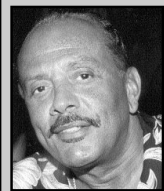


# Travel

## Redeveloping the Nile Hotel Complex in Uganda



*Travel With  
John Daye*

By Prof. Wolfgang H. Thome MBA Ph.D.; eTN Uganda

For a long time the Nile Hotel and Conference Centre, built for an OAU meeting in the 70's, sat on a prime piece of Kampala real estate in a state of sheer hibernation. The initial effort in the 1990's to privatize the hotel and its management had collapsed and left the Government of Uganda in a legal limbo, which did not permit to re-advertise the facility until the pending cases over the botched first attempt were resolved. Hence, a management was installed for the interim period, which besides a lack for funds for much needed capital expenditure, renovation and upgrading was equally short of vision and enthusiasm for the place, dooming it to a lackluster existence no longer taken seriously as a competitor by other leading Kampala hotels.

The fresh privatization through a concession agreement in 2003 excited many prospective bidders and industry analysts, while the general public was yet to be convinced that the renewed effort would actually bear some visible fruits. Several bidders were pre-qualified and then invited by the Privatization Unit to put in formal documentation, but ultimately only the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development owned Tourism Promotion Services Group provided the necessary bid papers, and were after due diligence of the proposals by the PU declared the winner of the process. A 30+ year concession was awarded and while the signing was delayed by misguided elements within the 7th Parliament for a fortnight, their objections were amply put to rest and a contract signed between Government of Uganda and Serena Hotels, the name under which TPS is trading.

When on February 15th 2004 Serena Hotels then took over the management of the hotel and conference facility, an immediate optical upgrade was given to the facility, from a proper spring cleaning to new decorations, furniture covers and curtains, carpets, wall hangings and a/c replacements. Restoring much of the broken down equipment in the back of house, like walk in freezers and kitchen equipment to life was another challenge which the new management did meet in exemplary fashion.

The menu changed and the staff retained was given intensive on the job training to be able to run the big conferences during that year for the African Development Bank, COMESA and the Africa Travel Association annual symposium. Suddenly smiles were seen again amongst the staff and being of service became once more a matter of pride for those, who were previously feeling disenfranchised and disillusioned, showing that Ugandans, once given proper training and tools, could very well operate on the same level as their Kenyan or Tanzanian colleagues in the hotel and hospitality sectors.

Behind the scenes the consultants, architects and planners were busy to prepare for the closure of the hotel so as to facilitate a complete re-building and re-development of the facility and by December 15th 2004 the last guests checked out to allow for winding down and the main work to start on February 15th 2005.

The old building was completely gutted in preparation



for the re-build and with a re-construction period of 15 months Serena's management, contractors and architects had their work cut out for them to meet their ambitious deadline.

Within weeks the old hotel building was an empty shell and work commenced to add the new wing in a U-shape while the new back of house area and the new landscaping, including the pool area started taking shape. Kampala suddenly sat up and took notice, as the 'new' hotel began to emerge and a never ending stream of visitors came to the site or made their way up Crested Towers to take a peep onto the construction site.

It was soon visible for all that the shape of the 'new' hotel was something quite remarkable and of an architectural and landscaping nature hitherto not seen on this scale in Uganda. The 30+ Million US Dollar budget of course helped to drive the construction forward, and while the conference centre side was 'only' being re-furnished the main hotel and its new facilities were all newly built with state of the art technology, energy saving measures and the amenities 5star guests have come to expect from Serena Hotels.

Now a year into its re-construction and only a few months away from the grand re-opening, the new Kampala Serena Hotel, as it will be known from now on, will have an intense run-in to the deadline of mid July 2006, but all indicators are that the deadline will be well met. Upon completion it will give Kampala the first really new 5Star property by international standards and credit of course goes to Serena's professional management, whose vision transformed the formerly rather dull and bland facility into an eye-catching 'new' place worth of the parkland setting in the heart of the city.

From previously 90 rooms the Kampala Serena will have nearly 160 suites and rooms when re-opening, and the utility-like former single restaurant will be replaced by three, an all day coffee shop, where breakfast, lunch and dinner can be taken in high standards but informal surroundings, while two top class international restaurants will be available for fine dining during lunch and dinner.

A spa and recreation facility has been developed around the new swimming pool, which with its free flowing forms puts the square like unimaginative 50's style pools elsewhere to shame. The Nairobi Serena's Maisha Health Club and Spa is arguably the best such facility in Nairobi and word has it that the Kampala Serena will be outdoing its senior sister hotel in terms of facilities, equipment and spaciousness to provide a truly 5Star treatment even in the

leisure facilities of the new hotel.

Serena of course already has a collection of over 25 properties in their stable, amongst them award winning places like Kirawira, Zanzibar Serena Inn, Mara Serena and others, and with the addition of the Kampala Serena the East African circuit will be completing a long held vision from the 70's, when Serena was to become a regional hotel group - delayed by political events in Uganda and Tanzania at the time. Their global marketing machinery has for a while now been in full swing to promote their latest addition and they will arguably bring a lot of new business to Uganda, for conferences, conventions and meetings but also for the safari lodge and resort sector, where undoubtedly Serena will become active too once the new Kampala Serena has opened.

It goes to prove that government can successfully privatize loss making parastatals into shining new profitable enterprises, making valuable contributions to the national economy, here through the tourism industry. It will be providing new, state of the art facilities but also promote the country abroad. The famous 'win-win' situation often proclaimed but rarely true, comes into its own on this occasion and Serena's arrival will undoubtedly improve Kampala's hospitality options for visitors, but also challenge other hotels to follow the professionalism Serena will inject to the Ugandan hotel sector. They are already members of the Hotel and Catering Association of Uganda and interact closely with Uganda's national Hotel and Tourism Training Institute in Jinja. About 100 of their staff were over the past year deployed in Serena's Kenyan and Tanzanian properties to train, learn and get ready as the core unit of professional Ugandans, who will run the new hotel and those recently recruited will undergo an intense training schedule to be ready when the hotel opens in about three months.

All in all, we can expect the grand opening with a grand fanfare and indeed, most of the people I have talked to about the new Serena, can't wait for the hotel to open its doors. More choices for Kampala and its visitors must surely be good for the country as a whole, especially now that Uganda has once again recorded a visitor increase over the past 12 months and will host the Commonwealth Head of State and Head of Government Summit in 2007, which incidentally will be opened at the new Kampala Serena Hotel.

If fit for H.M. the Queen it will surely be fit for all of us.

## Tanzania Campaigns for More Open Borders

By Apolinary Tairo

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania (eTN) -- Tourism development and movement of people within Southern African region will be discussed during this week's visit by Tanzanian president to three Southern African Development Community (SADC) regional states.

Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete is on a second visit to Southern African region aiming at strengthening regional cooperation in key areas of cooperation including joint tourism development and movements of people.

Tanzania shares tourist products and visitor services with its southern neighbors including Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. President Kikwete is currently visiting the Kingdom of Swaziland - the only remaining monarchy in Africa, the mountain Kingdom of Lesotho and Mozambique.

During his visit to Namibia last week, the Tanzanian president said Tanzania was committed to cement its relations with Namibia in various economic development areas including tourism.

Namibia is a member of Regional Tourism Organization of Southern Africa (RETOSA) engaged on marketing SADC

tourism.

RETOSA covers 14 diverse and exciting countries which include the legendary wildlife covered plains of Tanzania, the Coral Coastlines of Mozambique, the vineyards and bustling cities and big game reserves of South Africa and the Botswana's Okavango Delta referred as "The Jewel of Africa."

The mountainous kingdom of Lesotho and Victoria Falls shared by Zambia and Zimbabwe as well as the beaches of Mauritius; all make the countries of Southern Africa offer a lifetime adventure.

The SADC secretariat has organized a three-day investors forum in Windhoek, Namibia, at which about 100 tourism project promoters from Southern African countries will be invited to meet with a similar number of potential investors from the United States, European Union and other countries, such as South Africa.

The purpose of this investors' forum to be held between October 3 and 6 this year is to facilitate the development of business partnerships between EU and SADC enterprises as well as between tourism project promoters and investors from within the SADC region.

Botswana, which is the fast growing tourist destination in Africa, is the other regional state that President Kikwete called and later visited South Africa, the continent's eco-

nomie giant.

With highly developed tourist services and travel infrastructure, South Africa is the leading tourist destination in southern African region. More than two million foreign visitors were recorded to have visited South Africa last year.

South Africa had imposed strict visa regulations to visitors coming from other SADC member states, the move that was highly protested by people from other neighboring states including Tanzania.

The Tanzanian president held talks with South African President Thabo Mbeki and discussed areas of cooperation that would attract more South African investments to Tanzania, hotel and tourism being on top priority.

Over 25,840 South African tourists visit Tanzania's wildlife parks and climb Mount Kilimanjaro each year and make South Africa the leading tourist market to her neighbor states.

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