

Tourists Are Just Not Coming



Nigerians can be found in every part of the world, including the Antarctic which shows that they are great travellers. The number of Nigerians in unending queues at the various embassies in the country is enough to testify their love for travelling. But other nationals are not so enthusiastic to come into our own country. Even our closest neighbour, Benin Republic, fairs better in tourism, as Nigerians travel to the country a lot.

The dearth of infrastructure – good roads, constant electricity, functioning railway system – which are taken for granted in other countries and also the lack of good governance have been identified as the biggest challenges that Nigeria's tourism faces. For years, the Federal government has been struggling unsuccessfully to transform the tourism sector into a money spinner, as other African countries like Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa have succeeded in doing.

Exploiting Tourism Potential

Experts in the sector blame the low performance on the government's negligence, and insist that the country has abundant tourism resources and potential. The chief service officer of Topcomm, a public relations and consultancy firm, Temi-Tope Ogbeni-Awe, argues that the sector has not developed as desired because the government took a long time before realising its importance to national development. "Why countries like South Africa, Ghana and Kenya's tourism industries are booming is because they have made tourism a front burner for their economic development."

They were quick to realise the economic contribution of tourism to their national development. These countries, unlike Nigeria, have the political will to harness their tourism potentials for national development.



"Our government has just woken up in the last five years to the realisation of developing the country's tourism potentials and their effort to develop the sector is yet to match the works done by other

countries," he said. A travel consultant, Dayo Ajala, distinguishes between two categories of tourism in the country. "Tourism in Nigeria can be divided into two parts: the business and leisure tourism. As for the business tourism, Nigeria, especially Lagos, has the highest arrivals in Africa, while leisure tourism, which is the main money spinning activity in the sector has been witnessing low patronage from within and outside the country."

"The leisure tourism is often driven by premium tourism branding and Nigeria has a lot of destinations that have been branded and some that are yet to be. However, the problem still lies in security and infrastructural development," he said. Accordingly, Mr. Ogbeni-Awe noted that the infrastructure across the country is all in dilapidated state, stressing the need for it to be revived for the sector to flourish the way it should.

"To achieve the desired goal in the sector, government needs to provide an enabling environment, such as good roads to these tourism sites, constant electricity, good income for people to take vacations. They also ought to intensify the publicity of these tourism sites to increase patronage," he said. Nigeria's Ambassador to Israel, Dada Olisa, who spoke on the infrastructure challenges, also emphasised the importance of the tourism sector to the development of the economy. He said: "If properly organised, the sector can generate a lot of revenues for the country and can also generate income to supplement the oil sector."



Institutional Challenges

Speaking on the institutional challenges, the experts maintain most of the tourism sites have not been developed to international standards. Mr. Ogeni-Awe said: "The problem with the sector has always been how to harness and develop them to improve the number of tourists who visit the country. Our government has not yet identified what we want to market and promote in Nigeria. Other countries have done this. If we say culture is what we are marketing and promoting in Nigeria, then we must develop all the cultural attractions that we have to be marketable for tourists. So far we have not done it yet."

"Are we going to market culture, sport or wildlife? We have to identify our strong points as other countries have done. The packaging of our tourist attractions has also been a problem because these things are not packaged in a way that will attract tourists to Nigeria." Besides, he argued, government, at all levels – federal, states and local governments – are not providing enough funds for the development of tourist sites. Furthermore, Mr. Ajala noted that even the management of the tourism industry is

distorted.

"The only place managing its tourism brand in Nigeria is Cross River State, but the Niger Delta crisis is also not helping them, as travellers have to pass through the region. Most people are scared of coming into the country because of the Niger-Delta crisis and other communal clashes, which seem to have made the country a volatile place and no tourism sector can develop without trust and security," he added.



Efforts by the government to salvage the situation, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation, embarked on continental tours to showcase the Nigerian cultural heritage as well as carnivals. However, the capacity deficiencies at the ministry are a serious problems as most of the personnel are not trained tourism professionals. Owing to this, Mr. Ogeni-Awe insists, "There is the need to educate Nigerians on how they can relate and coordinate to exploit the opportunities in tourism. As of now, we do not know how many tourists visit the country or how much money is assigned for tourism."

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