

EAST AFRICAN STATES HEADING TO SINGLE VISA



The East African Community (EAC) partner states may soon waive tourist fees if the single visa system that has been proposed by Rwanda is adopted. The revolutionary proposal presented by Rwanda's delegation to the EAC's technical meeting seeks to boost the flow of tourists into the EAC region through the removal of Visa barriers.

According to the proposal, **tourists only need to use the same visa they acquire at the point of entry into EAC region, including Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda**, to access all the three countries without paying any extra fees or stopping into other embassies.

While explaining the Rwandan position on the issue, Rica Rwigamba, the head of conservation and tourism at Rwanda's Development Board, sounded passionate about the potential blessings of a single visa to tourism in the EAC region. "The tourism sector will grow considerably if both the visa and the fee impediments are removed," said Rica. In a recent meeting by the Heads of States, held in Entebbe, Uganda, Rwanda was given the responsibility of ensuring that the harmonized EAC visa is established.

While delegates from Kenya and Uganda supported the single visa proposal, a few obstacles still stand in the way of its implementation. The visa harmonization has proved difficult because of the varying fees charged by the countries. Usually, single entry fees range from \$5 to 50 while multiple entry fees vary from \$50 to 100 depending on the country. Moreover, delegates from Uganda and Kenya insisted that even with a single visa, the fees should not be abolished because they are an important source of national revenue.

According to Grace Awulo, Uganda's tentative head of tourism, the tourists should keep paying the fees to respective member states. "The fees should not be removed at all. I am not convinced that tourists from the US or UK find the fees cumbersome. Individual states should continue drawing revenue from these fees even if the single visa proposal is adopted," Awulo explained her position on the meeting's sidelines. Awulo also identified the lack of national legislations regarding a harmonized EAC tourist visa in the individual countries as another barrier that would need to be removed before implementing the proposal.

While Kenya favors the single visa move, it prefers that all the outstanding issues are completely discussed and agreed upon before the proposal can be implemented. "This is still only a proposal and it should not cause unnecessary anxieties. The visa fee is an important source of revenue to individual countries, but as a team we will discuss and arrive at an agreeable position to present to higher authorities," said Jane Waikenda, Kenya's Immigration Service Director present at the meeting. Kenyan delegates also proposed that sharing of intelligence information are vital if the single identity card and single visa program is to succeed.

While being categorical that the move would benefit the people of EAC region, Anaclet Kalibata, Director-General of Emigration and Immigration proposed that **the usage of single identity cards should be fast-tracked, especially at border points**. "We know that there are challenges, but we can deal with them in a way that ensures our people still enjoy the benefits of free movement,"

Kalibata said.

Tourism generates massive revenue and employment in the EAC region. For instance, it was the highest earner of foreign exchange for Rwanda at Rwf 178 billion in 2012 and has generated \$32.8 million worth of investments for the country. Rwanda has breathtaking attractions in the Mountain gorillas, Congo Nile Trail, Lake Kivu, Nyungwe and Akagera national parks, bird watching, museums, culture, among others.

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