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Rwanda is fast tracking development from all fronts strategically leveraging sports to drive socio-economic transformation, and has for the last two decades or so, been extensively preoccupied with the creation of global sporting partnerships as part of the country's broader development strategy.

The East African nation boasts a global limelight after successfully experimenting homegrown solutions in nearly all spheres of her economy, and is now directing massive efforts into sports tourism.

Besides enhancing Rwanda's global visibility, the Kigali administration maintains that hosting global sports events like Formula 1 Grand Prix could spur the country's desire to evolve into a competitive actor in the business of sports.

One of the key drivers of this strategy is the government's goal to host high-profile international sporting events, such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix, the FIA (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile) Awards and General Assemble in December 2024, Kigali.



Hosting global sports events, like the Formula 1 race is a key part of Rwanda's strategy to move beyond being a consumer of sports and transform into an active participant in the global sports economy. "Hosting an F1 race would allow Rwanda to move from being a consumer of sports to a competitive player in the business of sports," said Yolande Makolo, Rwanda's government spokesperson, in a statement to *The Roanoke Times*.

"Rwanda's interest in Formula 1 aligns with our strategy to leverage sports for transformative impact. We seek every opportunity to drive forward Rwanda's development, including through global sporting partnerships," added Makolo.

While Rwanda's bid to host a Formula 1 race remains in progress and is not yet finalized, the country's ambitions have been met with optimism. Formula 1 Management (FOM) officials have already visited Rwanda and reviewed the nation's plans to construct a new, permanent F1 circuit near the Bugesera International Airport - under construction and set to be completed by 2028.

Rwanda is also competing with other African nations, including South Africa and Morocco, for the right to host the prestigious race, but it has significant backing from global sports figures, such as seven-time Formula 1 world champion Lewis Hamilton. Hamilton has been vocal in his support for an African Grand Prix, emphasizing that “Africa deserves a place on the Formula One calendar” and that hosting the race will boost tourism across the continent.

Beyond Formula 1, Rwanda has demonstrated its capability to host major international sporting events with remarkable success. The country played a pivotal role in the Basketball Africa League (BAL) like the 2023 edition, with Kigali serving as the championship’s host city.



Looking ahead, Rwanda is set to make history by hosting the first-ever Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) Road World Championships on African soil in Kigali from 21-28 September, 2025.

Additionally, in December 2024, Kigali will become the first African city to host the FIA’s Annual General Assembly (AGA) and the prestigious FIA Prize-Giving Ceremony. This renowned annual event honors the outstanding achievements in motorsport across various categories, further cementing Rwanda’s position as a premier destination for global sports events.

Every year, the country hosts the Mountain Gorilla Rally and attracts foreign teams from Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Belgium and Zambia and experts in the sector say that motorsport is a potential tourism offering.

These events, along with the country’s thriving cycling culture and the growing popularity of the Tour du Rwanda, participation in international sports has boosted its profile as a potential top sport tourism destination, creating new opportunities for economic growth. Such big sport events like BAL, Tour du Rwanda, bring thousands of international visitors to the country, directly contributing to the hospitality industry and creating new jobs.



The influx of tourists has also increased demand for transportation, infrastructure, and services, further stimulating Rwanda’s economy.

To support the country's growing sports tourism sector, infrastructure development is a top priority. Hosting high-profile events will require significant upgrades to Rwanda's transport network, including improved roads, airports, and hospitality facilities. The government's investment in infrastructure—such as the expansion of Bugesera International Airport, new sports stadiums, and upgraded regional football grounds—sets the stage for Rwanda to host future global sporting events.

Relatedly, the country has, over the years, invested in football infrastructure, and in 2024, the newly upgraded Amahoro Stadium, now with a capacity of 45,000 seats, reflects the country's growing sports ambitions. Additionally, the Nyamirambo Sports Complex and Huye Stadium are key additions, providing multi-purpose venues for football, athletics, and a variety of other events.

Furthermore, the Kigali Arena, a state-of-the-art indoor facility, is designed to host large-scale sports events and concerts, making it a key venue for both local and international events.



Building on this momentum, the upgraded Amahoro Gymnasium is also playing a crucial role in promoting sports in Rwanda, offering space for gymnastics, basketball, volleyball, indoor football, and concerts. Located in Kigali's vibrant sports and entertainment district, it sits next to the BK Arena and Amahoro National Stadium. In addition, Zari Court, currently under construction, is set to become a premier destination for community and cultural events, further solidifying Rwanda's position as a growing sports hub.

Similarly, Rwanda has also made strategic moves to enhance its global visibility by partnering with prominent sports organizations and clubs.

These collaborations include high-profile sponsorship deals with global soccer giants such as Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain, and Bayern Munich. Through the *Visit Rwanda* campaign, the country has positioned itself as a premier tourism destination, with its logo appearing on Arsenal's jerseys and in PSG's international promotional campaigns.

In May 2018, RDB and the London-based soccer team, Arsenal Football Club, signed a three-year partnership, where the "Visit Rwanda" logo was to appear on the left sleeve of all first team, under-23 and Arsenal Women's matches after the deal had

become effective. Rwanda would become the official tourism partner of the premier league club.



Commenting on the benefits of this partnership, Vinal Venkatesham, Arsenal's Chief Commercial Officer, highlighted the global exposure that comes with it, noting at the time that Arsenal's shirt is seen 35 million times a day worldwide, making it one of the most viewed teams across the globe.

After partnering with Arsenal, Visit Rwanda continued its global promotional efforts by signing a three-year deal with Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2019. This collaboration aimed to boost Rwanda's international profile by highlighting Rwandan products in Paris and promoting the country's rich culture, fashion, and design.

While Rwanda's aspirations to become a leading sports tourism destination are well-supported, there are challenges to overcome. Competing with established venues like South Africa's Kyalami circuit, which hosted Africa's last Formula 1 Grand Prix in 1993, presents a significant hurdle. Moreover, the logistical and financial challenges of hosting such major events cannot be ignored. However, Rwanda's proactive approach—backed by strong government support, strategic partnerships, and investment in infrastructure—positions the country as a serious contender in the race for global sports events.

The economic benefits of sports tourism are already becoming clear. In 2023 alone, Rwanda hosted 160 events, attracting 65,000 delegates and generating \$95 million in revenue. The country's focus on expanding the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events (MICE) sector has also contributed to the growth of Rwanda's hospitality industry.

Sports tourism is set to boost growth in sectors like hospitality, transportation, and retail. Rwanda's focus on developing a diverse and sustainable tourism industry, along with its rise as a sports hub, will bring long-term benefits to the economy.

The county's efforts to position itself as Africa's premier sports tourism destination are yielding impressive results. By hosting major international sporting events, forging strategic partnerships with global sports organizations, and investing in world-class infrastructure, Rwanda is establishing itself as a regional sports powerhouse.

As Rwanda continues to build on its success, it is clear that the country is not just participating in the global sports tourism movement but is actively shaping the future of sports tourism in Africa.