Tourism: Culture, warmth and much more

Introduction
Tourism has become a global and highly competitive socio-economic and environmental activity in both developed and developing countries. It has become the largest and fastest growing industry world-wide, and stimulates other sectors such as agriculture, finance and manufacturing. Apart from generating foreign exchange earnings and revenue for governments, tourism has the potential to become a powerful tool in poverty reduction strategies. It has the ability to create jobs and wealth for local economies as well as contribute to conserving natural resources.

Ghana is fortunate to be endowed with a wide-range of cultural, natural and historical attractions. Additionally, the strategic geographical central location of the country, the excellent air transport access, political stability, coupled with the proverbial Ghanaian hospitality and friendliness of Ghanaians are not just assets but have created a conducive environment for growth of the tourism sector.

Performance of the sector
Currently, the tourism sector is the fourth-highest foreign exchange earner for Ghana and makes huge contribution to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and job creation.

The sector continues to be one of the most important and fastest growing sectors of the Ghanaian economy. All tourism indicators show a consistent trend of growth; in terms of contribution to GDP, in contribution to foreign exchange earnings, in the number of visitors, in total tourist receipts, number of hotels, number of rooms, hotel occupancy rates, and number of restaurants, car hire companies and tour and travel operators.

For instance International tourist arrivals increased from 497,129 in 2006 to 698,069 in 2008 indicating an average growth rate of about 18% per annum. The corresponding receipts also increased from US$987 million in 2006 to US$1,403 million in 2008, and contributed 6.3% to GDP.

Being a service sector and also being multi-faceted with various sub-sectors namely; Accommodation, Food, Transport, Attractions, Entertainment, Souvenirs (Handicrafts), and other auxiliary services,
tourism is highly labour-intensive and a major job creator. It generated around 300,000 direct and indirect employments during the period 2006 - 2008.

Attractions
In line with the country’s policy of using tourism for the conservation of ecological, historical and cultural heritage, Ghana has attractions which focus on niche tourism.

Eco-Tourism
Ghana is a nature lover’s delight. It’s sunny equatorial climate and fertile well watered soils sustain an enhancing selection of wildlife, ranging from elephants to monkeys and marine turtles to crocodiles, as well as hundreds of colourful bird and butterfly species. More than 5% of the country’s surface area has been accorded official protection across 16 national parks or lower-profile conservation areas, of which the most popular tourist destinations are the Mole National Park in the northern savannah and the forested Kakum National Park near the coast.

Over recent years, Ghana has emerged as a pioneer in the field community-based ecotourism. The Boabeng-Fiem Monkey Sanctuary, home to the sacred troops of mona and black-and-white colobus monkeys, led the way in 1995, and it remains the flagship for more than two dozen other community-based tourism projects countrywide. These range from the award winning Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary in the Upper West to the Amansuri Wetland Sanctuary in the Western Region.

Volta Region, the most topographically varies part of Ghana, also hosts the country’s largest concentration of community-based ecotourism sites, and offers outdoor enthusiasts some superb opportunities for hiking, rambling and mountain biking. Popular attractions include the sacred monkeys of Tafi Atome, a plethora of magnificent forests and waterfalls around Amedzofe, the country’s highest peak on Mount Afadjato, and the impressive forest-fringed Wli Falls, the tallest cascade in West Africa.

Ghana is highly alluring to birdwatchers, with 725 species recorded. For casual visitors, it is colourful savannah birds such as gonoleks, rollers, parrots and weavers that tend to catch the eye, as well as the eagles and other raptors that inhabit the drier north. Serious birdwatchers, however, are likely to want to seek out the more elusive residents of the shadowy rainforests interiors of Kakum, Bui and Ankasa, as well as the exceptional variety and volume of marine species that congregate on coastal lagoons such as Keta, Songor and Muni-Pomadze.
Natural attractions are the superb palm-lined beaches that line its 540km Atlantic coastline. One of the most beautiful is Ada Foah, on the Volta Estuary, an important nesting site for endangered marine turtles. The beaches flanking Elmina and Cape Coast are ideal for those who wish to combine their sunbathing with some historical sightseeing, while their less developed counterparts further west around Busua, Axim and Beyin offer the opportunity to truly get away from it all in idyllic surrounds.

Cultural Heritage

Ghana pulsates with life. From the bustle of downtown Accra to the atmospheric adobe villages of the north, from the ancient kingdom of Asante to the mediaeval mosques of Laranga and Bole, it is a country whose immense cultural diversity both thrills and fascinates visitors, drawing them into a daily rhythm that is uniquely and unmistakably African. A common feature of all Ghanaian cultures is a love of festivals. Barely a week goes without one or other town or village holding its major annual celebration.

The normal starting point for exploring Ghana is the historical capital Accra, one of the safest and most navigable of African cities, and brimming with interest. Accra’s older quarters Ushertown and Jamestown are characterized by an architectural cocktail spanning several centuries, spiced with striking landmarks such as the 17th century Osu Castle and Jamestown Lighthouse, the more modern Independence Arch and Nkrumah Mausoleum, and the lively fishing market.

Ghana’s second city Kumasi, is the traditional capital for the Asante people, heirs to a centuries-old kingdom that once sprawled from its core in central Ghana into what are now Côte d’Ivoire, Togo and Burkina Faso. Better known to outsiders as Ashanti, Asante was the last and most enduring of a succession of centralized states that controlled the goldmines of Obuasi, though its wealth and influence was also linked to the ample supply of captives it provided to coastal slave traders. Traditional Ashanti landmarks include a beautiful 300-year old fetish shrine at Besease, the royal kente weaving village of Bonwire, and Manhyia Palace, where the Asante kings sit in session every sixth Sunday, heralded by a procession of dignitaries and a fanfare of exuberant drumming and horn blowing that capture the pageantry of Asante’s past.

There is also the coastal Fante Kingdom, Asante’s southern counterpart and traditional rival, centered on Mankessim and incorporating the ports of Cape Coast, Elmina, Anomabu Saltpond and Winneba, where local fishermen still ply their trade in colourful pirogues, and life is ruled by the whimsical winds and tides of the Atlantic.
All along the coast, relics of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, especially the forts and castles at Cape Coast and Elmina attract thousands of African descendants from the Diaspora who visit Ghana in search of their roots and to connect with the motherland and by extension, the mother continent. Built between the 15th and the 18th century and occupied at different times by the European traders and adventurers from Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Germany and Britain to safeguard trading posts, these monuments still stand today and have been designated as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO.

The north of Ghana, by contrast, has strong cultural links to the sandy Sahel, clearly visible in the local style of dress, a strong Islamic influence dating back to mediaeval times, and the captivating mud architecture of villages such as Paga, Sirigu and Lara-banga, which is also known for its mud-built white-washed Sahelian mosque, said to date from 1421.

Management of the sector
In recognition of Ghana’s immense tourism potential, the Ministry of Tourism was created in 1993 with the mandate to develop, promote and coordinate all tourism activities in Ghana.

The Ministry exists to create a conducive and favourable environment for sustainable growth and development that would ensure that the tourism sector achieves a greater contribution to GDP growth through effective and efficient use of appropriate policies, corporate planning, programmes, and projects as well as public-private partnership initiatives.

Policy Objectives
The key policy objectives and strategies outlined in the Tourism Sector Medium Term Development Plan (2010-2013) are set in the context of achieving the sector specific developmental goals and overall contribution to the attainment of the broad objective of the National Development Policy Framework, 2010 – 2013. They include:

- Diversifying and expanding the tourism industry for revenue generation;
- Promoting domestic tourism to foster national cohesion as well as redistribute income;
- Promoting sustainable and responsible tourism way to preserve our historical, cultural and natural heritage;
- Developing and strengthening Ghana’s creative economy in ways that would enable the nation to actively engage in the world trade in creative goods and services; and
- Promoting Public Private Partnership initiatives.

Key Strategies
The key strategies of the Ministry are to:

- Market Ghana as a competitive tourist destination.
• Develop new high value options in the leisure market, culture, heritage and eco-tourism components.
• To enhance tourism services/standards through inspection, licensing and classification of formal/ informal tourism establishments.
• Promote the development of wellness facilities in the area of preventive health e.g. Spas, convalescent facilities to selected tourist destinations to ensure long term stay.
• Accord export status to tourism plants by granting those benefits and concessions (tax benefits).
• Promote the development of more high value accommodation and condominium by private investors.
• Enhance capacity and strengthen the legal and institutional framework to support the tourism industry and activities.
• Support the development of national parks and other natural attractions (e.g. Lion Project).
• Vigorously promote domestic tourism to encourage Ghanaians to appreciate and preserve their own national heritage and create wealth in their communities.
• Develop sustainable eco-tourism, culture and historical sites.
• Ensure the reduction of sex abuse and spread of sexually transmitted diseases.
• Develop a manpower development plan at all levels.
• Provide adequate resources to develop and retain skilled labour.
• Undertake Human Resource Capacity survey.

Latest Achievements
• The Ministry has successfully launched the National Tourism Marketing Strategy 2009-2012 which aims at making Ghana the preferred tourist destination in Africa. The Strategy, which is anchored on the campaign theme “Ghana - Culture, warmth and much more”, has given much room for all stakeholders both public and private sectors to play their respective role in the achievement of the strategy and realizing about 1 million tourists by 2012.
• The Ministry in collaboration with its stakeholders has successfully organised the National Chocolate Day Celebrations, PANAFEST / Emancipation Celebrations and Regatta. This was patronised by both Ghanaians and International tourists. Ghana also hosted the celebrations of the International World Tourism Day in September 2009 on the theme “Tourism Celebrating Diversity”.
• In September 2009 Ghana Tourist Board opened its first office abroad. It is based in the Netherlands using the Dutch name “Ghana Verkeers-bureau”. The Verkeersbureau is targeted on the destination branding for Ghana and distributes material and news of tour operators and Ghanaian destinations to the European consumer market and press.
• A crucial need has been met with the Japanese government in December, 2009 granting the Ministry of Tourism GH¢1.2 million for the construction of an ultra modern Visitor Information Centre (VIC) to be put up in Accra. The facility is expected to provide coordinated tourism information on destination Ghana as well as provide facilities to serve as the first-stop for tourists, both domestic and foreign, before going on to their in-county destinations.
• The Ministry is far advanced in the preparation of the National Tourism Bill which seeks to establish the National Tourism Authority to regulate the Tourism Industry together with the establishment of the Tourism Development Fund.
Implementing agencies

**Ghana Tourist Board**

The Ghana Tourist Board is the main implementing agency of the Ministry of Tourism. It has the following responsibilities and functions:
- Advises the Ministry on policy formulation and planning.
- Regulates and controls the tourism industry including registration, classification, licensing and application of standards for accommodation, catering and travel and tour enterprises, etc.
- Markets tourism both domestically and internationally including participation in tourism trade fairs and exhibitions.
- Conducts operational research and studies on tourism trends.

**Hotel Catering & Tourism Training Institute (HOTCATT)**

The Hotel Catering & Tourism Training Institute (HOTCATT), a training wing of the Ministry which was established for the purpose of training hospitality service providers has been restructured and merged with GIMPA Hospitality Training Institute for effective and efficient training programmes for the industry.

**Ghana Tourist Development Company Ltd. (GTDC)**

The Ghana Tourist Development Company, established in 1972 as a limited liability company with the character of a quasi Government agency to be the Development and Investment wing of the sector. GTDC is specifically charged to prospect and undertake investment in tourism superstructure and allied facilities either on its own or in joint partnership with local and/or foreign direct investors. It also acts as a pathfinder to develop undiscovered opportunities in Ghana tourism industry.

As part of reviewing GTDC mandate and structures to enable it to deliver, it has been proposed that GTDC be placed as the investment wing under the proposed National Tourism Authority, an object of the new National Tourism Bill, 2009 which is currently being finalised for consideration at cabinet and parliament respectively.

**Ghana Tourism Federation (GHATOF)**

In order to promote effective linkage between the public and the private sectors and ensure better co-ordination and co-operation among the private sector associations, the government in 1994, encouraged the formation of the Ghana Tourism Federation (GHATOF). Since then GHATOF - the apex body of all Tourism related associations has coordinated activities of all (23) trade associations.

**Challenges and Constraints**

In spite of the apparent successes of tourism in Ghana, there are problematic areas that require urgent attention if goals are to be met.

The areas are as follows:
- Lack of awareness of tourism as a tool for development.
- Weak human resource base.
- Low investment and funding for the sector.
- Inadequate infrastructure particularly access roads to tourist sites.
- Perception of Ghana being a high cost destination.

**Conclusion**

The government recognises that the enhancement and promotion of tourist attractions is very important towards the development and promotion of Ghana as a competitive and diverse tourist destination. The tourism authorities, realising the importance of the sector to reduce poverty and boost foreign earnings, have launched a marketing strategy aimed at making Ghana the preferred tourism destination in West Africa. If successful, this three-year strategy (2009-2012) will pull in more tourists, turning the ambitious million tourist mark into reality.

With adequate resources and focus, tourism could become the number one foreign exchange earner in Ghana, surpassing the traditional commodity like cocoa.