

**TOURS**

# Operators get creative selling troubled Africa

By [Michelle Baran](#) / April 29, 2015

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Guests of the Saruni Samburu lodge on a safari in Kenya.

In the face of a long chain of crises across Africa, specialists and suppliers have had to remain vigilant and get creative with their marketing and selling initiatives to prevent their businesses from becoming yet another casualty of the continent's catastrophes.

"Specialist tour operators focusing on Africa have to be prepared for the peaks and the valleys," said Dave Herbert, CEO of Great Safaris. "In the too-frequent valleys, you need to grab market share from the big, multi-destination operators and keep expenses in check."

Herbert said that one strategy in times of crises is to work with suppliers to introduce attractive specials, such as two-for-one deals and 50% off savings, to kick-start bookings.

Another way he said he has managed to keep his business going is by working more closely with travel agents.

“How do we, as tour operators, survive and prosper in a world full of violence, wars, terrorism, disease and unbelievable wonder? The answer lies in targeting the travel counselors who are experienced in dealing with travelers seeking new experiences,” Herbert said. “The job of a travel counselor is to gather the facts — not from sensational media — and present those facts to their clients, including the fact that Africa generally is more secure than 80% of American cities.”

That message, however, has been increasingly challenging to communicate, especially in the wake of news earlier this month that gunmen from the Islamist group al-Shabaab killed 148 people at a university in northern Kenya. Merely the latest in a series of devastating setbacks for Africa since the Ebola outbreak last fall, the Kenya killings came on the heels of last month’s deadly terror attack in the Tunisian capital, Tunis.

The damage to the African continent’s economy, and more specifically to its tourism economy, has been severe.

Bernard Gustin, CEO of Brussels Airlines, which serves 19 destinations in Africa and continued service to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone during the height of the Ebola crisis, told reporters this month that lingering, unjustified fears about the virus are costing the continent billions of dollars.

Widespread misinformation persists despite the fact that earlier predictions that the virus would infect millions of people worldwide by April never materialized. Gustin said that many people around the world continue to associate Africa with images of healthcare workers clad in hazmat suits.

To counter that image, Brussels Airlines has launched an “Africa Is Not Ebola” campaign that includes a website, [AfricaIsNotEbola.com](http://AfricaIsNotEbola.com), an Instagram hashtag, #AfricaIsNotEbola, plus “Africa Is Not Ebola” pins.

Since a soft launch of the campaign nearly three months ago, supporters have posted more than 220 #AfricaIsNotEbola images on Instagram, including shots of wildlife, children, jungles, mountains, beaches and people at work.

Gustin has taken the campaign to government officials, nongovernmental organizations and to the public.

The airline executive also said that when Ebola flared up, “very quickly we and Royal Air Maroc were the only ones flying to those countries.”

Had the two carriers pulled out, he said, those countries would have been completely isolated. He said relief agencies had implored Brussels Airlines to continue service.

At the same time, social media exploded with criticism of the airline: “They said we were managed by people so greedy they were willing to bring disease around the world,” Gustin recalled.

Other suppliers that sell Africa are also hoping to spread a more positive message about Africa.

“For the geographically informed and second-time visitors, now is a great opportunity to visit Africa, [with] great value for the money,” said Jim Holden, president of African Travel.

The challenge, he said, is that “to the uninformed, Africa is one country.”

For example, he said, with regard to the latest shootings on the border between Kenya and Somalia, “Tourists have never been sent anywhere near the border. The parks and tourist sites are miles away from the Somalia/Kenya border. Sadly, those distinctions are too subtle for the first-time visitor to Africa.”

Holden said that in an effort to win back business, safari lodge owners in Africa are offering substantial deals, which African Travel is hoping to pass on to customers as an incentive.

Another bright spot for business has been South Africa, which, he said, “continues to do well, with fewer perceived security issues and the strong dollar making for good value.”

But even South Africa has faced challenges of late, including a recent wave of xenophobic attacks on foreigners, who are being seen as a threat to local jobs. The CEO of South African Tourism, Thulani Nzima, has condemned the violence, and tour operators are working to assure travelers that the destination remains safe.

In another attempt to promote Africa, Extraordinary Journeys, a New York-based tour operator and Africa specialist, held a press event earlier this month to **market its Zimbabwe product**, confronting concern about tourists traveling there in light of the authoritarian government of President Robert Mugabe.

But Extraordinary Journeys co-founder Marcia Gordon said, “The worst thing is to not go, if you care about Zimbabwe.”

Indeed, Africa operators say that same message applies to most of the continent.

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*Kate Rice, Nadine Godwin and Dorine Reinstein contributed to this report.*