

Q&A

CORPORATE INTERVIEW | THE ARK AND ABERDARE COUNTRY CLUB



The Ark and Aberdare Country Club General Manager
Richard Hodgson. (PHOTO: ELVIS OGUNA/STANDARD)

By CLAY MUGANDA

Kenya was recently rated among the top upmarket holiday destinations in 2016 by a US-based luxury travel network. It also noted that the country had recorded the largest growth in tourist bookings globally. We spoke to Richard Hodgson, the general manager of Marasa Africa-owned Aberdare Country Club and The Ark, to find out if the reality reflects the report.

What are the challenges you have faced in marketing your products, and what are the general challenges the hospitality industry/tourism sector faces?

Security concerns and travel advisories from various countries affected tourism badly. But thanks to the recent high-profile visits of the president of the United States, the Israeli prime minister, the Indian prime minister and the Pope, the security confidence in our country has improved. Further, since the travel bans were lifted, tourist numbers to Kenya have begun to steadily increase, though we are yet to see the big numbers of previous years. But business is steadily growing.

Kenya has several tourism-related bodies. Do you think the measures they take to market the country to foreign visitors are bearing fruit?

Yes, the Kenya Tourism Board and the others have made great strides in advertising Kenya, and we look forward to them coming up with more innovative ways to increase our tourist numbers.

However, they need to progressively sell Kenya as an all-year-round travel destination, instead of the usual wildebeest-migration destination, which peaks in July to mid-September. They need to continue partnering and working with local hospitality players

to come up creative ideas to boost tourism numbers.

And while our rich wildlife and beautiful beaches make Kenya unique, we also need to sell the country as a destination for large conference meetings. Nairobi has five-star international hotel chains and the Kenyatta International Convention Centre that can host large conferences.

The advantage is that some business travellers take a short safari after their meetings, and come back months or years later with family and friends, or give us referral business.

The East Africa Community came up with one visa for tourists visiting the region, are the effects of this being felt? Has it led to an increase in the number of foreigner visitors?

As hoteliers, it is hard to answer this question since we are the end users when guests arrive in the country. However, this is a good idea and it will encourage foreign guests to visit neighbouring nations at less inconvenience and cost.

How do The Ark and Aberdare Country Club keep a stream of guests flowing?

Our sales and marketing team is fully engaged in social media, participates in local and international trade shows, and visits and

meets with corporate and travel partners.

We also have a ground team whose customer service ensures our guests enjoy their stay, which encourages referrals and repeat business.

Has domestic tourism boosted business for your hotels?

Yes, we are seeing an increase in local tourism and conferences at our hotels.

Once people visit our hotels either on business or leisure, we always seem to get more referral business out of it. The number of local tourists over the weekends and public holidays has also increased in recent years – we're only a three-hour drive from Nairobi in the Aberdare highlands. While the local traveller mostly travels with family and is here to relax, foreign travellers come to see wildlife and admire our beautiful country.

There is a considerable number of Chinese citizens in the region engaged in different projects. Are they visiting sites like yours?

Yes, we have seen good and steady increase in local Chinese travel to our hotels. They either travel for business, that is, for conferences and team building, or for leisure. The good thing with these guests is that they are social media-savvy, so referral business is bound to come our way.

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