

Image key to Zim tourism revival

The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) is hoping to produce a turn in dwindling international arrivals from its Zimbabwe International Travel Expo, which has been re-branded, the Sanganai Travel and Tourism Africa Expo.

By [Dumisani Ndlela](#) 26 Aug 2008

But critics say a comprehensive image overhaul will be needed to convince international visitors to start putting Zimbabwe on their holiday and leisure itineraries, saying a troubled economy as well as a political crisis is likely to further undermine growth in the tourism industry in the short to medium term.

“We haven't even begun [working on the country's battered image],” said John Robertson, an independent economic consultant. “Image is very important but it will take over ten years to restore the country's bad image.”

The ZTA chief executive officer, Karikoga Kaseke said his organisation is planning to host the biggest travel expo on the continent in October, arguing this would help the tourism sector win back international confidence lost, due to a violent political campaign over the past decade as well as an economy now on its knees.

“Sanganai is not going to be a visiting affair; we want the world to meet Africa in Zimbabwe,” Kaseke said at the launch of the re-branded travel expo, insisting that the number of exhibitors expected at the expo showed international tourist markets were beginning to warm up to the country after a turbulent decade.

Over 518 exhibitors have applied for space at the expo, while 70 foreign companies - including Brazil, the UK, South Africa, Germany, France, Italy, Ghana and Malawi - have already been booked places at the exhibition, said Kaseke.

Robertson said while indeed the expo could attract such significant interest, it was unlikely this would translate into meaningful tourist arrivals as long as the current economic and political environment remained unchanged.

He said most travellers, particularly those from South Africa who travelled by road, had shunned the country because of fuel shortages.

Moreover, visitors who used to travel with international credit cards stopped doing so because of the skewed exchange rate, which resulted in them being charged as much as US\$500 for packages that would normally cost less than US\$100.

“The menus in the hotels have deteriorated and visitors wouldn't want remnants of what used to be a wonderful menu in local hotels. The staff crisis has also meant that staff recruited to replace trained personnel can't present themselves very well,” said Robertson.

Most of the wildlife conservancies have been destroyed, with very little left for game lovers.

All this, Robertson said, has contributed to a very negative image which would take more than a travel expo to repair.

But Keseke insists their efforts are paying off, pointing out that international tourist traffic has been increasing gradually due to their perception management programme that has seen the institution splurge large sums of money to bring in international artists and tourism agents from Russia, China, Britain and the USA among other places.

But an executive with a local hotel group, who cannot be named because he cannot publicly oppose the ZTA, which also acts as a regulator of the industry, said the industry's own efforts have revealed that spending substantially on managing the country's battered image would be futile in the absence of political and economic stability.

Zimbabwe's image, he said, would be further badly damaged by current domestic strife, which could escalate after the collapse of talks for a government of national unity between the ruling ZANU PF and two factions of the opposition MDC.

ABOUT DUMISANI NDLELA

Dumisani Ndlela is a Zimbabwean journalist specialising in business and financial reporting, with experience reporting on commodities, stock and financial markets, advertising, marketing and the media. He has previously reported from a number of regional countries as well as from the UK and Germany on commodities and regional integration. He can be contacted on dndlela@yahoo.co.uk.
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