



## Should marketing travel Uganda out there be completely halted during the Covid-19 lockdown?

*"I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unnerving ease. It begins in your mind, always ... so you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you."*

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*

Almost all Uganda travel companies have cut their entire marketing spend during the international Covid-19 lockdown, which I think will have long term effects after this all ends.

Before I let you slide into my thoughts, the medical teams, emergency operatives, volunteers and government folk out their fighting for our universal safety are doing an awesome job so far. Let's all spend a few seconds on the next two empty lines and send them some love.

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Thank you. Please keep us safe!

A month ago I read a [blog post on Monitor.co.ug](#) that cast a dark shadow over my thoughts about the **travel Uganda market**. In the blog, Ms Lillian Ajarova, the Chief Executive Officer of Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), says the Covid-19 scourge is frustrating the ambition of the sector to hit the 10 per cent growth rate in this financial year.

In the same blog, Ms Kelly macTavish, the Managing Director of Pearl of Africa Tours Limited, uses a single dark word to drive the point home; "**Horrible!**". Sentences down, she cuts us some slack and explains: "**The phones have stopped ringing, the emails are not coming through, and those who booked are cancelling. This is just one of the worst things that has happened to us**". Just one of the many worse things to come, Ms Kelly.

The Uganda tourism sector had registered significant and progressive improvements as shown by several development indicators such as tourist arrivals, foreign exchange earnings, growth in domestic tourism, and employment and tourism business among others.

According to UTB, in the financial year 2018/2019, tourist arrivals grew by 7.4 per cent from 1.402 million in 2017 to 1.505 million. The foreign exchange earnings also grew by 10.1 per cent from \$ 1.45 billion (Shs5.1 trillion) in 2017 to \$ 1.6 billion (about Shs6 trillion), according to the 2018/2019 sector performance report.

A total of 667,600 people were employed in the Travel and Tourism industry in 2018 and is projected to employ 972,000 people by 2029. I think someone will have to adjust that number considering the current situation.

If everyone is under lockdown, the phones are not ringing, then I'm safe to think that most of the 667,600 in the travel Uganda market now read their junk emails like the book of proverbs and at least all have postponed sales and marketing efforts.

Even the big ones like Airbnb recently announced a pause on all marketing, saving \$800m this year. [The 2020 Catholic Uganda Martyr's Day feast slated for May 29th](#) for the youth and June 3 for the rest, has been called off due to the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

With the effects upon the travel industry likely to be worse than the effects of 9/11 and the 2008 recession combined, the industry needs to be prepared not only for current disruption, but also for the aftermath. With many factors of uncertainty around the pandemic, including the scale of impact and length, there is no doubt that the travel industry will be hit hard. Travel companies and destination market organisations (DMOs) need to have comprehensive plans to mitigate the impact.

*"The losses incurred to date by the players in the industry ranges from cancellation from now to over a year. We are still conducting a survey to establish the exact monetary value. However, if I have to go by our projections, we will be losing not less than \$1.6b, which is what we earned last year as a sector."*

Ms Lilly Ajarova, *UTB chief executive officer*, [talking to the Daily Monitor](#)

It could be very easy to cut all marketing costs while travel is not permitted, as the initial thought would be that it's not needed whilst 'lying low'. Uganda has ended all marketing campaigns, which aimed to target 2.2 million foreign visitors, double the amount in 2022. I know because at [Burt Systems](#), travel is our top niche and 100% of all travel campaigns have been indefinitely postponed.

Countries that have been the hardest hit by the pandemic, such as Italy and Spain will have to increase efforts to drive tourism again to these popular destinations. Their reputation as a safe destination may diminish, so DMOs are brewing ways to increase effort in these tourism-dependent economies.

If Goliath is fighting to keep his head above the flood, David may need to have a measurable amount of strength and resources left to walk off the beach when the floods end?



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Some DMOs have made viable efforts to [maintain awareness](#) of the destination during the pandemic. Visit Britain, Discover Puerto Rico and Visit Philly (Philadelphia, United States), are just a few examples of destinations offering virtual tours of the destination during the Covid-19 crisis. Offering an experience which can be enjoyed whilst adhering to government travel restrictions is a fantastic idea, and is making the most of the current situation.

As many source markets across the world are placed on countrywide lockdowns, with hospitality and retail venues closed, frequent travellers are currently at home, looking forward to travel again once the restrictions have been lifted. Evidence shows that travellers are still searching,

and booking holidays for later on in the year, highlighting the need for marketing not to pause. Those who do not pause marketing spend will be well positioned to exploit the pent up demand.

We recently tested this with a simple promoted survey on just a newly registered Instagram Account [@trip2uganda](#). Out of 500 respondents from Europe and North America, 49% said they would visit East Africa if they intended to before the outbreak. 38% said they would wait for years before travelling again and 13% are apparently still confused but manage to look Instagram travel pictures. We also managed to get 12 followers, and 300 likes from 12 posts.

There needs to be a travel industry to return to. Cutting marketing spend completely will have a long-term detriment to travel Uganda operations. If marketing spend was halved, then the impact on awareness would be much less even though costs would be saved. However, its ability to do so depends upon the travel companies' brand and market recognition.

**Reprioritising marketing channels at this time and creating a 'bounce back' marketing campaign for when the height has passed will aid companies and destinations in the long run when travellers are willing to travel again.**



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[Marketing in the wake of covid-19](#)

However, my advice has a very tiny chance of being scalable at this moment. According to Ms Ajarova, the government should consider tax reliefs in the area of value added tax for 12 months across the tourism value chain.

She also advises that the government should consider deferral for advanced corporate tax payment, waive pay as you earn for a period of 12 months as well as consider a reduction of 40 per cent for accumulated utilities bills, key among them water and electricity, especially for the hotel and accommodation sub-sector.

We may need powerful minds on getting the 'was' insanely growing Uganda travel industry back up again. I know great minds are at it and they give me great hope that things will be done differently but better.

*“Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it can. But life leaps over oblivion lightly, losing only a thing or two of no importance, and gloom is but the passing shadow of a cloud...”*

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*



Hi, my name is Denis and I've built over 60 modern travel websites at Burt Systems.

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