

Rwanda Turns to Tourism

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The government hopes foreign visitors can forget Rwanda's brutal past.

Flowers and a white gate draped in purple satin ribbons surround a weathered red-brick church standing peacefully in a small town outside the Rwandan capital of Kigali. Signs outside defiantly declare: Never again.

Within the walls of the church, which has a bullet-ridden ceiling, are a mud-stained statue of the Virgin Mary, bloody footprints and withered flowers. Musty underground bunkers housing row upon row of skulls and bones and stacks of brown coffins dominate the backyard.

This holy house of horrors at Nyamata is infamous as the murder scene of 10,000 people during the 1994 genocide. Only 11 people survived, including 22-year-old church guide Chantal Niwemugeni who hid under dead bodies.

The Rwandan government does not actively market as tourist attractions the Nyamata church and other memorials of the massacre, which saw about 800,000 Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus killed in three months

But they have inevitably emerged as points of interest to some of the 70,000 tourists who visit the country each year.

It is not easy to entice tourists following an event as horrific as genocide - a task made doubly difficult by the reality of the troubled Great Lakes region of Africa where United Nations peacekeepers struggle to rein in many rebel groups that for years have been a menace.

So Rwanda has its work cut out, but the government hopes visitors will be able to forget the country's bloody past and focus on its natural beauty.

The country that two years ago relaunched itself as a vacation destination now aims to nurture a tourism sector that it hopes will be worth an annual 113 million US dollars by 2010.

To that end, this month will see the debut of the Rwanda Travel & Tours Association, made up of hoteliers, airlines, tour operators and travel agencies and which hopes to pool the collective resources of the travel industry.

Officials say the main attraction will be the mountain gorilla population of the Parc National Des Volcans. Rwanda's gorillas, amounting to some half the total of 700 surviving mountain gorillas in the wild, were made internationally famous by the murdered conservationist Diane Fossey.

However, Rosette Chantal Rugamba, director general of the Rwanda Office of Tourism and National Parks, ORTPN, admits interest has been limited so far.

“The tourism revival hasn’t been very evident from our tourist numbers,” said Rugamba. “But the gorilla tours are booked until the end of September despite travel warnings.”

Part of the problem is the lack of skilled people in the industry, few hotels and poor infrastructure and roads, explains Manzi Kayihura, director of Kigali-based Thousand Hills Expeditions.

Rwanda is also an expensive country because of the presence of many NGOs and the sheer volume of donor aid.

“We made a choice to go for high-end eco-tourists, and this is because our country is very small. But we’re not saying we’re not targeting backpackers,” said Rugamba.

Rwanda has aggressively used trade fairs, travel guides, promotional websites and press coverage to increase the number of visitors and foreign investors.

President Paul Kagame lately has capitalised on his attendance at various international events to mend Rwanda’s tarnished image, even as genocide trials carry on and prisoners are seen doing community work in towns and cities.

Targeting the Rwandan diaspora in North America, Europe and other parts of Africa has also emerged as a tactic.

The government in July staged a convention in Houston, Texas, aimed at creating business networks among the migrants to boost tourism.

“They need to talk about the successes of their country. What is available to see,” said Rugamba

“Second is to start thinking of how they can invest in the tourism industry because that is where we need a lot of support.”

Selling the world on the safeness of Rwanda began in 2001 when the government embarked on a public relations campaign emanating from a message that “the country is at peace”.

Westerners, notably Americans and Britons, are among the most frequent visitors to Rwanda even though their home governments have been unenthusiastic given problems in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC, which several rebel movements use as a base to fight governments in Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC itself.

But visitors do come.

Former refugees like Manzi Kayihura, director of Kigali-based Thousand Hills Expeditions, returned to his native Rwanda in 1999 to set up a tourism business, the backbone of which is the country’s gorillas. He has 15 to 20 clients per month.

Eric Kacou, director of OTF’s Kigali office, believes tourists will also come for Rwanda’s culture - everything

from “one kingdom [in the pre-colonial past], to the German and Belgian colonists, to 1994, to today”.

“The leadership of this country has chosen to deal with the country’s brutal past,” said Kacou, adding that genocide memorials are part of this. “After you’ve been to one of them, I think you are basically done.”

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