

# Rwanda's Tourism Plan & Media Reaction

By Joshua Smith

Rwanda, a relatively small country in Central/East Africa with a population of twelve million people,<sup>i</sup> has in recent years, led the way in sustainability both as a country and in regard to their tourism industry. To appreciate these efforts, it is important to understand the country's history, especially the government's change following the genocide in 1994.

Following the death of then-President, Juvenal Habyarimana of the Hutu tribe, a civil war began with speculation that his plane was shot down by the Tutsis, specifically, Paul Kagame, a leader of the Tutsi rebel group. In the period of a hundred days, an estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed, a campaign initiated by the presidential guard.<sup>ii</sup> After Kagame became the country's elected leader, he set out to create a government for the people, making great strides in both leadership and the well-being of its citizens.

"Often unpredictable triggers will be the catalysts for their innovation,"<sup>iii</sup> Russell and Faulkner (2004) stated, which is evident in the changes made in Rwanda. Recognizing the need for environmental protection, Kagame initiated a ban on plastic bags in 2008,<sup>iv</sup> only the second country in the world to do so, which set the stage for Kigali, its capital, to become one of the cleanest cities in the world. Supported by *Umuganda*, an event occurring on the last Saturday of each month, the government requires residents to spend 3 hours cleaning the city.<sup>v</sup> Rwanda has also focused on diversification of leadership, with the highest percentage of women leaders globally with more than sixty-one percent holding positions in its parliamentary house.<sup>vi</sup>

A large focus of this new government was to prioritize its citizens, specifically with regard to healthcare which included implementing a national system in 2011, offering coverage to more than ninety percent of its residents,<sup>vii</sup> as well later innovative programs such as medical supply delivery via drones, a first in the world in 2016.<sup>viii</sup> With Rwanda's people seeing a clear

path of rebuilding, the tourism sector became a focus to aid in its potential economic development which amounted to thirty-eight percent of Rwanda's export according to the World Bank in 2012.<sup>ix</sup>

The World Travel & Economic Tourism Council (2017) determined that tourism was 12.7% of Rwanda's gross domestic product (GDP) and directly supported 132,000 jobs, indirectly 333,500 jobs with a combined 15.5% of employment supporting the tourism industry.<sup>x</sup> With such a high percentage of people impacted by tourism, combined with the support of leadership, as indicated by Kagame's 2017 win of ninety-nine percent of the vote and ninety percent of people casting a ballot,<sup>xi</sup> it's clear this aligns with Nunkoo's & Raminkissoo's theory that "residents' trust in government actors is likely to be a determinant of their level of support for tourism development."<sup>xii</sup>

As a destination in the development stage (Butler, 1980),<sup>xiii</sup> Rwanda established a solid and concise tourism plan in 2009 with the document's first statement of "Tourism has been identified as a priority sector to achieve Rwanda's development goals as set out in Vision 2020."<sup>xiv</sup> Rwanda's biggest draw for tourism is the opportunity to see the endangered mountain gorillas, only available in Rwanda, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). With political conflict, little developed tourism infrastructure and a declining population of mountain gorillas in the DRC,<sup>xv</sup> the competition in mountain gorilla trekking, primarily remains with Uganda, a country which has been underfunded in tourism promotion and infrastructure development, along with potential sanctions due to human rights violations.<sup>xvi</sup>

With a clear path toward sustainability and an increasing mountain gorilla population, four hundred and eighty in 2010 to six hundred and four in 2016,<sup>xvii</sup> Rwanda has become the

leader in this type of experience. This may be the reason why the government doubled the gorilla trekking permit fee from \$750 to \$1,500 in May 2017.

Reaction to this policy change has led to some uncertainty with local tourism professionals saying they have lost income. “It was chaotic. I can’t estimate the percentage of tourists we lost but it was very bad,” said Parfait Kajibwami, manager of Le Banbou Gorilla Lodge near the park.<sup>xviii</sup>

However, with this increased fee, the community revenue sharing program also increased from 5% to 10%, or \$37.50 to \$150.<sup>xix</sup> In 2017, according to Paul Charles, CEO of The PC Agency, a London-based marketing firm, “Communities around Rwanda’s national parks received tourism proceeds worth \$1.28 million, helping build schools, clinics, and housing for vulnerable members of the community.”<sup>xx</sup>

Belise Kariza, Chief Tourism Officer for the Rwanda Development Board explained “the increase of gorilla permit is about conservation and protecting the future, not about making the country richer,” in a travel trade webinar (Jan. 2019).<sup>xxi</sup> Additional insight from Kariza was revealed at the recent New York Times Travel Show (Jan. 2019) that the increase aligns with the government’s new strategy of focusing on high-end tourism and the increased funds allows the government to further develop other national parks for the tourism sector,<sup>xxii</sup> including Gishwati National Park, launching in 2020.<sup>xxiii</sup>

It may be too early to determine the lasting economic impact this fee change will have on tourism to Rwanda, especially when the economic impacts of tourism are typically estimated by some variation of “Number of tourists multiplied by average spend per visitor multiplied by a multiplier (secondary economic indirect and induced effects of tourism activity).”<sup>xxiv</sup> However, the Rwanda Development Board has confidence this is the best strategy with proven statistics of

“Between May- August 2018, RDB saw increased revenues of USD \$983,333 when compared to the same period in 2017.”<sup>xxv</sup>

While the number of tourists is likely to decline due to increased gorilla trekking fees, the high-yield, low-volume strategy is in full effect with various brands establishing a presence. The luxury brand, One & Only, opened a lodge in the Nyungwe National Park with room rates at more than \$1,500 per night<sup>xxvi</sup> and recently announced the opening of Gorilla’s Nest, a resort in foothills of Virungu Volcano.<sup>xxvii</sup> Singita, a leader in luxury experiences on the continent of Africa, has also announced their plans to launch Singita Kwitonda Lodge in 2019, stating, “Working in close partnership with the Rwandan Development Board and local communities, Singita will be taking a measured, long-term approach to conservation on the edge of the Volcanoes National Park.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Because of the high-cost of its iconic tourism product, mountain gorilla trekking, the destination is clearly focusing on the Venturer,<sup>xxix</sup> as defined by Plog (2001) who possess traits of being “intellectually curious about and want to explore” and “spend discretionary income more readily.”

The government is also making an effort to ensure there is awareness of tourism experiences in Rwanda especially in the North American market with the recent appointment of Myriad Marketing, an MMGY Global company as their representation.<sup>xxx</sup> Another large effort resides in air access to the destination from key markets, with an expected new flight directly from New York to Kigali, Rwanda to launch in fall 2019 on RwandAir.<sup>xxxi</sup> Celebrity endorsements of the destination, including Ellen Degeneres’ visit to launch the Ellen Degeneres Campus in the Northern district of Musanze focusing on gorilla conservation,<sup>xxxii</sup> have also elevated awareness on a larger scale.

While awareness is important, a recent marketing activity has been questioned both domestically and internationally. In June 2018, Visit Rwanda, the tourism marketing brand of the Rwanda Development Board announced a \$40 million, 3-year deal with the British soccer team, Arsenal, who will have the Visit Rwanda logo on their uniform sleeves.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The domestic frustration lies in that the gross national income per capita, while increasing every year, was only \$720 annually in 2017 according to the World Bank Group,<sup>xxxiv</sup> so some feel this money is better spent on local development. On an international level, Rwanda receives \$80 million a year in assistance from the United Kingdom, so to return one sixth of this to a private entertainment entity may impact future aid.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In the Rwanda Tourism Policy (2009), the overall objective is to “increase tourism revenues in a sustainable manner, generate profits for reinvestment and create jobs.” This includes product development, as noted by allocating funds from higher gorilla trekking fees to new tourism products such as Gishwati National Park; marketing and awareness, as noted by its campaign with Arsenal and recruitment of a marketing firm; access to Rwanda as a destination, noted by its investment in acquiring direct flights from New York and possibly China; and infrastructure development by supporting international brands and their development of sustainable accommodations.

The Rwanda Development Board manages both tourism and investment as well as managing business development, which is unique for a destination, but explained by Kariza as offering the ability to streamline the business development process, particularly in the tourism sector.<sup>xxxvi</sup> With a designation of Destination Management Areas (DMAs), diversification of tourism product offerings is further highlighted in the Rwanda Tourism Plan (2009) by

“continuing to promote primate viewing as the iconic product complemented by a range of nature, wildlife, adventure, activity and cultural products.”

The government is doing this through its direct initiative of working with Stakeholders, as outlined in their tourism policy (2009), dedicating an entire section on views from this community. “The approach of empowering stakeholders to include their voice in the decision-making for tourism development is a relatively new approach that became an indispensable element of the sustainable tourism development process,”<sup>xxxvii</sup> shared by Innocent Kahigana, with the Department of Travel and Tourism Management, University of Tourism Technology and Business Studies in Kigali.

Such research amongst stakeholders, provides an integrated understanding of needs that included feedback on changing the previous branding of Rwanda being an affordable destination, thus, a negative connotation, to focusing on ‘value for money’ even at the high-end. Shareholders also stated in the tourism policy (2009), “Targets tourist numbers and revenues should be on specific tourism segments such as leisure and business tourists but not on overall visitor arrivals.”

Business and the Meetings, Incentive, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) market is another primary focus of Rwanda, which has recently been acknowledged by the World Bank’s Doing Business Report 2019 that “Rwanda is the only Low-Income Country among the top 100 countries listed as the easiest place to do business.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Additional data provided by The New Times included “Rwanda is the second easiest place in the world to register property; it took an average of 354 days in 2005, and today it takes an average of seven days.” Kariza further added in a personal interview, “You can actually start a business in Rwanda from anywhere and receive all documentation within twenty-four hours, but usually it’s around eight hours.”

With such great strides made in the well-being of its residents, infrastructure, and it's clearly outline tourism policy with stakeholder inclusion, it's evident that Rwanda's residents have remained in Doxey's (1975) Euphoria Area with characteristics of being a "welcoming host population" and "locals happy that tourists are interested in their destination."<sup>xxxix</sup>

The country has seen such change from its devastating past, but proved success is achievable, especially when focusing on tourism as a means to achieve economic growth. Sometimes this change can occur with a single leader, as shown by the Rwandan President, Paul Kagame, who has recently been recognized in a larger forum with his appointment as the East African Community Chairman announced on February 1, 2019.<sup>xl</sup> While still in the early stages of rebuilding, it's already clear that Rwanda is a great example of sustainable tourism and should be an example for many other countries across the globe.

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