Ethiopia: A country worth touring

Can you guess the country to which the World’s Best Tourist Destination accolade is given to in 2015? You may guess it to be Spain, Thailand or Italy. You are excused to guess so. But it is given to a surprise candidate: Ethiopia. It is selected out of 31 countries to win this award. Ethiopia is praised for its outstanding natural beauty, dramatic landscapes and ancient culture.

The country has a variety of tourist attractions, including historical, geological and cultural resources. These include 25 high-elevation Mountains and active volcanoes that appeal to adventure tourists. There are more than 80 unique rich ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups and the southern cultural routes, particularly South Omo, are among the most famous. Visitors also enjoy the northern historic route.

Ethiopia is a land of plenty with a long and noble history giving rise to ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. It offers the most dramatic scenery of unsurpassed grandeur: the Simien Mountains National Park, unique rock-hewn churches, the spectacular Blue Nile Falls, the Great Rift Valley, the Danakil Depression, imperial castles and monuments of an ancient civilization linked with the legend of the Queen of Sheba.

There is yet so much to be explored and excavated in the land of origins, wonders and destinies. Ethiopia is a country blessed with immense natural, cultural and historic heritages. It is the cradle of mankind and the origin of the Blue Nile and coffee. Ethiopia is home to Ert Ale, one of the most active volcanoes in the world.

The Danakil Depression, one of the most alluring attractions in the country, is also situated in its north eastern corner. Thanks for its rivers that are quenching the thirst of east Africa and beyond up to Egypt, the country is called “the water tower of Africa”.

Ethiopia currently has four biosphere reserves that are registered by the UNESCO. Rift valley lakes, hot springs, and highland lakes are among the beautiful sceneries that the
country is endowed with. The country has many national parks and a couple of beautiful sanctuaries to which millions of tourists are flocking every year.

Most importantly, the country has a reliable peace and tranquility despite its location in the unstable horn of Africa. In Ethiopia, one could enjoy the microcosm of the entire sub-Saharan ecosystem. Ethiopia, after the rains, is a land decked with flowers and with many more native plants than most countries in Africa.

The Nile River, the longest river in Africa, holds part of its heart in Ethiopia. This river flows 800 kilometres within Ethiopia before it joins the White Nile and give life to Egypt and Sudan.

Ethiopia, the oldest independent nation in Africa, also has historical heritages that date back to the first century AD. Axum, capital of the country when it was a great empire that attracted the eyes of traders from Greece, Rome, Persia, etc, is one of them.

The rock-hewn church of Lalibela one of the places worth visiting in the country. Debre Damo, the oldest existing intact church in Ethiopia, depicts the ancient roots of Christianity in the country. The 17th century capital of Ethiopia, Gondar, is the seat of the palace of Emperor Fasiledes. The country also has its own calendar and alphabets. These and other unique heritages have made Ethiopia a country worth visiting.

Compared to the previous times, the contribution of tourism to the overall development of the country has been showing considerable leap forward. The country has earned 2.9 billion USD in 2015 and the sector has created job opportunities for about 700 thousand people during the same year.

The peace and tranquility and the sound policies and strategies tailored by the government to run the sector during the last couple of decades have contributed for the growth witnessed in the sector, according to a recent report by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Furthermore, the government has decided to foster its zeal for the tourism industry during the second growth and transformation period. The Ethiopian Tourism Transformation Council(ETTC), Chaired by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, and the newly
founded Ethiopian Tourism Organization (ETO), established to undertake promotion, marketing, development of services and products at destination areas, were part of the new strategies for boosting the sector to a new height.

Ethiopia aspires to be one of the top five tourist destinations in Africa by 2020 as it is officially stated under the Second Growth and Transformation Plan of the country a year ago. Five years ago, Ethiopia had eight registered World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO. Now, the country has managed to add two more sites to this list and there are a total of ten registered sites in the country.

The Konso Cultural Landscape and the Meskel Festivities are the two sites who lately joined the list. The country has also lately succeeded to add another intangible cultural heritage, Fiche Chembelala, to this list. This is indicative of the fact that the country has a huge potential of heritages of both tangible and intangible nature that can attract more tourists in the near future if tapped properly.

Unlike the previous years, the country now has 128 hotels in Addis Ababa alone that are recently labelled from one up to five stars by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. A lot of modern and luxury hotels are serving tourists in major tourist destinations situated outside the capital. As the country has unexploited options to diversify its tourist bases, more hotels, spas and resorts are expected to be built in more corners of the country.

Moreover, the country needs to promote itself in the international arena to sale its image and tourist products and generate more income from the sector. The zeal to open a new website, software and mobile apps to be used for this purpose has already started.

Ethiopia’s uniqueness and peculiarity is manifest in many of its cultural and traditional heritages. The Hamer Tribe, attracting thousands of tourists from different corners of the world, is one among the many alluring features of Ethiopia. This area waits one with unchanged face of Africa as it was discovered first by explorers’ centuries ago.

The Hamers represent one of Africa’s exotic tribes that are still proud of their traditions and customs. As pastoralists their food, clothing and shelter is closely tied with herds and their products. They wear animal skin as clothing and milk mixed with blood is a staple
drink. A lucky tourist may also witness the Hamer Bull-jumping ceremony, a key moment that determines a hamer youths transition to manhood.

Another cultural heritage that makes Ethiopia is the Coffee ceremony. Coffee is believed to be discovered first in Ethiopia around 800 AD by a goat herder who observed his goats livelier after eating the red berries. It is hardly possible for a tourist to leave the country without an invitation to a coffee ceremony at least in one occasion.

With the expansion of tourist destinations and infrastructure in areas that were previously inaccessible, the tourist flow has been increasing over the years. Current visitor arrivals are estimated at 780,000 per year, up from 523,438 and 596,341 in 2011 and 2012, according to statistics obtained from the Ministry of Culture & Tourism (MoCT).

Side by side with the booming hotel and tourism industry, the country has also started to be a hub for many international conferences. Hence, conference tourism is taking root in the country. The sustained peace and stability in the country amid instability and havoc in neighboring countries has made the country a preferred and reliable destination for conferences and international bodies.

With respect to transportation services to the major tourist destination, the Ethiopian Airlines now flies to almost all of them including all the seats of the regional states. Arbaminch, Bahirdar, Gondar, Lalibella, Axum and Mekelle are the main tourist destinations in the country where Ethiopian flies to all of them even more than once.

With all these challenges and opportunities in the tourism sector; currently, the sector is contributing a 4.8pc share to the total GDP of the country. Its GDP contribution has increased from 4.2 pc in 2013.

This achievement witnessed so far in the sector is indicative of the fact that tourism can generate more income to the country if the country’s cultural, traditional, historic and other heritages are promoted to the international community and more development are to be undertaken in the sector as scheduled during the coming five years.

In a nutshell, Ethiopia is a country of astonishing wonders and origins that leave visitors in elation. From the Axumite Obelisks in the North to the awe-striking cultures of the
South tribes, and from the breathtaking Danakil Depression in the east to the Bale Mountains National Park, this is a country of hospitality and worth visiting. This is a country that awaits its visitors with open arms.