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## TRAVEL NEWS

Travel Pulse > Travel News > Obama's Trip to Africa: Will It Boost Tourism?

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### Obama's Trip to Africa: Will It Boost Tourism?

By **David Cogswell**  
July 03, 2013 2:29 PM

"All press is good press," say publicists and press agents. Even a scandal will draw attention to a movie, a book or a recording, and help sell it. But people in African tourism might not agree because most of the publicity Africa receives in the U.S. media is so dismal it scares people away and reinforces an image of Africa that is so distorted as to be almost perverse.

With America's first family visiting Africa this week, many in the industry are hoping that President Obama's highly publicized visit will boost tourism by drawing attention to the continent and showing it in a positive light. [The African Travel Association](#) sent out a press release celebrating the trip to Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania, and expressing the hope that it will drive tourism. "The timing of President Obama's trip couldn't be any better, especially with Africa becoming a more accessible tourism market for Americans," said Edward Bergman, the ATA's executive director, in the statement.

An American president in Africa is a rarity in itself. Even a presidential mention of Africa is extremely infrequent. The African tourism industry has good reason to hope that the President's visit will actually encourage Americans to visit Africa. The fact that Obama's father was an African creates additional resonance. And the possibility that Obama would meet with South Africa's ailing former president and national hero, Nelson Mandela, ratcheted up the emotional impact even higher. In the end, Mandela's condition made the meeting impossible. But the connection was drawn and it carried a significant emotional punch.

In the wake of the [FIFA 2010 World Cup](#) in South Africa, it is generally agreed that the event did improve South Africa's image and consequently that of the whole continent. South Africa overcame the negative impact that has been seen after most international sports events, probably because Africa's image in the American media has been so distorted that footage of the World Cup was the first opportunity for many Americans to see that South Africa is a civilized country with a first world infrastructure and a highly sophisticated society.

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People in the African travel industry are divided on how much they expect from the presidential visit. Karin Jones, managing director of [Anastasia's Africa](#), told TravelPulse.com, "Having just returned from Tanzania last week, I know that the Tanzanians are very excited and were busy making preparations. Given that the press is very focused on the current gay marriage issue, we can only hope that they give some decent coverage to his visit."

Lucille Sive, president of [Lion World Tours](#), agreed that Obama's visit should help tourism. "It's the press around it that helps," she said, "like it did with the World Cup. People will be following the news and South Africa will be in the spotlight showing that South Africa has a first world infrastructure. Africa is on everyone's bucket list these days and hopefully President Obama's visit will get people enthusiastic about going soon."

[The Kenya Tourism Board](#) was disappointed that Obama would not be visiting the land of his father's birth on this trip, though he has traveled to Kenya before and has pledged to return during his presidency. But Wausi Walya, public relations and corporate communications manager for the Kenya Tourism Board, acknowledged that the trip might still help Kenya.

"Indeed there may be improved traffic of tourists to Africa based on this visit since his visit can be interpreted as an endorsement of the continent as a whole," said Walya. "Remember we have so many tourists who have Africa as a 'must visit' in their lifetime, some must have made a firmer resolve on this based on the visit."

Obama's family connection to Kenya has itself been a help, said Walya. "Kenya has had a lot of attention related to President Obama's ancestry since he ascended to power. In the first year of his presidency we had an influx of people visiting his grandmother's home. Over the years, many tour operators continue to itinerate visits to western Kenya including the village, Kogelo, where Obama's grandmother lives. Kenya will probably benefit from this for a long time."

The response of others was more measured. "A high-profile visit by the President to Africa can only help, although the one-night stands to three countries will have limited media impact," said David Herbert, chief experiential officer of [Great Safaris](#). "I would not think this presidential visit will be a 'boost' to tourism, but we have experienced a good growth in to travel to Tanzania and South Africa continues to be a growing destination, so the visit can only reinforce this trend."

Marcia Gordon, co-founder of [Extraordinary Journeys Africa](#), said that her company is seeing a steady climb in interest in Africa, and "such a high profile visit and putting Africa in the news so prominently is only going to boost that interest."

Gordon expects the presidential visit to help the countries Obama is visiting. "Even though he is not highlighting the countries from a touristic point of view, his trip allows Americans to see the images that we associate with Africa: modern, functioning countries with highly educated people, instead of the all-too-frequent images of famine, war, etc. This conveys an impression of these countries as safe, pleasant destinations."


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