

AVIATION, TOURISM AND CONSERVATION NEWS from Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean islands.
A weekly roundup of breaking news, reports, travel stories and opinions by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang H. Thome



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BAHRAIN, ARABIA'S CULTURE CAPITAL 2012 – WHERE THE ANCIENT MEETS THE FUTURE



(Bahrain's capital city of Manama, where the ancient Fort Bahrain, one of the Kingdom's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, has been carefully excavated and lovingly restored, while *'today and tomorrow'* unfolds in the background, adding new chapters to the rich heritage and culture of the country)

When I travelled to Bahrain last month to attend the Bahrain International Air Show 2012, a bi-annual event which brings the world of aviation to the Kingdom, there was thankfully time to spare on the day prior to the official opening, and true to my nature not a minute was left to go to waste in exploring Bahrain's capital Manama and surrounding areas. A pamphlet I had picked at the airport – where incidentally the processing was swift, friendly and without the queues otherwise seen even in the premium class fast track channels elsewhere in the Gulf – told me that Bahrain had been named as Arabia's Culture Capital for 2012. That spurred my interest and I set out to learn more about the year's programme from added information available at The Gulf Hotel where I stayed. January was the 'kick off month' of the year long celebrations of Arabian and Bahraini culture and heritage, setting the stage with art exhibitions and a planned sculpture symposium. And art I found in plenty, showcasing scenes of Bahraini day to day life, something I later on witnessed to be still true and found in the streets in the centre of the old city.



Art galleries across Manama, in particular in the main Souk, had such pictures on display, bringing the Arabian urban life '*to life*', through the eyes of many artists and to be appreciated by aficionados of art, culture and heritage from all over the world, who are expected to come to Bahrain this year to see it close up and personal.

A range of events and activities are lined up for such visitors throughout the year, showcasing both modern and classic Arabian poetry, music, performing arts, establishing a regional cultural arts centre and a national theatre besides restoring yet more of the large number of traditional buildings, ancient mosques and forts. Nature and environmental conservation too feature in the calendar of events putting the spotlight on the Hawar islands, a biodiversity hotspot holding its own against many of the more fancied global sites.

The official opening ceremony took place in early February, conducted by H.R.H. Crown Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa in the presence of dignitaries from across the Arabian Peninsula, and included a special performance '*The Path of the Pearls*' for which Bahrain had become so famous already in ancient days and remains so well into the 21st century.

But back to my personal experience, which was greatly enhanced by having Ms. Azza Matar of Gulf Air's Corporate Communications Department, of course a Bahraini citizen and clearly very passionate about her country, as my personal guide. She took me around the 'modern' city by car, then on foot through the main souk, on to the ancient Fort Bahrain at the ocean front and then finally showed me parts of the old city '*regular*' visitors will otherwise rarely have the chance to come face to face with. As we walked the narrow streets, a few times in circles, as we stood in awe in front of buildings which must have been built a hundred and more years ago, with all the ornamental decorations, arcs, carved doors, intricate stone works, I began to understand what makes Bahrain different, what makes the people passionate about both their past and their future. I was clearly given a very personal tour, a tour back in time, reflecting my guide's own likes and preferences what to show and how to explain it and I was better off for being at the receiving end of this very charming gesture. Rooted in a proud heritage, treasuring the old without preventing the new from establishing itself '*next door*' the Bahraini people I met, first and foremost represented by Miss Azza, made an immediate impact on me. The proverbial hospitality was truly taken to another dimension, not only by my very special '*guide*', who in fact became a friend along the hours of walking the old town, but by every other Bahraini I had the opportunity to interact with over the coming days and who went out of their way to explain landmarks and their significance and meaning to the people of Bahrain.

None of them minded my questions about the events of a year ago, all of them sad and all united in believing that the troubles were externally sponsored and supported, but then again, every one of them happy to see a visitor interested in exploring the less trodden paths across the city, keen to see the true face of Bahrain and before long already scheming a return trip to see more, to the great delight of my hosts who were somewhat anxiously awaiting my '*judgment*'.



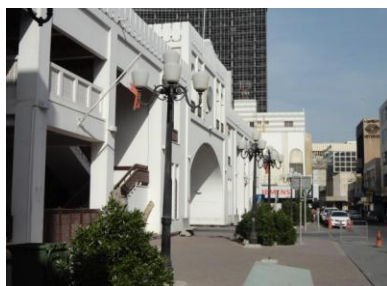
Little has changed in the way of life in Bahrain, where the men continue enjoy their tea, coffee and board games in one of the narrow alleys off the main bazaar area, read newspapers and magazines or simply chat with each other, without as much as a sign of the much heralded '*troubles*' doomsayers in the international media, pursuing their own agenda, had predicted, aimed to keep visitors away from the Kingdom. It did not deter me and in fact it only steeled my resolve to return to Bahrain at the next opportunity to explore more of the country and see more than this flying 4 day visit allowed me to see.



The old town convinced me by the presence of the people who actually live there and according to Ms. Azza in many cases already for generations upon generations, residences passed down from father to sons, or daughters in a spirit of what I would call '*Arabic Liberalism and Enlightenment*' otherwise hardly found in this part of the world. Rarely is there a gap between the houses although repair and maintenance work was seen underway on many buildings, restoring as if for an open air museum, and yet full of life and bustling with activity wherever we walked. Exquisite woodwork and distinct stone carvings were present everywhere while in other parts of the city ancient buildings, still being used, are now preserved as monuments of historical importance and kept in immaculate shape.



Shown below is the original gate to the city, now under national protection as a heritage monument, but side by side with the modern part of Manama, which has sprung up partly on land reclaimed from the sea to make space for expansion of the business district and to provide much needed space for housing developments too.



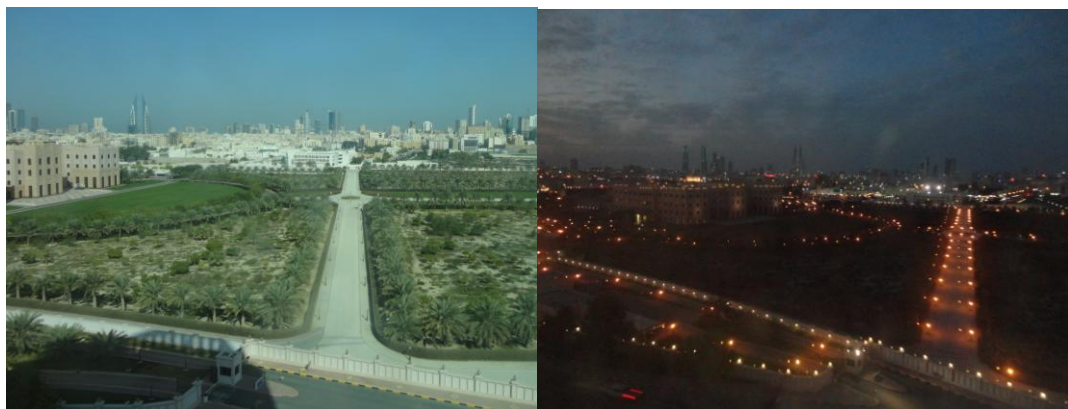
But most impressive proved the visit to the ancient Fort Bahrain, one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the Kingdom, where careful excavation of the old fort's structures has literally unearthed a historical treasure, now lovingly restored and open to the public, on the day of my visit with large numbers of visitors from a berthed cruiseliner being led across the sprawling site by their local guides.

It is here where the ancient Bahrain again meets with the modern Bahrain. Standing on the parapet of the walls the views expand right across the historic ruins to the 'new' Bahrain, which has grown in leaps and bounds and makes for a spectacular background.



What I liked about Bahrain is the balance, the mix between old and new, much of which has in other parts of the Gulf been sacrificed on the altar of so called '*progress and development*'. While the glitz and glamour of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, or the rapid catch up in Muscat, hold their own attraction for visitors, Bahrain clearly is undervalued and underrated and yet worth a visit or two, at least, if not more. The Kingdom may not be as vigorously promoted with shopping festivals, megalomaniac malls and buildings fitting the attributes like '*biggest, largest, tallest*' but has in its own right architectural marvels, both historical as well as of the 21st century. Bahrain has the traditional souks frequented by the locals as much as the tourists, where bargaining is a must – and not doing so almost an insult – and where one haggles over a freely offered glass of sweet tea. Bahrain has museums, art galleries, a horse racing course and of course a Formula 1 Circuit where this year in April the engines will be turned on again for a long weekend of testing, qualifying and racing for points after the event had to be first postponed and then cancelled last year. Marinas, golf courses and world class Spa's, including the brand new '*Thalassa Sea and Spa*', are needless to say open for visitors wishing to play their favourite sport or seeking rest and recreation. Restaurants are offering just about every ethnic choice and are ranging from the fanciest and most expensive to the affordable where one can smell the scent of spices and cooking from a distance away, letting one's nose lead the way to the location. In my hotel, The Gulf Hotel, I was overwhelmed by the choice of 16 restaurants, and as I could see, all of them busy as can be, with acclaimed chefs heading each and every one of them and presenting their works of art, a delight for the eyes as well as surely the palate too.

Bahrain in my opinion has still retained the somewhat laid back styles of yesteryear, where people on the streets are seen to stop, greet and talk to each other, unlike in the metropolitan areas of the UAE which appear intent to even outpace the likes of London and New York with their '*speed of life*'. And yet, Bahrain does not appear backwards or behind modern times but simply offers a well balanced mixture of the ancient and the modern, is unpretentious and in a sense '*more real*' than many of the other metropolises I have in the past visited across the Gulf.



Seen here is the view from one of Bahrain's many five star hotels, The Gulf Hotel, over one of the Royal Palaces and on to the central business and financial district of Manama. This particular palace was once upon a time temporary residence for the late Michael Jackson when he took '*refuge*' from the global media circus. The same view again at the onset of night with the lights on with the aviation hazard lights flashing from the tops of the distant high-rise buildings of the financial district, demonstrating how the scenery both changes and remains the same.

Travel to Bahrain from East Africa is possible nonstop with Gulf Air, operating daily from Nairobi to Bahrain and Visa applications for East Africans undergo the same process as do Visa applications for the UAE, while a number of other nationalities are Visa exempt and can obtain a visitor's pass on arrival at Bahrain's international airport. Visit www.gulfair.com for fares and direct bookings or else get a ticket or the entire package, hotel included from your favourite travel agent. Stopover '*deals*' are available from the airline for those passengers wishing to take a mini break either enroute to or from their final destination, and while it is NOT Dubai, some may in fact say thanks goodness for that.

Bahrain has a wide range of options in terms of hotel accommodation from 5 star luxury hotels to simple, clean and functional 1 star hotel establishments and all types of properties in between. The global hospitality giants are all present in Bahrain, ensuring that those with a tendency to 5 star travel and red carpet VIP treatment do indeed get what they are paying for, yet that those on a budget too have the option to experience the Kingdom on much less and still have as good a time as anywhere else.

'*Best time to visit*', at least weather wise, would be the European winter months between say mid October to late April, when temperatures are agreeably lower and humidity is kept in check, while during the European summer months temperatures tend to soar well into the 40's Celsius, as does humidity, making outdoor activities, like the long walks I so enjoyed across the old city, rather more of a test of will than should be necessary.

And in closing, would I go back to Bahrain, absolutely YES, and am I worried about the sporadic attempts to create a bit of havoc on the streets by foreign funded extremists? NO in capital letters, as after all, we went through the same a year ago in Kampala, when the foreign media vultures made the world believe that Kampala was on fire. I guess I trust my own instincts first and foremost and not allow myself to be misled by one-sided and opinionated pieces, written by people, as was the case in Kampala a year ago, who were tucked away in the safety of a Sheraton relying on the very people for '*reports and updates*' who were trying to fuel the trouble for the foreign paymasters. I guess it is not any different here than in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

East Africa News

AFRICAN AIRLINES HOPE CHINESE REFUSAL OF THE EU'S ETS WILL BRING CHANGES

The just reported directive of the Chinese government, prohibiting Chinese airlines from participating in any form or shape in the European Union's Emission Trading Scheme or ETC, has set not only China and Europe on a collision path but opened new hope for airlines from around the world presently blackmailed by the EU to participate in the scheme, like it or not.

While the EU threatens airlines not complying with severe sanctions and fines, to the point of denying landing rights, the Chinese government's directive is now binding on Chinese airlines, and no permission is expected to be granted to any of them to either join or raise fares or in any other way comply with the EU's demands.

This will probably bring matters to a head, as sources from the US are claiming the US government too is looking into ways and means to protect their own airlines in a similar way.

The EU would be faced with the stark option of either having to cave in and suspend the scheme for the time being, until a solution can be found, or else risk that – should they deny traffic rights to airlines unable to comply – their own European airlines be denied landing rights too in retaliation.

AFRAA, the association of African airlines based in Nairobi, had only recently denounced the EU's measures but so far found little backing from governments on the continent, all over cautious not to '*upset*' the Europeans for reasons of trade and aid. However, should China see their refusal to comply through, and America join that boycott, it would be easier for African governments too to jump on the band wagon and finally dare to speak up, not just in the corridors but the main arena.

Africa's main airlines, Ethiopian, Kenya Airways, South African Airways and Egypt Air, to name but the market leaders, have had no choice in the matter and complied with EU requirements, but at a substantial cost which found its way into the ticket prices, as they were literally abandoned by their own governments for political considerations. It is understood though that they all would be glad to see the back of the present scheme and see a fresh round of deliberations take place first before either retaining the ETS in a different format or else bin it altogether until a globally agreed version can be introduced.

For now, and for a change, the world's aviation hopes rest on the shoulders of the Chinese government and their ability to enforce their ban on their own airlines after throwing the gauntlet to the EU. Watch this space.

Uganda News

GULF AIR'S RESTRUCTURING AND COSTCUTTING SEES ENTEBBE AXED



When Gulf Air returned to Uganda on the 05th of December with 4 flights a week, much hope and expectation was raised in Ugandan aviation circles that new options had opened up, for visitors coming to Uganda from across the Gulf Air network and travelers from Uganda flying to Europe, the Gulf, to India and beyond via Bahrain. The current circumstances in Bahrain however seem to have taken their toll on forecasts and route projections and it was just learned that effective 21st of February the airline will have to halt their flights to Entebbe again, until economic circumstances once more allow the airline to return to the '*Pearl of Africa*' and better loads make the route financially more viable.

Having been on their flights recently, it is therefore with a sad note that I have to wish Gulf Air a very sad '*Kwaheri ya Kuonana*' from Entebbe. The airline's daily flights to and from Nairobi however continue and it is understood that options are being explored between Gulf Air and Air Uganda to enter into an interline agreement so that those travelers who were instant converts as a result of the superior inflight service on GF can continue to fly with them, albeit for the time being via Nairobi. Happy landings my friends, until your wings extends once more to Entebbe.

NATIONAL PARK FIRE DESTROYS SAFARI LODGE

A raging bush fire, allegedly set by staff of the Uganda Wildlife Authority, has devastated the Kyambura Game Lodge earlier in the week, according to reports from a source close to UWA. The fire was reportedly started by UWA staff to clear dry vegetation and allow for fresh green shoots to emerge with the onset of the rainy season, but got out of control and spread not only beyond the park but also to the nearby lodge.

According to the same source UWA is already trying to wriggle out of being the responsible party in order to avoid compensation claims, setting the course for a court battle over who is responsible for the damages and the cost of restoration and loss of revenue. While the lodge may have been insured against fire damage, the loss of available beds in Queen Elizabeth National Park is equally considered to be damaging tourism prospects as during the peak season the available lodges inside and outside the park are often fully booked.

The lodge owners also alleged in media interviews that UWA did not adequately respond when the advancing fire was reported to them, only being told to take care of firefighting directly, while the advancing fire however was too strong, driven by gusts of wind, to resist it or put it out. Set at the Kichwamba escarpments the lodge comprised of 7 twin cottages and a main building, valued at over a million US Dollars. No date for a possible re-opening has been set yet as the fire damage is still being assessed.

Uganda has been named by the Lonely Planet guide book company as '*The Destination for 2012*' while the country is also preparing to celebrate 50 years of independence from Britain, hoping to cash in on both events with increased tourist arrivals.

BRUSSELS AIRLINES DROPS FARES FROM ENTEBBE BY 25 PERCENT



Competition was cited by a source close to Brussels Airlines in Kampala for their move to drop outbound fares by 25 percent, which is a promotion valid until the 13th of March, effective immediately.

SN is a regular '*visitor*' to Entebbe since the days of the old SABENA and operates 3 times a week with an A330, always in conjunction with another East African destination like Kigali or Nairobi.

'The going is tough right now for many of the established airlines since Qatar Airways and Gulf Air have come to Entebbe late last year. And when Emirates ends their stopover in Addis in end March, that will add more competition because none of our clients ever liked that stop which only delayed everyone by an hour and a half from reaching either end. Luckily there is more traffic now to Uganda with the Lonely Planet campaign for Uganda and we hope the economy stabilizes enough for more Ugandans to travel again. Brussels Airlines is a good airline and we have the Belgian Embassy next door for Visa applications, so it is a good package' said a regular source from amongst the leading travel agents.

Other airlines are bound to counter the move but with Brussels being a favourite airport for onward connections, of short ways and relatively fast processing of passengers entering the EU, SN is bound to have the element of surprise on their side and sales, according to the same source, are looking bright already. Happy Landings!

PARLIAMENTARY GREED ADDS TO TOURISM FUNDING WOES

News emerged from sources in parliament that a controversial deal for new vehicles for members of parliament is apparently going ahead, worth over 100 million Uganda Shillings per MP, draining the available funds left in the emancipated purses of the Ministry of Finance even more. Only last week was it confirmed that nearly 200 million US Dollars were taken off budget allocations for most ministries to pay the independent electricity producers at least some of their long pending dues. This was leaving in particular the tourism ministry in dire straits, and will very likely compromise the preparations and marketing of the country abroad during Uganda's 50th year of independence and after being named *The Destination for 2012* by the Lonely Planet Guide.

This latest information has seemingly infuriated tourism stakeholders some more, denouncing the 'greed' of parliamentarians when the country is in economic difficulties and considering that the already overstrained budget can hardly afford such luxurious expenditure on a few when crucial activities of showcasing and marketing the country are being reduced for lack of funding. Said a regular contributor: *'in times like this it is not responsible to spend money we don't have or need for something else. Tourism would be so happy to receive just the equivalent of 25 of those car payments because that would give us a million US Dollars and we could promote Uganda like never before. But the truth is, the money is squandered on unproductive elements while productive economic activities are starved of funds and then not perform as well as they should. And there are few development partners willing to finance tourism activities now because it is not in the government's priority list it seems and they are reluctant anyway to give Uganda much money because their own economies are not doing well'*.

Parliament is reconvening today after having taken a long break since December, and sparks will undoubtedly fly over a range of issues and this one not the least of them. Watch this space.

Kenya News

DAVID STOGDALE APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF THE KENYA TOURIST BOARD

Effective January 19th did the Minister of Tourism Najib Balala appoint one of Kenya's hospitality grandmasters, David Stogdale, to the board of director of KTB it was learned over the weekend.

Looking back at a long and distinguished career in key positions of Kenya's hospitality industry for the past 35 years, his appointment is generally seen as a further injection of professionalism into the top policy level of the Kenya Tourist Board where he joins such cadres as John Cleave, CEO of Mombasa Air Safaris and Mahmud Janmohamed, CEO of Serena Hotels.

Kenya tourism had a record year in 2011 and the country will be celebrating its 50th anniversary of Independence in December 2013, allowing for detailed planning during 2012 to then deliver an extraordinary programme of promotions, marketing and PR. This poses both opportunities as well as challenges for KTB and Kenya's tourism sector, which has in recent years substantially diversified its range of products, introduced new upmarket safari and beach resorts properties and opened new circuits in hitherto less explored parts of the country with in particular Western Kenya now on the score sheet since the successful relocation of 21 rhinos to Ruma National Park, previously known as Lambwe Valley.

Congratulations to David on his appointment and the very best of luck to shaping the future of Kenya's tourism industry in coming years alongside his distinguished colleagues.

NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK – HOW LONG WILL THE DEFENCES HOLD

Sections of Kenya's conservation fraternity have described plans to carve out over 150 acres from the Nairobi National Park *'the beginning of the end'* fearing that once the precedent has been set, the flood gates will open even more in the future. *'The next thing will be that they propose a railway, or the expansion of Wilson Airport, or simply grabbing park land to make space for new housing estates, so where does it stop. If we cannot prevent this highway routing nothing will ever stop our notorious landgrabbers from eventually swallowing up the park bit by bit. And it is also a bigger issue as the same Highway Authority has already tried before to also do the same with Nakuru National Park to run a highway through it'* a regular source from Nairobi said on condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions from what was described as *'vindictive and potentially murderous individuals set to benefit enormously from carving up the park land for huge profits'*.

It became public knowledge last week that the Kenyan government was intent to have the new proposed *'Southern Bypass'* run through the park from near the location of the Ole Sereni Hotel on Mombasa Road, creating an admittedly much needed new traffic artery in particular for traffic destined beyond Nairobi but at the same time

breaking past promises and commitments to never touch the ‘*sacred land*’ set aside for the world’s only national park adjoining a capital city.

Only weeks ago had the same government’s Highway Authority made conciliatory noises towards conservationists, led by Friend of Nairobi National Park or in short FoNNaP, and had reportedly made verbal commitments to Dr. Paula Kahumbu when she raised the issue of the bypass routing and the anticipated negative fallout for game migration in and out of the park, with key staff of this government body. FoNNaP had at the time even produced a map to show exactly how problematic the anticipated routing would be, which is courtesy of FoNNaP again reproduced here for the information of readers: www.fonnap.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/nairobi-map-2.jpg

Regular sources from Nairobi have also suggested that Kenya Wildlife Service has been ‘*offered*’ 1.8 billion Kenya Shillings in ‘*compensation*’ should they consent to let go of the targeted land. This land however falls into a tree belt planted over the past two years with the support of the top 50 names in Kenya’s corporate world, who may equally feel that they have been duped by a government known to work using U-turns and somersaults to confuse its real intent and hide it from the public. It is understood that some 50,000 trees may have to be cut should the routing follow the present proposed route.

Sources close to KWS have in turn already demanded substantially more in terms of financial compensation PLUS the allocation of at least a further 1,000 acres of land adjoining the park in other locations, to make up for the loss, should government – as is generally expected – try to use compulsory methods of acquiring the land they want for the construction of the Southern Bypass. That ‘*exchange*’ land however too is reportedly owned by individuals who may seek full compensation at market values, making the proposed swap transaction one of the most expensive ever for the Kenyan government. Said one source in regular contact with this correspondent: ‘*Mind you, this is the prerogative of parliament to decide to alter boundaries of protected areas like national parks, and the way things are between government and parliament, and with elections coming up later this year, and a long legislative agenda to be tackled before the current house is dissolved, this may not happen anytime soon. But believe me, the pressure is on KWS now and there is a lot of horsetrading going on behind the scenes as well as promises of big jobs in the future for those who come around and for those opposing that their careers will for all purposes be over for good*’.

The nearly 29 KM long dual carriage highway, aka *Southern Bypass*, is to connect the highway from Mombasa and the main traffic artery from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport to the inland highway to Naivasha and Nakuru and beyond, allowing transit traffic, mostly heavy trucks, to avoid Nairobi’s ever congested Uhuru Highway and Waiyaki Way, which runs directly along the Central Business District and is a main route for commuters into the city centre. Time will tell how this saga is playing out, but the stage is now set for an epic battle between the conservation fraternity and the Kenya government similar to the fight across the border against the Serengeti Highway. There all eyes are glued to the 15th March calendar date when the East African Court of Justice is going to decide on whether to grant a permanent injunction to the plaintiffs, restricting the Tanzanian government to start any building activity, and Kenyan conservation sources have already vowed to sue also in the EACJ in Arusha, should the routing of the *Southern Bypass* not be substantially revised and revisited. Watch this space, but in the meantime see some of the previous articles filed here as additional reference to the topic at hand.

Below are the links of some of the previously filed articles also referring to the threats now unfolding against Nairobi National Park, for ease of access:

www.wolfgangthome.wordpress.com/2011/10/20/quo-vadis-wilderness-as-the-world-population-hits-7-billion/
www.wolfgangthome.wordpress.com/2011/08/27/kenya-conservation-news-update-reprieve-for-nairobi-national-park/
www.wolfgangthome.wordpress.com/2011/06/09/kenya-conservation-breaking-news-highway-authority-targets-nairobi-national-park/

KENYA AIRPORT AUTHORITY REACTS TO STINGING CRITICISM

Clearly stung by criticism over complaints about the visible delay on construction of the new terminal and other facilities, much needed to de-congest East Africa’s busiest hub – Jomo Kenyatta International Airport – has the authority’s CEO reacted earlier in the week. ‘*We have set aside some 10 percent of the project cost in our budget, enough to get us started*’ he was quoted to have said in KAA’s defence when earlier on allegations were made that the financing of the project had still not been finally secured and that construction was behind schedule.

A regular aviation source from Nairobi added: *‘KAA is misleading the public and such statements only highlight the fact that they are hiding crucial information from us. The financing was due to have been signed and sealed by Q3 of 2011 and is still pending. It shows that KAA is run by political puppets and it is time to retire them and inject new young professional blood into KAA. Our government is big in making announcements but when it comes to the facts on the ground, JKIA remains a mess, is overcrowded and underfacilitated. We all know what happened last year, power outages, construction problems, accidents like the boiler explosion and so forth. They have for too long underestimated traffic growth, neglected the needs of the airlines operating from JKIA and slept while Kenya Airways was expanding. KQ wants to double their fleet in a few years and triple it in the next 10 years. KAA has failed the national airline and has failed all airlines at JKIA. We have for years said we need a second runway but again KAA has slept on their desks. Let us not talk of plans and intentions, we need reality now, we need concrete time frames and we need assurance that the money has been secured. Ask any passengers during peak hours in the terminal and their comments are bad about their first or last experience when coming to Kenya’*. More than enough reason to continue monitoring this saga and see what variances emerge between reality and pink colour coded PR.

KENYA AIRWAYS RETAINS IOSA AND ISAGO CERTIFICATION



Following an extensive safety and ground operations audit has IATA earlier in the week once again officially re-certified Kenya Airways and issued another IOSA and ISAGO certificate to *‘The Pride of Africa’*.

IATA’s regional director for Africa Gaoussou Konate was in Nairobi to personally hand over the certificates to Kenya Airways’ CEO and Group Managing Director Dr. Titus Naikuni, who expressed his delight and satisfaction with the results, now that the audits are concluded. *‘As an airline that is seeking to strengthen its global presence, we have to ensure we adhere to the highest safety standards. This will also help strengthen and sustain the confidence of our passengers as we seek to grow and open new markets. Safe ground operations mean less accidents, less damage and therefore fewer audits’* said Dr. Naikuni during the brief ceremony at the airline’s Embakasi head quarters with Mr. Konate responding: *‘We note that the airline has strived to enhance its safety performance. These certificates are issued after a rigorous audit under IATA standards’*. Kenya Airways is East Africa’s largest airline, covering the continent of Africa and key destinations in Europe, the Middle East and Asia and has given notice of their intent to literally triple their fleet from presently 34 aircraft to 107 aircraft over the next decade, as the carrier is striving to remain the leading airline not just in East Africa but on the continent at large. Watch this space for regular and breaking news stories from the aviation sector in Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean islands.

KENYA WILDLIFE SERVICE TRANSLOCATES 20 RHINOS TO RUMA NATIONAL PARK



(Picture courtesy of Kenya Wildlife Service)

Good news emerged from Kenya that KWS has last week successfully completed the relocation of 21 Eastern Black Rhinos to the Ruma National Park, formerly known as Lambwe Valley National Park when this correspondent still lived in Kenya and visited the area a few times.

Supported by the Worldwide Fund for Nature, or WWF, KWS brought the animals from two of Kenya’s rhino sanctuaries, amongst them Solio, where incidentally the Rhino Fund Uganda got 6 of the Southern White Rhinos from we brought into the country during my chairmanship, 2 for UWEC in Entebbe and 4 for the Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary.

Ruma National Park was only last year designated and equipped to become a dedicated rhino sanctuary and the arrival of 21 rhinos is seen as the biggest bonus to finally bring tourists to Western Kenya's many unexplored tourism attractions, both islands in Lake Victoria but also on land, where the rich cultural heritage of the Luo tribe has visitors much to offer and to show.

After acclimatizing to their new habitat and home it is hoped that the rhinos will soon start to mate and reproduce, now that a core breeding stock has been introduced to the park. Monitoring and security, at the perimeter but also around the animals, has been stepped up considerably since the arrival of the 21 to ensure that poaching is literally ruled out.

Visitors to the park can stay at one of the campsites or else use the KWS owned nearby Oribi Guest House, where a fully equipped kitchen supports self catering guests, though catering arrangements can be made if done so well in advance. The park is home to over 400 species of birds, resident and migratory, which makes it a preferred area for birdwatchers and the large number of other mammals, including the rare roan antelopes, oribis, hartebeest, impalas, reedbucks, buffalos, hyenas and leopard to name but a few, offer sightings to tourists without swarms of other vehicles around them, guaranteeing a superior safari experience.

Other options for visitors are to stay in the town of Homa Bay on Lake Victoria or further away in Kisumu. Notably, the park presently does not use the common '*Safaricard*' payment system so cash is required to enter Ruma.

Well done to KWS and all missing now are more visitors to see the new arrivals.

GULF CARRIERS 'BIGGEST THREAT TO AFRICAN AVIATION'

Two aviation sources have of late once again expressed their concern, that the onslaught of Gulf based airlines will eat into their traffic shares and reduce and dampen growth prospects for the future.

Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines, the latter the erstwhile Pan African airline copied successfully by rival KQ, are rapidly expanding their network across the African continent, intent to connect every commercial and political capital with their hubs in Nairobi and Addis Ababa respectively. Going by figures available from Kenya Airways, Ethiopian in this regard is rather too stumm in getting corporate information into the public domain, about 50 percent of all revenue is coming from African traffic, and expanding the network by the end of 2013 to all capitals, will only strengthen this trend.

Yet, Gulf giant Emirates is already flying to 22 destinations in Africa, the largest African network of any of the Gulf airlines, Qatar Airways is playing catch up and so is Bahrain based Gulf Air which will be the first to announce flights to Juba / Southern Sudan. Etihad will be the latest to join the throng when it arrives in Nairobi in April for their inaugural flight, and then there are the Gulf's LCC's. Air Arabia is already flying daily to Nairobi from Sharjah and Fly Dubai is reportedly eyeing a further expansion into Eastern Africa beyond their present destination Addis Ababa, as they get more of their ordered B737- 800 delivered.

'We need to change the thinking of our governments if we are to survive on our own long term' said a Nairobi based aviation source before continuing *'AFRAA has often made it plain that government support is crucial in promoting African aviation. But we also have to change perception. The continent's leading airlines are as good and at times better than US airlines where service has been cut back to the bare bone. We in Africa, be it Kenya Airways or South African or Ethiopian, are full service airlines and none of them have resorted to the last resort and last ditch attempts to rob passengers via check in fees, baggage fees, fees for seats or talking of charging for the use of on board toilets. The African airline leaders have new fleets, have ground handling and lounge services which can hold their own and punctuality is good. Safety is good too with especially the Europeans eyeing them closely ready to pounce but they cannot find faults with them. But really our biggest issue are our own governments. They are happily granting traffic rights to the giants, and at the same time not giving us the tax breaks to level our cost structures compared to them. Our aviation ground facilities need to be boosted to cater for growing home airline fleets, maintenance facilities and all'*, sentiments heard often before and echoed here regularly.

With Qatar Airways planning to add Mombasa and Zanzibar to their growing list of destinations, they will pose an added challenge to retain and grow connecting traffic from those two airport via Nairobi and Addis – Ethiopian flies scheduled services into Mombasa as presently the only foreign airline to do so – for African carriers. Etihad only recently acquired a 40 percent stake in Air Seychelles and is rumoured to be seeking expansion through buying into more airlines, making some of the better African airlines targets for quasi takeovers, if not by them but surely by others. Will African government listen to the experts or in the hitherto practiced policy of laissez faire things happen and only then take notice how their own strategic assets have been hollowed out? Is the rush for oil, gas and minerals not a lesson already of how Africa is being exploited and will aviation soon be added to this list? Watch this space for future news.

ROYAL AIR MAROC SET FOR NAIROBI



Kenya's Minister for Tourism, Najib Balala, is in Morocco at present on a mission to promote travel between the two countries, and while there reportedly asked Royal Air Maroc to commence flights between Nairobi and Casablanca. Nonstop flights are thought to encourage both tourism and trade between the two countries, and Royal Air Maroc's extensive European and North / West African network is also expected to attract additional traffic.

Balala is on Morocco on a fact finding mission, heading a delegation from Kenya's tourism private sector with a number of high ranking officials from the leading tourism trade associations like the Kenya Tourism Federation, KATO, KATA, MCTA, EcoTourism Kenya and the Kenya Association of Hotel Keepers.

While Kenya Airways is not yet flying to Casablanca it is the declared intent of *'The Pride of Africa'* to fly to all political and commercial capitals across Africa by the end of 2013, giving Royal Air Maroc the initial market advantage. A delegation from Casablanca is expected in Nairobi next month to finalise the arrangements of flights between the two countries. Watch this space.

TREETOPS, WHERE THE PRINCESS TURNED QUEEN

On February 06th in 1952, outside Nyeri in the forest of the Aberdare Mountains, did a youthful Princess Elizabeth and her husband Prince Philipp climb up the ladders into a treetop hideaway, to spend the night watching the game parade by the waterhole below. Little did she know, and not learn of it until the next afternoon, that during that night her father had passed away and the crown had passed to her, turning her from Princess to Queen.

First *'built'* in 1932, Treetops was always a special place, inside the forest and above a waterhole, allowing visitors to stay in one place and let the game parade by. It is understood from historical records, that when the Princess turned Queen stayed at Treetops, it was no longer the original version of it, and within two years of her visit was the tree house burnt down by the Mau Mau, before yet another *'version'* was re-built in 1956.

Relocated, refurbished and expanded several times, Treetops eventually had 50 rooms but is presently closed to allow a major modernization, while also reducing the number of rooms to 36 again.

The closure thwarted the *'Royal Watchers'* from celebrating this night at location, as inspite of through the roof demand the lodge remained closed, leaving dozens of wannabe visitors, hoping to *'catch'* a night at Treetops on the very anniversary, stranded and settling for either the base hotel Outspan or neighbouring treelodges.

Treetops, and Kenya however rose to fame and after the 1963 independence from Britain ties remained close and hundreds of thousands of Brits have since come to visit Kenya. Treetops, where the Princess went up and the Queen came down, but also the Outspan, where Lord Baden Powell, founder of the boy scouts, spent years, became a *'must visit'* place each in their own right, and when the *'new'* Treetops opens in April this year, one suite will proudly bear the name *'Queen Elizabeth Suite'*.

The Royal family of course has since then set new *'markers'* for the next generation of Royal Watchers, after Prince William proposed to his now wife in another lodge on the slopes of Mt. Kenya during a holiday they had in 2010 and though the couple then honeymooned in the Seychelles, Kenya will keep a share of the fame and use the good fortune of promoting the country's safari treasures. Magical Kenya, where else does one constantly bump into Royal history and see and experience close up the hunting grounds of the *'Happy Valley crowd'* or reminisce over *'Out of Africa'*, follow the tracks of the *'Lunatic Express'* or walk in the footsteps of the great explorers or those of Hemingway, who was a regular visitor to Kenya in his days.

Rwanda News

JACK HANNA COTTAGE GETS 5 STAR MAKEOVER



The Gorilla Nest Lodge outside Musanze / Ruhengeri, which sustained fire damage sometime last year as reported here, has finalized the *'makeover'* of the famous Jack Hanna Cottage, where guests are now accommodated alongside the neighbouring *'Ranch Rooms'*, allowing as many as 8 guests to enjoy the unique ambience and vistas from the lodge as shown in the picture below.

The cottage is named after John Bushnell Hanna or *'Jungle Jack'* as he is also known, one of America's foremost wildlife experts, television wildlife programme presenter and former director of the Columbus / Ohio zoo. His link

with Rwanda and the mountain gorillas comes through the Diane Fossey Gorilla Fund where he serves as a member of the Board.

The 5 star Jack Hanna Cottage is part of the Dubai World owned and managed Gorilla Nest Lodge, although this exceptionally fine and very private safari lodge is also co-marketed by the Shamwari Group. All meals for pre-booked guests are served in the cottage's dining room and prepared by the chef assigned to the cottage to ensure the highest standards of cuisine.

Rebuilding and upgrading of the burned down part of the lodge is ongoing although no dates have been set as yet for full reopening. Bookings can be made via the Dubai World Africa Kigali office.



L' ESPERANCE'S BIRAMBYE LODGE PROJECT TAKES SHAPE



(Victor Monroy surrounded by 'his' children at L' Esperance)

One of the most remarkable orphanages I have ever seen, L' Esperance at Kigarama in the highlands of South Eastern Rwanda along the Congo Nile Trail, is now set to embark on one of their income generating projects, the Birambye Eco Lodge, to be set up on a 3 hectares piece of land right on the shores of Lake Kivu.

Assisted by ICATIS, the International Centre for Appropriate Technology and Sustainability, sufficient funds have been raised to purchase the land needed to start the lodge and get all the titles and deeds unified. Once that has been accomplished the planning and licensing phase will go underway, with approvals sought from the relevant authorities including getting green light from the environmental watchdogs to begin construction.

Besides the staff at the orphanage, led by Victor Monroy, some 18 other individuals in their various capacities have been named as a support team, looking after certain aspects of the lodge project development and being already put in charge of various crucial components like windsurfing, boating, biking, hiking, environmentally friendly building and operating practices, but also to create links with the media, local regional and international. Close ties are also being sought with the Institute of National Museums and local universities to create win win situations between the lodge, existing institutions aimed at promoting culture and heritage tourism and the academia teaching relevant courses in tourism, hospitality and environmental protection.

The new lodge, when completed, will become a key link in the series of overnight stops along the Congo Nile Trail, much about which has been written here already and much more will come in the future as I intend to return to the trail later in the year for some hiking through Nyungwe Forest, across rural Rwanda and a return visit to my friends at L' Esperance and the Bumba Base Camp of Father Patrick.

Visit www.lesperancerwanda.org or see more on Victor's incredible vision for his orphaned children at www.victormonroytrust.org and of course about the lodge project at www.icatis.org/birambye

Contacts for all the 18 individuals are available on request and funding proposals and fund raising initiatives can be coordinated with Victor Monroy via lesperancerwanda@aol.com

Tourism as a tool to reduce poverty and sustain a community – close up and hands on. Visitors are always welcome to L' Esperance and to the Birambye Lodge site on Lake Kivu not too far from Kibuye, and this, according to Victor, is a standing invitation to everyone coming to '*The Land of a Thousand Hills*' for a visit. Watch this space.

South Sudan News

GULF AIR DELAYS START OF JUBA FLIGHTS



Following the shock announcement, that the recently inaugurated route to Entebbe will be suspended on 21st February, came further information to light from Juba, when it was confirmed that Gulf Air will delay the commencement of flights between Bahrain and the Southern Sudanese capital city until further notice.

The airline is presently evaluating a number of marginal destinations with the aim to cut cost and shift resources to core markets and markets with a promising forecast and outlook, opting to consolidate first and then expand again when the global economic situation has sufficiently stabilized and improved. *'We are a lot disappointed about Gulf Air not coming anytime soon to Juba'* said a regular source with close links to aviation in Southern Sudan before adding *'this airline would have given us here more opportunities to fly and not needing to go via Nairobi or Entebbe. Right now it is Ethiopian as the only other big airline company to come here other than Kenya Airways. But we really hoped that Gulf would come and connect us to the world. Egypt Air tried but failed us by first coming through Khartoum which has been treating our people very badly when there were delays and then Egypt Air pulled out also. We really hope that some other big airlines will consider coming to Juba direct so that we can finally fly from here to many places without connecting somewhere else first.'*

This sentiment was echoed by several regular readers of this correspondent's articles in eTurboNews and on his blog, after it was reported late last year that Juba would have 3 weekly frequencies by Gulf Air due to commence in the first quarter of 2012. Gulf Air however has reiterated that their daily flights to and from Nairobi will be maintained, offering the choices of connection to travelers from the East African region. Watch this space.

Congo News

REPORT ON ELEPHANT POACHING PAINTS GRIM PICTURE FOR CONGO CONSERVATION

Information came to light this week that over 500 elephant had been killed for ivory in the Virunga National Park in Eastern Congo over the past two years alone. The park is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Officials of the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, in short ICCN, lamented the fact of the increased poaching during a conference in Kinshasa and appealed for government support through greater funding and more resources to fight the menace, or else risk to have the elephant population decimated and wiped out completely.

The largely lawless East of the Congo, for long engulfed in civil strife with a number of militias fighting for economic domination of the mineral rich part of the Congo DR, has seen the largest deployment of UN *'peace keeping'* forces ever yet to little visible effect, as the national army continues its on again off again approach of selective and often half hearted intervention. This has led to suggestions of covertly being in league with some of the militias against *'sharing the spoils'* i.e. splitting the proceeds of gold and coltan mining, often gained by using forced labour abducted from villages away from the spotlight of the international media.

Poaching has also been reported for other endangered species and game and the local meat trade in the provinces of North and South Kivu is said to be dominated by *'bush meat'* with little visible efforts by the local administration to put an end to it, equally suggesting that corruption is at the heart of the Congo's ongoing woes. Watch this space.

Mauritius News

NEW BUSINESS HOTEL SET TO OPEN ON MARCH 12TH

No room service, no pool, no in-house restaurant and NO SURPRISES AT CHECK OUT was the description given by a source in Port Louis when describing a new, mall based *'business'* hotel, the Voila Bagatelle which is set to open in a month's time. While following up on the information it emerged, that the hotel is going to charge Mauritian Rupees 2,599 per night for the room, a pre-booked Mauritian Rupees 250 (otherwise 285) breakfast and free high speed internet access while offering its guests access to 12 restaurants, 18 food court outlets and 3 supermarkets readily available within the Bagatelle Mall of Mauritius, run independently and therefore reducing the cost structure of the hotel itself. Guests are welcome it is understood to take their food with them into the hotel's lounge where they can enjoy their meal in greater privacy. A meeting room seating up to 12 people is also available at the hotel, subject to availability and at a nominal cost. Bookings will be accepted via www.voilahotel.mu where additional information about the hotel's facilities are also found.

Seychelles News

CARNIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE VICTORIA ATTRACTS AT LEAST 26 FOREIGN GROUPS



Information available from Victoria now indicates that at least 26 foreign carnival groups have confirmed their participation in the ‘*Carnaval de Carnivals*’ in the Seychelles capital Victoria, with key carnival nations like Brazil and Germany represented with floats and troupes, besides the famous Notting Hill from the UK and the Trinidad and Tobago carnival organization, amongst many others.

Emirates has now launched a comprehensive range of packages available across their global network, to bring visitors to the Seychelles and witness the Creole Carnival Festival ‘live’ and close up. The airline offers these ‘deals’ through their website, their respective country sales offices and through travel agents linked with Emirates, which now fly 12 times a week between Dubai and Mahe, making a journey to the Seychelles a one stop trip.

Said a corporate communication message from Emirates: *‘In line with our continuous effort to promote Seychelles, special packages have been launched for the upcoming carnival event in Seychelles called Carnaval International de Victoria from March 2-4, 2012. The event will showcase a parade of colourful floats representing the various participants’ national carnivals and will also include other exciting activities all of which fall under the carnival’s theme. We have selected five-star properties with attractive bonus offers for our clients, valid from now until March 2012’.*

Also adding to the Carnival Festival spectacle will the presence of several international navy units, amongst them and Indian and a Russian warship normally on anti ocean terrorism patrol in the extensive waters of the Seychelles’ economic exclusion zone around the islands, which will be in Victoria harbour and reportedly available for visits by local Seychellois as well as for tourist visitors. See you in Seychelles, or miss it to your own lasting regret! Seychelles, truly ‘*Another World*’.

SEYCHELLES NATIONAL ECONOMICS COUNCIL APPROVES GREATER TOURISM FUNDING



It was learned overnight that the presentations made by the Seychelles Hospitality and Tourism Association SHTA to the government of Seychelles, on a range of issues from concerns over recent developments at Air Seychelles and over funding of tourism marketing, were part of the discussions of the NEC in Victoria this week. The body, chaired by President James Michel, on February 08th debated on the points raised and consented that the Seychelles Tourism Board should get a funding increase to allow yet greater marketing of the archipelago’s tourism attractions. While announcing the increase in funding the NEC also urged the tourism sector to speak with one voice and stand together as one when promoting the islands abroad.

The upcoming Carnival Festival has brought the global spotlight back to the Seychelles in full force and the present turmoil in the Maldives too has opened additional opportunities to showcase the Creole Island Paradise as a haven of peace and tranquility, setting it apart from other trouble spots elsewhere and ready and able to absorb additional tourist arrivals with little if any notice.

A source at the heart of the tourism industry in the Seychelles contacted this correspondent overnight and stated: *‘We are but one stop from anywhere in the world and air access today provides the best connectivity for our islands with any city in the world. We have 12 Emirates flights per week through Dubai, 7 Qatar Airways flights through Doha and Etihad and Air Seychelles jointly are now offering six flights a week through Abu Dhabi. We also have a weekly Condor nonstop flight from Frankfurt and the Italian airline Blue Panorama is starting a weekly nonstop service from Rome and Milan to Seychelles. Ethiopian Airlines is also starting a service from April with four flights per week from Addis Ababa and Kenya Airways operates to Seychelles from Nairobi in Kenya for those who combine an African Safari with a beach holiday. Air Austral maintains the liaison between Seychelles and La Reunion Island for those wanting to enjoy the spectacular mountains and the volcano crater of that French Island in the Indian Ocean’.*

SHTA has in an official statement hailed the decision by the National Economic Council as ‘*the right decision at the right time*’ and pledged to continue working hand in hand with government and STB to achieve the goals set for 2012, which anticipated a growth of tourism arrivals to over 200,000 in 2012. Seychelles, truly ‘*Another World*’.

MALDIVES POLITICAL MESS TO BENEFIT VANILLA ISLANDS

Recent events on the Maldives have triggered a trend by key global tour operating companies to seek alternatives, should the islands descend into full scale political unrest. First in the bad news came the Maldives opposition demands to shut down with immediate effect all Spa's in each and every resort across the islands, alleging that they were a front for prostitution and brothels. Initially implemented the government then made a swift U-turn when it became evident that tourism would suffer huge setbacks, should the decision be allowed to stand, but not long afterwards more bad news emerged. When the airport handling charges were unilaterally raised by 50 percent, airlines started to protest and threaten reduction of air services to the island's sole international airport, raising the spectrum of less seats and less tourists coming for holidays. Qatar Airways outspoken CEO Al Baker in fact was widely quoted in aviation news that should the outrageous increases not be reviewed and revised, the airline could contemplate reducing flights and shifting that capacity elsewhere.

The latest and worst news though is the mutiny by sections of the country's police earlier in the week, which effectively forced the elected president from office, throwing yet more clouds over the future of the Maldives. A radical opposition, ready to restore the ban on Spa's at the expense of losing out big time in tourist arrivals and foreign exchange earnings, is now scratching to get into power, setting international tour operators and airlines on a collision course with politics and having their crisis management teams already looking into their options.

Other Indian Ocean islands, like Mauritius and the Seychelles, are ready to accommodate tourists initially booked for the Maldives or intent to book their holiday there, should the political situation worsen and compel tour operators to seek safe alternatives, as foreign ministries are preparing anti travel advisories warning potential visitors of the potential for political unrest, affecting the smooth operation of the airport and of holiday resorts.

Understandably are 'official' tourism sources from both Seychelles and Mauritius cautious to comment but private operators of resorts have made it quite plain that they are ready to absorb any additional traffic from Maldives, should the situation there become untenable for tourism. Watch this space.

WORK BEGINS IN EARNEST AT THE NEW STA CAMPUS

Information from Mahe indicates that work has now began at the new campus of the Seychelles Tourism Academy, where when complete some 500 students will be able to undertake certificate, diploma and degree courses in hospitality and tourism studies.

Demolition of some of the existing buildings has been going on for a month now and construction is now commencing on the first tuition block with as many as 30 class rooms, which is phase one of the project to turn STA into a state of the art training facility. While construction is ongoing, and due to the demolishing of existing buildings, students are now having their classes in temporary wooden structures until the new building is ready.

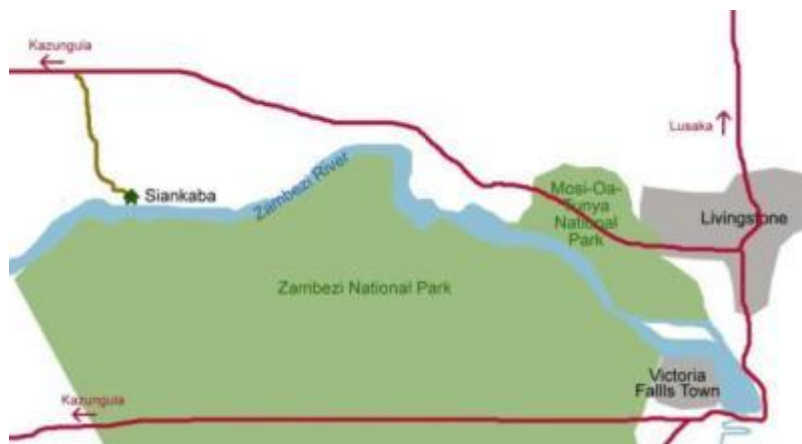
Among the next phases it was learned will be an administration building, hostels to accommodate students from across Africa, a conference centre, a demonstration kitchen, a fully fledge Spa to train personnel intending to work there but also a 60 room application hotel, to be named '*Oceanic View*'.

The site, with a commanding view over Mahe island and the Indian Ocean, was originally occupied by a US military '*listening post*' and handed to STA when the Americans left the facilities to the Seychelles government and being a little remote at La Misere is today actually seen as an advantage, allowing students to concentrate on studies and not being distracted by a city location. Like in everything else, Seychelles, truly '*Another World*'.

And in closing as every week, though not last week when I messed up my weekly summary followed by a long litany of unprintable utterances – once more some collection from Gill's 'The Livingstone Weekly'

A Visit to Islands of Siankaba

The Islands of Siankaba is a lodge on two islands in the Zambezi River, about 40 km from Livingstone. It is a luxury lodge with seven chalets ranged along the riverbank, all reached via a raised walkway though the trees.



My daughter, Bernie, was visiting from Australia and wanted a special evening out, so the Islands of Siankaba seemed a perfect choice. My son, Muftau, and his girlfriend, Lois, joined us. We left Livingstone at about 2.30pm arriving at Siankaba just after 3. We boarded a boat which took us round to the front of the islands and the main buildings where we were given a bit of a talk by Brett, the manager.

Having dumped our bags in the rooms we headed for the boat and a river cruise. Victor, our guide, had taken our orders for drinks, loaded a cool box and we headed off ... and then there was a shout from the bank ... Victor had forgotten the gin ... With much laughter we turned the boat around to collect the gin ... Bernie promptly opened the bottle and helped herself and everyone else to a drink.



I have to say now that the weather was cloudy; it had rained on the drive to Siankaba and it looked like rain again. Luckily it didn't, but the greyness did not make for good photos. It didn't dampen our spirits ... or the beer and gin, though.

Having trundled along the river for a while we parked on a sandbank of one of the islands to relax and enjoy the ambience of the river. It was time to ply Victor with questions.

Where does the name Siankaba come from?

Victor: Siankaba is the name of the chief of the area and it means Witch-finder. We have always had good witch-finders in our village.

Are you from the village of Siankaba?

Victor: Yes. Most of the staff are from the village. We helped in the construction and then we were trained to become waiters, guides and cleaners.

When did the lodge open?

Victor: In 2002, and I have been working here since then.



All the while we were relaxing on the boat a pod of hippos was watching us warily from their spot in the middle of the river. Opposite the lodge is the Zambezi National Park in Zimbabwe and there we noticed some kudu along the river's edge.



Bernie works for a company in Australia called Toxfree. Toxfree is running a competition among its staff for the most exotic photograph of their flag. Everywhere we went and at every opportunity Bernie got out her flag for a photo ... determined to win the competition.

And then there was a flurry of photo-taking. Bernie wanted heaps to take back to Australia to show her friends ...

After a while we trundled back to the lodge to get ready for dinner.

We were joined at dinner by our hosts, Claire and Brett, and two other guests from France. We all sat down to eat a delicious meal together.



The dining/bar area seems very cosy in the evenings even though it is open to the elements. The walls are covered in photographs by Stephen Robinson and the lights give a warm glow. The rain dripped outside ...



In the morning I was woken by the morning chorus. The bird songs were loud as they flitted through the trees around the chalet. I got up and made tea. The giant kingfishers were the main culprits for the noise but the trumpeter hornbills soon started to give them some competition. I also saw plenty of bee-eaters, boubou shrikes and an African finfoot. Bernie and I soon finished our teabag allocation so Bernie went next door to Muftau to steal some of theirs. Having relaxed in our rooms, had a shower and got dressed we headed for the main area for breakfast.



The chalets and the main area are on two separate islands which are linked by a bridge.

The bridge had just been completely redesigned during the past year because of the water levels in the river – parts of the bridge had been under water ...

Muftau and Lois joined us not long afterwards, Muftau telling us that he had just seen some otters in the river. They must have been (according to me) cape clawless otters which are reasonably common in the Zambezi.

I went for a short walk along the nature trail but didn't get far as the rain started again ... it had rained most of the night ... The nature trail is particularly good at this time of year as all the plants are in flower and there are some really interesting specimens. In fact, I found one which I wanted and the gardeners set to work digging up a few for me to take home.



After breakfast and a chat we decided that we had to get back to Livingstone so took the boat back to the mainland. There I found the Zambikes and decided to have a go. The car park

was very wet, the seat of the bike too high for me to get my bottom on ... I did try but only managed a few yards ...

Thanks, Simon and Bonnie, for a great evening.

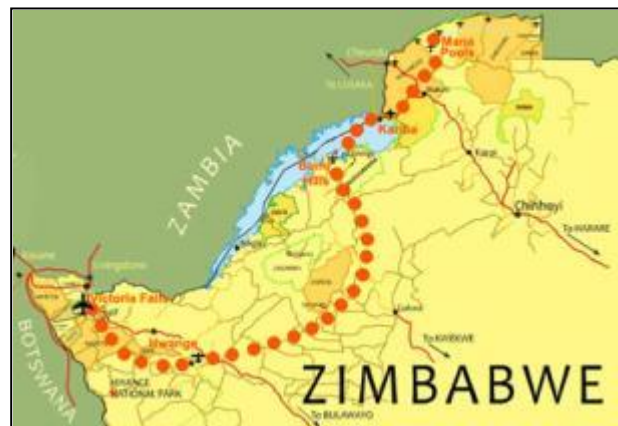
From Wild Zambezi

SAFARI LOGISTICS: A NEW PLAN FOR AIR ACCESS TO ZAMBEZI WILD AREAS

Wild Zambezi is excited about a new Air Taxi initiative to provide cost effective air access to some of Zimbabwe's top safari and wildlife areas. Safari Logistics has been launched by African Bush Camps to link hotels, lodges, camps and safaris in Victoria Falls, Hwange, Bumi Hills/Matusadona, Kariba and Mana Pools with a 4-seater Cessna 206 aircraft.

It has always been difficult (especially for couples or groups of less than four) to fly to Zimbabwe's remote destinations from Victoria Falls without having to pay for an expensive private air charter.

With Safari Logistics, clients or their agents can now simply choose the flight sector they need along the route (see map) and book and pay for a seat on the Air Taxi. This will run guaranteed schedules three times a week departing from Victoria Falls at 0800hrs on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.



Tourism facilities serviced by this route will include:

Hwange (Manga): Somalisa Camps

Hwange: The Hide, Sikumi Tree Lodge, Ivory, Miombo & Hwange Safari Lodge

Bumi Hills: Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, Rhino Safari Camp, Musango Camp

Kariba: Fuel Stop or House Boats

Mana (Dandawa): Kanga Camp

Mana Pools: Zambezi Life Styles, Vundu Camp, Goliath Safaris, various canoeing and walking safaris

Victoria Falls: Various hotels and lodges in and around this regional tourism hub. ...

For more information contact African Bush Camps or e-mail book@safari-logistics.com

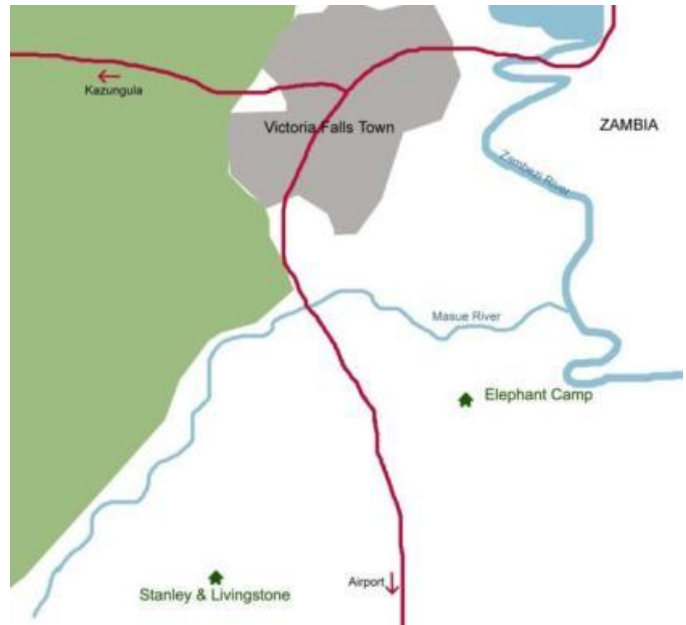
ZIMBABWE

Convention Centre for the Victoria Falls

In order to prepare for the UNWTO in 2013 the Zimbabwe government plans to construct a Convention Centre in Victoria Falls Town. The centre will seat between 3,000 – 5,000 people; have committee rooms, a golf course and two hotels. This was the story in one of the newspapers this week.

According to the article:

The piece of land being proposed for the construction of the convention centre covers an area of about 1,000 hectares. It is located six kilometres south of Victoria Falls town. It starts just after Musue River to the south of the town extending to about five kilometres southwards towards Victoria Falls airport, said the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality.



I would guess that the site is to the west of the Bulawayo road just north of Stanley & Livingstone Lodge.

This story is interesting for several reasons. The first one is that the government of Zambia is also considering building a Conference Centre in Livingstone for the UNWTO meeting. The other reason it is interesting is because the private sector in Victoria Falls Town stated that they were unwilling to invest in any such building development as it was economically unviable in this present time. The private sector in Livingstone is also unwilling to go to any investment for the meeting for precisely the same reason.

I can only guess that both convention centres would be built and funded by the Chinese. And, do we really need two? Do we need even one?

All this points to the fact, in my opinion, that there is not much discussion going on between the two governments of Zambia and Zimbabwe. The UNWTO only needs one conference facility and I doubt that it needs more hotels. A walk around Victoria Falls Town hotels will show the emptiness of many accommodation facilities. Only those hotels who work tirelessly on their marketing are managing to fill their rooms.

Discussing the building of a conference facility in Livingstone, I was told that Livingstone will need such a facility for the future as it intends to attract thousands of tourists ... My comment was that that was just a dream ... The future is very uncertain at the moment with much of the world still in recession and predictions stating that it will go on for many years.

Zimbabwe has broken infrastructure throughout the country with water and sewage systems not working; with power stations collapsing; roads deteriorating ... the list goes on. Victoria Falls Town is an island on the edge of Zimbabwe which functions well, but the rest of the country is in a state of collapse. Surely if the government is to spend (borrowed?) money it should be spent on the basic facilities for the people.

New Airline Operating in Zimbabwe

Sol Air has been given a licence to operate domestic air routes in Zimbabwe. They will operate on the Harare-Bulawayo, Harare-Victoria Falls routes.

At present Sol Air has one aircraft in Zimbabwe but three more will be arriving soon. The fleet will include a 19-seater Beech craft 1900D, a 70-seater CRJ700 plane and a ATR 72-500 turboprop.

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Blogs

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The Livingstone Weekly: www.thelivingstoneweekly.wordpress.com

Stories and Updates: www.storiesbeyondthevictoriafalls.wordpress.com

