to their clients. With the advent of technology, we must embrace the new tools to see how best they can serve our clients and make the travel agent more efficient.

traveller?

Clearly, there is still a viable business for the travel agent, if we gauge ourselves against the global standard.

These large travel management companies are all represented in Uganda. The travel agent is able to offer the technology tools to the corporate traveller depending on their travel

policy in place.

The travel agent is there for you every step of the way. Our service does not end at the sale of an air ticket.

A trip planned by a travel professional gives the traveller peace of mind that any cancellations, changes in itinerary can be managed outside office hours. The travel agent is there for

the traveller 24 hours a day.

Why should one get a travel agent when they can easily access all the information, they need to make a travel decision online?

Travel agents do not just sell airline tickets. They offer the traveller, options on various flights as well as subsidiary services, like hotel bookings, visa information, travel insurance, car hire, holiday packages and negotiate with airlines for special travel deals among others.

Through the Global Distribution System, a travel agent is able to offer one travel options on all airlines, not just the ones that fly into/out of Entebbe.

What challenges has the association faced in the last 20 years?

Weak regulatory framework for travel agents, which has allowed unethical travel agents to operate and defraud clients and this continues to dent the image of the travel industry and Uganda as a country.

Lack of enough funding to run the activities of the association, major source of funding is membership fees, which is generally not enough to manage activities as per our strategic plan.

Unfavourable economic conditions, where our members are challenged by



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