
Ebola Fears Ripple Across Continent to Hurt East African Tourism

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In Tanzania and Kenya, tour operators say tented camps and luxury lodges where lion and elephant saunter past are surviving on visitors who have not yet written off the whole continent because of an outbreak that struck 5,000 km away.

"The probability of dying from a tree falling on your head is probably higher than going on a safari in the Serengeti and catching Ebola," said John Corse of Nomad Tanzania, one of whose camps overlooks plains where wildebeest make the annual Great Migration, often described as a natural Wonder of the World.

Tanzania - which relies heavily on tourist dollars from visits to game reserves, Mount Kilimanjaro or Indian Ocean beaches - was aiming for a record year to top the more than 1 million visitors who came in 2013. That now looks a pipedream.

The Hotels Association of Tanzania, representing 195 sites nationwide, said business is down 30 to 40 percent on the year and advanced bookings, mostly for 2015, are 50 percent lower.

Next door Kenya has been hurt too. Its tourism industry was already reeling from a spate of attacks by Islamists, including last year's attack on the upscale Westgate mall and more recent incidents on the coast. Ebola has added to the pain, making dollars more scarce in the foreign exchange market and weakening the shilling.

Safaris are vital to both nations, whose other main exports are agricultural produce, because

they tend to draw wealthier visitors, ready to splash out on luxuries, like sundowners after a game drive at sites miles (kms) from the next settlement.

"A safari holiday behaves like a form of luxury goods: people consume more of it when they're feeling safe and wealthy," said Corse, whose packages combining a week or so in the bush followed by a few days on Zanzibar's beaches cost \$8,000 to \$15,000 a person.

EBOLA-FREE SO FAR

Particularly galling to some is that neither Kenya nor Tanzania, nor indeed any other east African nation, has had a single case of the Ebola virus, which has killed about 5,000 people, the vast majority in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea on the opposite side of the continent.

The United States and Spain, meanwhile, have had cases of infection on their soil and also deaths from the disease. Madrid stands less than 4,000 km from Liberia's capital Monrovia, a shorter distance than the game reserves of Kenya and Tanzania.

Several east African nations have imposed restrictions on travellers coming from afflicted areas.

Kenya Airways halted flights in August to Monrovia and Freetown after Kenya was declared a "high-risk" zone because Nairobi is one of Africa's transport hubs. Some European airlines still fly to afflicted nations of West Africa.

When nine Kenyans returned to Nairobi from Liberia this week, they were isolated for hours and tested before being allowed to go home, even though they showed no fever or other Ebola symptoms.

"Our problems started with insecurity long before Ebola became an issue, but Ebola of course has worsened it," said Sam Ikwaye of the Kenya Association of Hotelkeepers and Caterers, referring to last year's deadly attack by Islamist gunmen on a Nairobi shopping mall followed by other assaults elsewhere.

"Our members have reported that tourists are very concerned and have kept asking and seeking assurances that Kenya is Ebola-free," he said.

The Serena Hotels, which runs high-end safari lodges and beach resorts, said bookings were down by as much as 30 percent in 2014, from the last good year of 2012. In 2013, worries about election violence, which proved unfounded, also deterred visitors.

DEBUNKING RUMOURS

Problems for Kenya and Tanzania have knock-on effects on nearby Uganda and Rwanda, which are also part of the East African Community bloc.

Rwanda, whose tourist industry in particular relies on expensive treks to see rare mountain gorillas, denies entry to travellers who have been to the three West African nations in the previous 22 days. Ebola's incubation period is three weeks.

Tanzania, where most visitors come from Britain, Germany, the United States and Italy, plans to launch a website in early November to educate visitors about Ebola and debunk any rumours.

"We sympathise with our brothers and sisters in West Africa. But we don't have it and we are

doing everything we can to ensure Tanzania remains Ebola-free," said Lathifa Sykes, chief executive of the Hotels Association of Tanzania.

"Africa is not one country. Africa is a continent," she said, voicing the frustrations of many Africans who say people in the West often forget Africa's diversity and vast size.

Still, not all tourists are staying away. At the Sarova Whitesands Beach Resort, near Mombasa, 44-year-old Wilbur April from London shrugged off the worries.

"Of course we asked about Kenya before we came because there was bad publicity about the country back home and we wanted to be sure," he said from his sun-bed sipping a glass of red wine.

"Recently it was terrorism," he said. "Now it is Ebola, and it is not even near Kenya."
