



Global tourism firms discuss new deals to drive private sector profit to protect Uganda's wildernesses

Following a world-first conservation finance forum in the country, leading companies are working through the next steps towards new deals that will protect wild spaces

The unique approach of the Giants Club Conservation and Tourism Investment Forum, the first of its kind in Africa, was to link the Ugandan Government with some of the world's premier responsible tourism firms and conservation-compatible businesses.

“I’ve seen quite a lot of these sorts of things over the years, and I was hugely impressed,” said Patrick Fitzgibbon, senior vice-president for development for Europe and Africa for Hilton, the global hotel and hospitality group.

“What was probably most impressive was the top-level government sponsorship, which you really need, and the consistency of messaging that was really positive.”

How responsive key Ugandan government figures were in the coming weeks would “speak volumes” about the long-term success of the Forum, held on 6 October, Fitzgibbon said. “If you were thinking about investing in travel and tourism in Uganda today, after Friday you have to be more confident,” he added.

Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni, hosted the event, the first of its kind in Africa, and told close to 200 delegates that his country was 'open for business' for responsible tourism investment.

Central to new contracts will be rules ensuring businesses protect Uganda's environment and drive greater benefits from conservation to local people. These are key aspects of the work of the Giants Club, the initiative of the conservation organisation Space for Giants that organised the Forum with UNDP and the African Wildlife Foundation.

The managing director of Governors Camp Collection, Dominic Grammaticas, said that “as potential tourism partners we are very excited by the possibilities”. His collection of seven luxury safari camps and lodges are in Uganda's neighbours, Kenya and Rwanda.

“Uganda is clearly saying it's open for business as far as tourism investment is concerned,” he said. “It's difficult to see how the government could have done more to demonstrate political will at the highest levels.”

Karim Wissanji, CEO of Elewana, an exclusive collection of boutique safari camps and beach hotels in Tanzania and Kenya, signed a Letter of Intent as a result of the event that states his organisation “wishes actively to explore investment opportunities”.

"We recognise that the Ugandan Government has seen the increasing opportunity for responsible tourism to support the protection and management of its natural assets, to build elements of a 'nature-based economy,'" it said. "We're interested in exploring ways to undertake investment."

The Forum focused on opportunities for sustainable eco-tourism ventures, but also widened its net to include investors from different enterprises whose business models would include conservation dividends.

One was Solarcentury, which plans to develop large solar power plants feeding electricity into Uganda's national grid, creating stable conservation funding from selling solar power

Its East Africa director, Guy Lawrence, said the forum was “excellent for a number of reasons”, including the new special Delivery Unit at the Uganda Investment Authority. “I was impressed that the Uganda authorities have set up a one stop shop for external investors in the tourism conservation circuit,” Mr Lawrence said. “This is a major step towards securing investment from overseas and has been created due to the Giants Club's engagement with the Uganda Government.

”To have the President also not merely turning up to 'cut a ribbon' but to be actively engaged in the conservation discussion demonstrated his absolute support for promoting conservation tourism, and that gives investors confidence, too.“

While many of the sites available for fresh investment were 'tourism-ready', others would first require philanthropic attention and long-term funding to rehabilitate them, the Forum heard. That money was most likely to come from impact investors like Wild Philanthropy.

”I thought the Forum was extremely well timed in terms of a confluence of a growing impact investment model alongside more traditional philanthropy and travel arms,“ said Will Jones, Wild Philanthropy's founder and managing director of safari operator Journeys by Design.

”We have an impact travel model that fits very neatly with the Ugandan motivations of philanthropy, enterprise and travel. We are excited by the idea of working alongside the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the investment bureau to study further the opportunity. There is a neat overlap with our East Africa plans.“

George Osborne, Britain's former Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) and the editor of London's Evening Standard newspaper, attended the Forum and in his speech at its close he praised the “very specific investment propositions“ presented to delegates.

"I have been to a large number of conferences and heard a large number of investment pitches, and I have to say what I've seen here was pretty good," he said. "We have heard how the Ugandan Government will cut through a lot of red tape and bureaucracy for investors. What is so important now is implementation. This is a great initiative and deserves a great deal of support."