

ZIMBABWE: ROADBLOCKS DETER TOURISTS



Zimbabwe is largely known for its authoritarian government and high poverty rates but this country also has some of the most spectacular natural attractions. The drawback is that its breathtaking holiday destinations are finding it difficult to attract visitors. Some people attribute this to the many security checkpoints along the highways. These checkpoints are managed by armed security personnel who demand bribes.

Holiday destinations around Victoria Falls, which is one of leading tourist attractions in the country, are the hardest hit. They are reporting significantly lower visitor numbers because of the roadblocks that have made it challenging for tourists who prefer road trips to explore the country.

There are roadblocks after every 20 minutes on all the main highways. **This has reduced the number of people making their way into Harare, the nation's capital, which is popular for its colonial appeal and the granite land-form found in Matobo Hills, one of the UNESCO World Heritage sites.** The checkpoints are designed to manage the increasing crime levels. But they have become a money-making opportunity for the security officers. They extort visitors and usually confine them for short periods when they fail to pay.

This has forced a large number of tourists to use direct flights to get to Victoria Falls. It takes about 90 minutes to fly directly there from Johannesburg. This denies them a chance to see the big five in the many natural reserves along the way.

Some travelers are also choosing to explore the Victoria Falls from the Zambian side. According to Erik Hersman, a Namibian technology entrepreneur who spent several hours on road to get to Zimbabwe, the infrastructure is great but there are more than 15 police checks on the way with officers determined to stop the visitors.

The Zimbabwe Tourist Authority reports that over 1.8 million visitors travelled to the country in 2014. A similar number was also reported in the previous year. The country's home affairs ministry is trying to change the situation after reports about the roadblocks' negative impact on tourism. Police officers are currently undergoing training on how to treat tourists kindly.

Zimbabwe's limited domestic flight options have forced many tourists to go on road trips to visit the many attractions including Mutarazi Falls, Bridal Veil Falls, and Mount Inyangani. These attractions get fewer visitors because of the police checks.

Several communities depend on the tourists for a source of income. The community members sell a variety of artifacts particularly on the highway leading to Victoria Falls. According to the police, the security checkpoints are necessary for them to find fugitives and criminals and they are not aimed at raising money. Transparency International ranked the country 156 out of 176 countries in its 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The country's tourism and hospitality ministry and the Zimbabwe Council for Tourist both agree that the checkpoints are disrupting tourism. Tourists do not factor in the amount of time they spend on the roadblocks and this interferes with their travel plans.

Zimbabwe's government projects that tourism will account for 15% of the country's GDP in 2015 but this is impossible if the checkpoints continue to interfere with road travel.

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