

Moving up-market in tourism

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FATOU M.A.S. JOBE NJIE holds an MBA from the University of Wolverhampton and a Marketing Diploma from London Executive College. She began her career in marketing with the Gambia Telecommunications Company followed by a similar role at Standard Chartered, Gambia, where she rose to the position of head of marketing and corporate affairs. Subsequently she acted as managing director of The Gambia's premier resort and casino before being appointed to the tourism and culture portfolio in 2010. She served on a number of boards including the Gambia Red Cross Society.

The tourism sector is a very important economic activity to The Gambia and is identified in The Gambia's recently launched development blueprint, PAGE (Programme for Accelerated Growth and Employment), as one of the two main drivers of economic growth. It has huge potential to increase government revenue, reduce poverty and create employment opportunities.

Since its beginning in the 1960s, the sector has steadily provided jobs and decent living standards for citizens of The Gambia and income for the government. Currently the sector is ranked second to agriculture in terms of contribution to GDP and as such it is receiving deserved attention under the leadership of HE President Jammeh.

The Gambia is a destination of choice of tourists mainly from Western Europe but also with arrivals steadily growing from the USA, Eastern Europe and the West Africa sub-region. Our unique selling point and the jewel in our crown is the friendliness of The Gambian people and their readiness to share with visitors. This I believe makes us stand out as the smile on the face of Africa, hence the phrase "Smiling Coast of Africa". We are moving from being a winter destination with sun, sea and sand to an all year round tourist destination.

The Gambia has other selling points which give it an edge over competing destinations. These unique selling points are:

- Sun and agreeable temperatures all year round
- Gorgeous beaches
- A politically safe destination
- A variety of resorts and accommodation in all categories
- An authentic African Experience
- A unique nature with rich bird spotting opportunities
- Unique cultural attractions
- Easy access by air with limited distance and direct connections from key European destinations
- A very low crime rate.

The Ministry of Tourism and Culture's long-term goal is to make The Gambia "A World Class Tourist Destination and Business Centre."

We shall continue to diversify the scope of tourism to give our diverse mix of tourists a full range of options based on their taste. We will appeal to the top end of the market to attract more high spending tourists thereby maximising the benefits that could accrue to the average Gambian.

We emphasise ecotourism in our growth strategy given its potential to spread the benefits of tourism to the rural areas. In this regard, there are a plethora of opportunities to be discovered such as the River Gambia and its many islands and over 500 bird species. There is huge community based ecotourism potential throughout the country. There is also potential for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibition (MICE) tourism.

The hotel industry continues to play a major role in the development and consolidation of beach based products by developing high end products in the five and four star categories with state of the art facilities aimed at attracting high end tourists, while at the same time developing tourism facilities inland for ecotourism. This will be underpinned by high service standards to meet guest expectations.

Investment in the sector is facilitated by the Gambia Investment and Export Promotion Agency (GIEPA) and the Gambia Tourism Board. Investment laws and regulations are conducive to the development of the tourism sector. The following are some of the very attractive incentive packages for investment in the sector:

- Exemption from customs duties on capital equipment, spare parts, raw or semi-finished materials
- Exemption from withholding tax and tax on dividends for a period of five years
- Airport incentives on landing and handling fees
- Joint marketing activities with hotels, tour operators and airlines.

The way forward

In a bid to reposition 'destination Gambia' as a very interesting and exciting one, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture unveiled a new logo and slogan, which will serve as the new image of Gambian tourism. This positive development is happening and demonstrates the ardent need to increase the efforts in destination marketing and product reengineering. We will emphasize destination marketing by adopting an aggressive marketing strategy as outlined in the Ministry's business plan.

Given our unique qualities, we are proud of destination Gambia and we invite humanity to visit and experience the charming smiles of The Gambian people. F