

# Take your seats:

## Africa's tourism journey

With international visitors set to rise dramatically, governments across the continent are investing in tourism infrastructure and hospitality, writes **Sarah Rundell**



DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/ALAMY

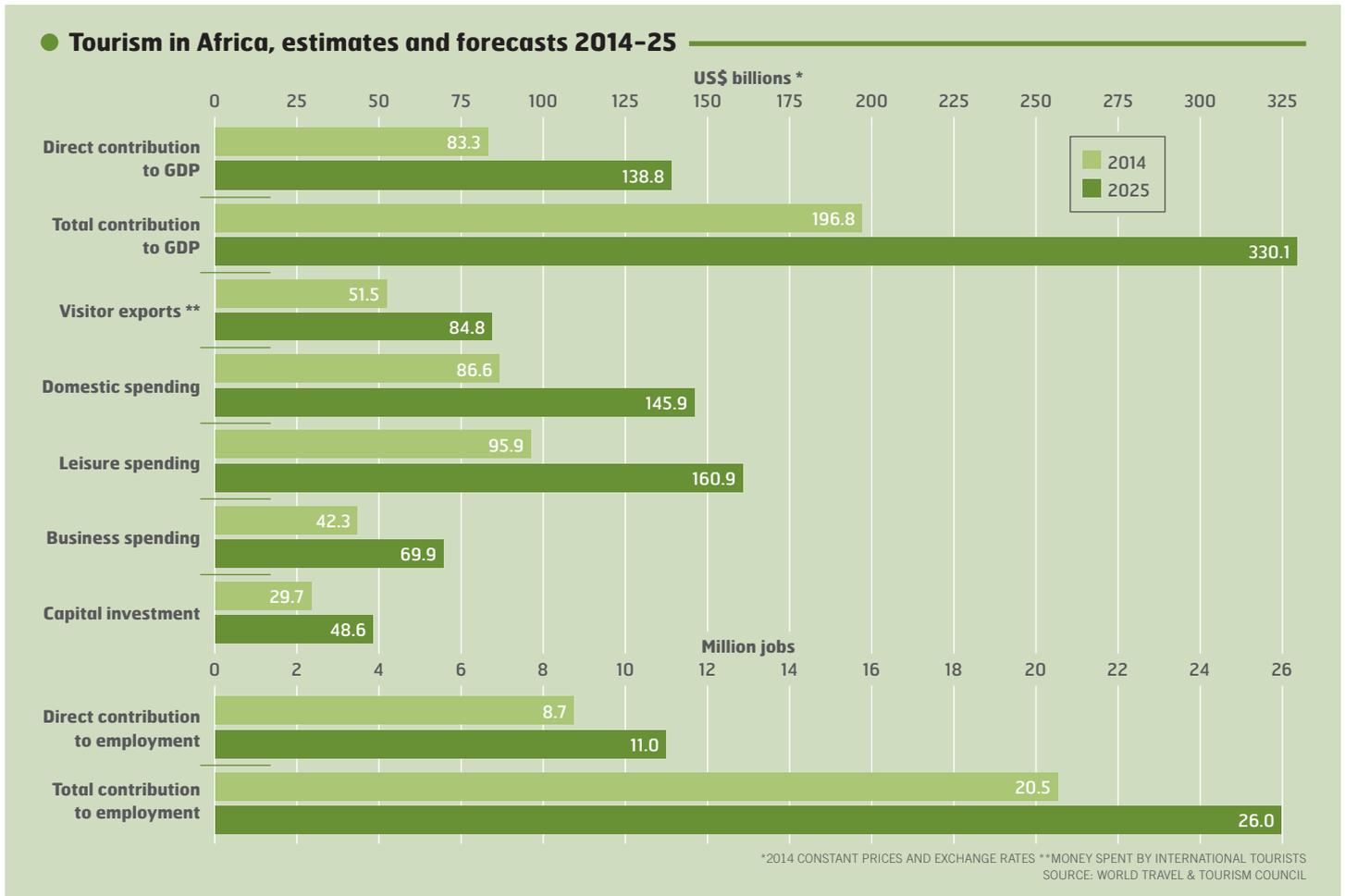
**H**undreds of monkeys roam through the neighbourhoods of Boabeng and Fiema in Ghana's Nkoranza District, arriving from a sanctuary nestled between the two forest villages. The monkeys are protected, considered sacred according to beliefs originating from the 19th century. The sanctuary is just one of many community-based ecotourist attractions that are fuelling Ghana's tourism industry.

Ecotourism, defined by the International Ecotourism Society as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people, is one of the fastest

growing segments of the global tourist industry, according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). It is crucial for conservation and a natural fit in Africa.

But ecotourism is just one strand to Africa's booming tourist offering. The continent has become the latest battleground for the international hotel industry; travel within Africa has taken off as the new middle class begin to holiday on the continent

Wolwedans Dunes Lodge in NamibRand Nature Reserve Park, Namibia. Tourists attracted to the beauty of the Skeleton Coast contribute to a thriving safari sector



and business people shuttle between fast-growing capitals. Africa’s rich cultures and natural wonders now compete with other global hubs in attracting tourist dollars, with new sectors emerging, for example Namibia’s flourishing luxury safari sector, which takes advantage of the unique geography of the Skeleton Coast to differentiate from its Kenyan and Tanzanian rivals. Elsewhere, countries such

## Referrals via social media have changed the game for many African operators

as Botswana and Tunisia are allowing more airlines in, meaning cheaper and quicker flights for visitors.

UNWTO projects that Africa’s international tourist arrivals will rise to 134 million in 2030, up 106 per cent from the 2013 level of 65 million arrivals. In addition, research group Euromonitor International says tourism income has risen from \$42 billion in 2011 in Africa to an estimated \$54 billion in 2014. As smart investors seize opportunities in niches such as health and wellness, golf tourism, eco-adventure and even

MICE – the industry anachronism for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions tourism – it feels as if Africa’s journey to a vibrant, world-class tourist industry has started.

### Hotel chains building an African presence

Africa’s hotel sector leads the investment drive. Last year, the global hotel chain Marriott invested \$200 million in Africa.

It plans to open 36 new hotels, hire 10,000 employees and expand into a total of 16 countries. The group was already the largest hotel operator in Africa, having acquired 116 properties from South Africa’s Protea Hotel Group. Others building their African footprint include Carlson Rezidor, which has 30 hotels with 6,300 rooms under development across the continent. Hilton and Starwood are scrambling to shore up a share of the marketplace. Progressive African governments are supporting investment, working hard to attract the world’s biggest brands; for example, Ethiopia won the attention of Best Western, which in October announced two openings in capital city Addis Ababa. Suzi Yoder, Senior Vice President of International Operations, said: “We are very excited about bringing our world-famous brand to Addis Ababa. Ethiopia [is] one of the fastest growing economies

in sub-Saharan Africa, with amazing world heritage sites recognised by UNESCO and is considered as a cradle of mankind by many.”

Angola says it plans to use a portion of its \$5 billion Sovereign Wealth Fund to invest in infrastructure projects, including new hotels. The hotel shortage in the capital Luanda makes it difficult to find a business-class hotel room for less than \$500 a night, negatively impacting the country’s tourist growth potential. According to consultancy EY, Nigeria has the largest pipeline of new hotels in sub-Saharan Africa, with 7,500 rooms added in 2013, an increase of 10 per cent year-on-year.

### Overcoming challenges

Investment will increase when bottlenecks and challenges are overcome. Executives complain of a lack of direct flights to many African destinations; fares and taxations are high and obtaining visas is still difficult for some countries. According to international consultancy Mercer, Luanda in Angola and N’Djamena, the capital of Chad, are among the world’s five most expensive cities for expats and business travellers in terms of cost of living. Business travellers want to use corporate credit cards to track transactions, but many destinations prefer cash. Telecoms and internet access is still underdeveloped, which means a lot of bookable content, including rooms, transfers and meeting spaces, are not available on the global distribution system (GDS) used by the global travel industry to book, secure and pay for travel.

However, technology is starting to transform the tourism industry. Destinations can market themselves via social media, reaching out directly to potential clients. E-Tourism Frontiers, a Kenyan-based initiative aimed at developing digital skills in the tourism sector across global emerging markets, argues that referrals via social media have changed the game for many African operators. Success stories include a small lodge off the Tanzanian coast that, by embracing social media, has turned itself into a ‘must-visit’ destination. Thanks to an active and innovative Twitter profile, Ras Mbisi Lodge has been featured in travel and lifestyle magazines around the world.

Integration of mobile payments and online booking websites is also starting to happen. Jovago, Africa’s leading hotel booking platform, has partnered with Tigo, a telcoms company based in Tanzania. As a result of this partnership, Tigo Pesa customers will be able to pay for accommodation that is booked on Jovago with their Tigo Pesa account. Ruan Swanepoel, Head of Mobile Financial Services at Tigo, said: “We are delighted to join hands with Jovago to give the customers of our two companies the convenience of paying for their hotel accommodation from the convenience of their mobile phones.”

In addition, Africa-wide initiatives are fostering cooperation. The Sustainable Tourism Masterplan (STMP), which is backed by the African Union, provides member states with a regional framework for sustainable tourism development, aiming to help alleviate poverty and promote integration with specific strategies. Issues include pushing single tourist visas, insecurity, disparities in fees charged and cross-border cooperation in the conservation of wildlife, as well as developing key tourist infrastructure. The

### ● Kenya: about to bounce back?

Entrepreneur Jake Grieves-Cook has been involved in Kenya’s tourism industry for over 35 years. Grieves-Cook is founder of Kenyan safari group Gamewatchers Safaris with a holiday offering that includes safaris in Botswana and Rwanda, as well as the group’s award-winning eco safari offshoot Porini Safari Camps, based out of Kenya. Former Chairman of the Kenya Tourist Board, he is a passionate advocate of sustainable and responsible tourism. The Porini camps operate under ‘a unique community concept’ that allow the Maasai people to benefit from wildlife conservation and ecotourism, explains Grieves-Cook. “This provides a great experience for the visitors staying at the camps, and generates an income for the Maasai people who benefit from protecting the wildlife and conserving the land as habitat for the big game animals,” says Grieves-Cook.

Grieves-Cook is confident Kenya’s tourist sector is emerging from a challenging couple of years, predicting a bounce back in visitor numbers from the United States and the United Kingdom, which account for a combined 40 per cent of Kenya’s total foreign tourist arrivals. The combined impact of security fears because of Somali militants and the Ebola crisis have taken a real toll on the industry, he says. “We have been hit by travel advisories against non-essential travel to most of Kenya’s coast, and fears of Ebola in Africa which impacted on all safari destinations in East and Southern Africa,” he says, adding: “This has come even though the Ebola outbreaks were thousands of miles away in West Africa.”

With encouraging signs that Ebola is finally under control, he is upbeat about the future. “Now we are working hard to make people aware of our attractions and are seeing signs of an upturn later in the year,” he says.

ISTOCK IMAGES



World Bank estimates that tourism accounts directly or indirectly for one in every 20 jobs in sub-Saharan Africa, and is one of the few industries on the continent in which women are well represented as employees and managers.

Issues such as land ownership, availability, and how land rights are transferred, are central to tourism investment. Investors also complain of other constraints such as taxes on investments and low levels of tourism skills among Africa’s population. But as governments continue to put in place policies to nurture the industry, investment will increase in line with tourist demand to see the continent’s rich cultural heritage and natural beauty. ●