

Selling Zimbabwe

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17 Oct 2007

Selling brand Zimbabwe, a land of great natural beauty should be relatively simple, but it is not, for the chaos beside the beauty makes it a difficult sell.

Harare – The Zimbabwe International Tourism Expo, which ended over the weekend, confounded even its own organizers with a turnout higher than expected, but the event did little to present Zimbabwe as a modern country trying to come right on policies that would turn around the economy and project an image good enough to attract foreign visitors.

Foreign buyers came in bigger than expected numbers, and some travelled across the country's resorts, sampling the Victoria Falls and the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, among other places.

They were stunned, but brand Zimbabwe wasn't going to be easy to market, said a buyer from Europe. The supermarkets had no food and other basic supplies; petrol was not available from pump stations, and could only be secured from the black market at exorbitant prices. And if you had been forced to change your currency on the official market, at ZW\$30 000 to the US dollar, you paid US\$10 (R70) per litre.

A total of 668 buyers – traders eager to buy Zimbabwe and other countries represented at the expo – had come from abroad, with 516 hosted by the ZTA, and 152 not hosted.

Just as the event was taking place, British tourists were mulling the reinstatement of a travel warning on the country by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

"There has been a general increase in the level of violent crime and a serious deterioration of the economy and infrastructure, making basic services, including utilities and health services, very unreliable. Many foods are now difficult to find," said the British Foreign Office.

Because of these concerns, Britain's Institute of Travel and Tourism (ITT) rejected Zimbabwe's bid to host its 2008 annual general meeting, as well as an invitation by Zimbabwe to ITT members for drinks and snacks at Zimbabwe's stand at the World Tourism Markets (WTM) expo to be held in the UK next month.

"I'm sorry that things have come to this and ITT is more than happy to promote Zimbabwe when things change," the ITT wrote in email to the ZTA's Felcia Munjaidi.

Zimbabwe, Bizcommunity.com heard from foreign marketers, looked like it was desperate for world's markets but hated its

rulers.

Karikoga Kaseke, the CEO of the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) says he's happy that 23 buyers had "come from the UK", adding that he believes the ITT had fed "on poison".

"We cannot lose sleep over that," he said, obviously not bothered by Zimbabwe's bad international image. "We're happy to report that the response from the markets is just too good to believe," said Kaseke.

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