

• Kigali City hugs its visitors again

By Dias Nyesiga;

Grace Mitchell had planned for a vacation in Africa at the beginning of last year, unfortunately, Covid-19 pandemic ravaged the world locking down economies and restricting movements.

As she passed time during lockdown searching through different destinations in Africa she opened a channel and a message popped up;

“The world will open for business once more, and when it does, we’ll be waiting with open arms. We can’t wait for you to visit Rwanda soon. Stay home. Stay safe. Travel tomorrow.”

It is from Visit Rwanda Youtube channel. Despite lockdown which saw the economy shutdown completely after the first case on 14 March, 2020, Rwanda continued to keep in touch with the world virtually.

“As it became more and more obvious that events and travel would come to a standstill due to the virus, destination marketers were faced with quite a challenge: staying connected (virtually) to visitors without seeming to be overly promotional during a time when so many around the world were suffering,” said Blair Potter, managing editor, The Meeting Professional.

Like other sectors of the economy, Rwanda’s tourism which is the country’s leading foreign exchange earner was severely affected losing Rwf 79billion from 70 meetings alone that were suspended last year.

This loss, Prime Minister Dr. Edouard Ngirente said was as a result of cancellation of meetings which contribute to Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) component which has shaped Rwanda’s tourism sector as well as aviation which recorded Rwf 8billion in losses.

Nevertheless, with government putting in place measures to curb down the spread of the virus, controlling numbers of infections, Rwanda opened again for tourism in mid-June, 2020.

“I felt hope that at least my plan of visiting the continent is still positive and there I opted I will have my vacation in Rwanda,” said Mitchell.

As a result, the country's tourism is healing and the flamboyant clean, green and attractive city of Kigali is now hugging its visitors again with over 3,000 visiting by July 2020 barely a month after the opening of the initial lockdown.

"Rwanda has prioritized MICE tourism as one of the drivers of its economic growth," said Belise Kariza, head of tourism at Rwanda development Board (RDB).

The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) says MICE industry is one of the fastest growing segments within the tourism industry with an annual increase of around 9 percent, indicating Rwanda's best choice to boost the industry.

The country, she says is ranked as the safest in Africa and fifth-safest in the world in Gallup's 2018 Global Law and Order report.

The City of Kigali plays a leading role in the MICE component and has been ranked second in Africa by the International Congress and Convention Association (2018 report) to host association meetings.

The city features 10,000 guest rooms, including many internationally recognized brands such as Marriott, Radisson Blu and Park Inn by Radisson, and plans are in offing to double the country's room capacity by 2025.

To further harness its position, Kigali has also adopted the green city Kigali concept that is aimed at responding to emerging issues and a pioneering project for Africa's rapidly growing cities, making it the first green city on the continent and thus pushing it to number one destination for tourism.

"Taking a holistic approach to integrate green building and design, efficient and renewable energy , recycling and inclusive living, the green city Kigali will become a blueprint for other cities, for the region, for the continent," a statement from the city of Kigali read in part about the project.

The city hosts the historic and cultural sites and sounds; memorials such as Kigali Genocide Memorial, the Richard Kandt House-Museum of National History and various other memorials, the splendid hikes, city tours that usher the visitor in the warming milieu of Kigali that is beautifully covered with green, the art and craft as well as made in Rwanda shopping that entices most visitors.

The transparent dome shaped Kigali Convention Centre that holds multi-functional conference halls which is set to be the most recognized modern structures on the

continent has been an attraction both for domestic and international tourists.

“Most visitors are enthusiastic to take a city ride and see the beautiful flowers by the road side, the green parks, hiking on the hillsides of the city suburbs because sometimes they don’t believe such things can happen in a city in Africa. We are back in business and the sector is healing,” said Theogene Rukundo, a tour guide.

Government prioritises hotels sector for the Recovery Fund



The Hotels and hospitality sector is expected to take the lion’s share (Rwf 50billion) of the Economic Recovery Fund (ERF) set up by government to help in reviving the economy hit-hard by the pandemic.

Whilst, Rwf 30billion will be allocated to larger enterprises with Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) taking 15 billion of the fund, government expects more funding to further reach all businesses.

The fund will help in loan refinancing for the hotels sectors which lost over 90% of revenues from cancellations of events and bookings due to global lockdown and travel restrictions. Others include; businesses in the agro- processing, manufacturing, transport and logistics.

The ERF, a two-year facility to cushion businesses affected by COVID-19 Pandemic is expected to amount to Rwf 200billion in total with the fund already giving out loans from the initial Rwf 100billion facility.

The fund will be channelled to the sector through Savings and Credit Cooperatives, Microfinance Institutions which will be easier for small and medium players in the sector to access as well as commercial banks.

The growth of the economy that had shown positive outlook for the past decade averaging to 7.2% slumped by 2 percent in 2020 auguring a sluggish outlook with World Bank recommending the need for recovery strategies to help the economy to bank on its growth path.

If this is not done, the World Bank says it would reverse some of Rwanda’s hard won socio- economic and health achievements but a ray of hope glimmers on the account that Rwanda took a swift action to stem the spill over with strategic

recovery approaches which are expected to bend the curve on the pandemic and get back on track.

With the recovery fund targeting the hotel sector, experts deduce will fast track the recovery of other sectors, given the position of the sector within the economy.

“Considering hotels and hospitality sector was the best approach to speed up recovery, first the sector links direct to the lower person within the income chain who is a farmer,” Davis Mukiza, a business analyst says.

“Again, it has a capacity to create jobs that are permanent and casual which means employment gap created by the pandemic can be closed easily and secondly, it creates a platform for other sectors to meet”, he adds.

In fact, Central Bank says hotels and restaurants recorded a very high value loan with the sector’s loan value increasing to Rwf 95.3billion in the first quarter this year to Rwf 6.1billion in the same period 2020 accounting to 14.60 percentage increase. This contributed to the rise in new authorised loans in the first quarter 2021 to 49.7 percentage from -10.6 percentages in the same period last year, painting a positive outlook for the sector’s recovery.

Experts are optimistic that strengthening the private sector will help in reviving the economy something that has seen the government allocating 58.7 % of the total budget (Rwf 2,234 billion) to economic transformation a pillar that has the economic recovery fund in its docket.