

ANOTHER PROBLEMATIC SEASON LEADS TO QUESTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF TOURISM IN MOMBASA



The resort of Mombasa in Kenya, with its beautiful beaches and long summer seasons was once a popular tourist destination and a great source of revenue for the nation. Today there is little sign of holidaymakers or the facilities for them to enjoy because, yet again, concerns over safety are damaging the reputation of the region and any chance for prosperity.

The images of empty beaches and abandoned hotels may seem shocking but it is actually a common sign of modern tourism in Mombasa.

This is not a recent disaster; this drop in tourist numbers and decline in revenue has been an ongoing trend since 2007 and recovery has been on a rocky road ever since. The violence that is said to be the root cause for the lack of tourists in 2014 – such as the reports of grenade attacks, fights between police and Muslims and recruitment drives by Somalian extremists – is nothing new; there has been a repetitive pattern of violence in the region for years, which includes the unrest after the 2008 and 2013 elections. This long history of poor tourism revenue means that over the past seven years, the number of traders on the beach has dropped from a healthy three-hundred to a resilient five and many hotels in the area have been left empty and abandoned.

Remarkably, there is still a small sense of hope among some that have stayed and positive sentiments expressed by the local elders. There is an acceptance that local youths are easy targets but they believe local projects could make a significant difference to their attitudes and potentially help the overall picture. Meanwhile, some hoteliers are remaining optimistic, such as Sam Ikwaye from the Hoteliers and Caterers Association who is quoted as saying “the only way we think as an industry is to face it head on”.

The future of tourism in Mombasa is balancing on a knife edge.

A decline in tourist numbers is nothing new for the people of Mombasa but there is a clear sense from these locals that this season will be crucial for the future of the area because the impact of these fresh safety fears and continued absences will be highly influential. Hoteliers, retailers and locals alike, whether they are optimistically looking forward to better years ahead or somberly looking back on seven years of hardship, have to be realistic and some of those that are still clinging on and serving the few remaining tourists reluctantly admit that their time may soon be up.

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