

ZIMBABWE: TOURISM INDUSTRY WORKING TO CHANGE WESTERN PERCEPTIONS



The United Nations World Tourism Organization ("UNWTO") held its General Assembly in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, last August. The focus for the people of Zimbabwe was on changing Western perspectives. The country is striving to be seen as a safe destination for travelers from the Western world.

Presidential Election Controversy

Some have questioned the legitimacy of the election, finalized just days before the Assembly, that saw President Robert Mugabe win a seventh consecutive term. Indeed, there was brief discussion at the UN regarding whether it might be a mistake to endorse the election by holding the Assembly in Zimbabwe at all. In the end, though, it was about promoting world tourism rather than election results.

The people of Zimbabwe are working hard to promote the country as a safe tourist destination. Zimbabwean businessman Clement Muwasi said: "What we need to do is . . . to have political stability, to manage our public perception well, and also to encourage foreign investors to come into the tourism industry."

Zimbabwean Destinations

Local businesses, dependent on tourism for income, saw the Assembly as a chance to communicate Zimbabwe's unique tourism opportunities, including safaris, rainforests, and Gonarezhou National Park, as well as dozens of options in or near the popular Victoria Falls.

At the Assembly, Zimbabwean Tourism Minister Walter Mzembi revealed some of the country's planned efforts, including plans to build a world-class theme park near Victoria Falls at a cost of \$300 million.

The best-known Zimbabwean tourist destination, though, is likely to remain the famous arch-span railroad bridge next to the falls. The Zimbabwean government and commercial sponsors will maintain the bridge for at least the next 15 years.

The Future of Zimbabwean Tourism Remains Uncertain

Despite the vote of confidence from the UNWTO, Zimbabwean government officials believe the country is not getting a fair evaluation by the Western world. Mzembi pointed out that Zimbabwe "is a very stable destination," and is not subject to the turmoil of the North African nations. It is a safe place to travel, according to government officials, but only time will tell if the Western world hears the message.

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