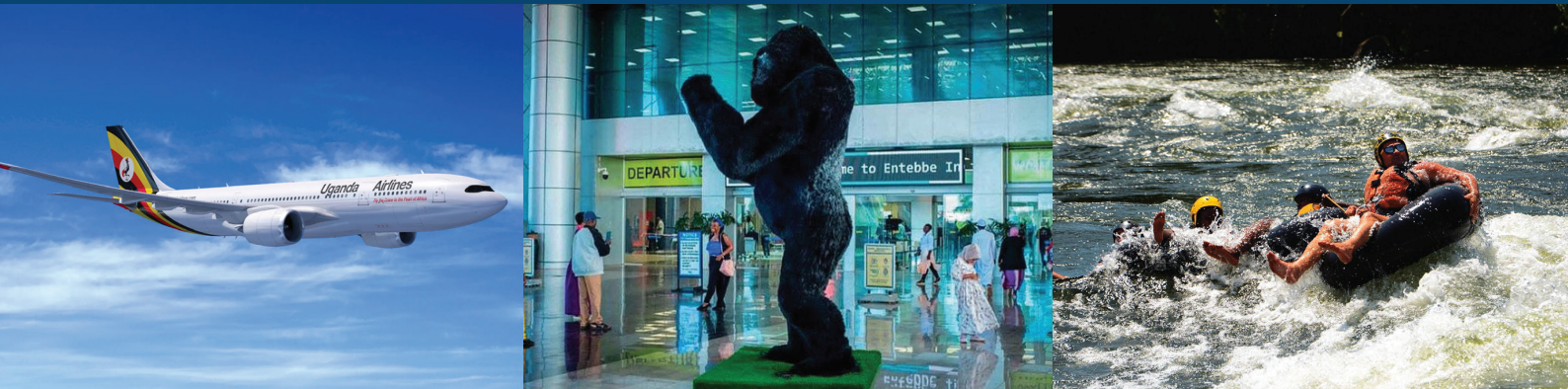


How visa facilitation reforms and expanding air connectivity can boost Uganda's international tourist arrivals.



Executive Summary

Uganda has registered a steady rebound in international tourist arrivals since the full reopening of the economy in January 2022, following nearly two years of COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions. However, arrivals remain below pre-pandemic levels, while regional peers such as Kenya and Tanzania surpassed their pre-COVID performance by 2023. This policy brief examines how Uganda's visa facilitation processes and air transport connectivity can boost international tourist arrivals, in comparison with East African regional peers. The findings show that Uganda has a relatively longer list of restrictive visa requirements, fewer visa-exempt countries, and more limited air connectivity than its regional peers. Therefore, the government should implement visa facilitation reforms to simplify visa requirements and liberalise the visa regime to increase the number of visa-exempt countries, expand Uganda Airlines' fleet and route network, and prioritise the completion of Kabalega International Airport.

Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global travel, Uganda had recorded 1.54 million international tourist arrivals in 2019. However, this number fell sharply to just 473,000 in 2020 as worldwide travel restrictions were introduced to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Since the reopening of the economy in January 2022, Uganda has recorded a steady rebound, with international tourist numbers rising from 815,000 in 2022 to 1.37 million in 2024.

Despite Uganda's steady recovery, international tourist arrivals remain below pre-pandemic levels, unlike those of regional peers. Kenya, for example, saw international tourist arrivals fall sharply

from 2.04 million in 2019 to 568,000 in 2020, but rebounded strongly, reaching 2.09 million in 2023 and 2.39 million in 2024. Tanzania experienced a similar trajectory, as arrivals declined from 1.5 million in 2019 to 621,000 in 2020, before surging to 1.81 million in 2023 and 2.14 million in 2024. These comparisons highlight Uganda's slower pace of recovery and underscore the need for concerted efforts to return to, or surpass, its pre-pandemic performance.

Evidence shows that a country's transport connectivity and visa facilitation processes significantly influence international tourist arrivals (OECD, 2018; Dascălu et al., 2024; Zebua et al., 2025; UNWTO, 2025). Against this backdrop, this

policy brief examines how Uganda’s visa facilitation processes and air transport connectivity can boost international tourist arrivals, in comparison with East African regional peers. The brief draws on data from official tourism reports published by ministries of tourism, national statistical abstracts, and the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Key Findings

Uganda has comparatively more restrictive visa requirements than its East African regional peers.

As shown in Table 1, Uganda has a relatively longer list of visa requirements than its peers, including a valid passport, passport-sized photo, travel itinerary, hotel booking, and a tour plan. These requirements can be burdensome for international visitors and may discourage spontaneous travel. In contrast, Tanzania and Rwanda require only a valid passport, passport photo, and proof of a return ticket. A simplified visa regime not only boosts international tourist arrivals but also strengthens a country’s image as an accessible, welcoming, and investor-friendly destination (UNWTO, 2024).

Additionally, Uganda grants visa exemptions to fewer countries than its regional peers. As shown

in Figure 1, only thirty-nine (39) countries are visa-exempt for Uganda, the lowest in the region. Of these, six (6) are East African Community (EAC) partners (excluding Somalia), fifteen (15) are other African countries outside the EAC, and eighteen (18) are non-African countries. By contrast, Rwanda and Kenya have adopted more liberal visa policies, exempting nationals from one hundred and fifteen (115) and seventy-seven (77) countries respectively. Their more open border policies facilitate greater tourism flows by easing mobility for both African and non-African travellers. Uganda’s limited number of visa exemptions reflects a relatively restrictive entry policy, which constrains its potential to attract higher numbers of international tourists.

Uganda has more limited air connectivity than its regional peers.

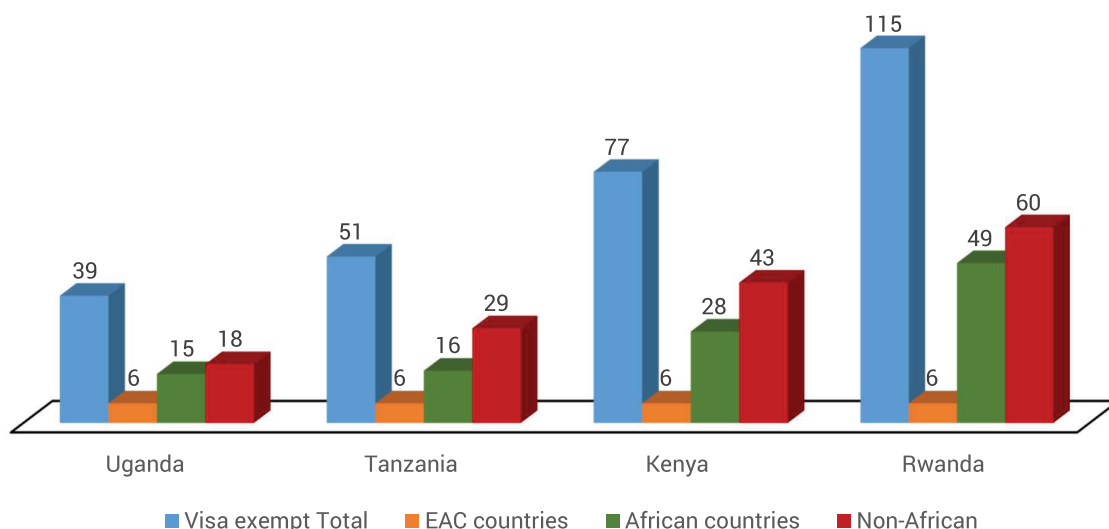
Most international tourists from America, Asia, Europe, and other regions enter East Africa through international airports. However, Uganda operates only one international airport, compared with Tanzania’s three, Kenya’s two, and Rwanda’s two, as shown in Figure 2. Tanzania and Kenya have the added advantage of domestic airports – thirteen in Tanzania and seven in Kenya – which further strengthen internal connectivity and support seamless travel to key tourist destinations.

Table 1: Tourist Visa – Single Entry Requirements for Uganda and Selected East African Countries

Uganda	Kenya	Tanzania	Rwanda
Passport (at least 6 months validity)	Passport (at least 6 months validity)	Passport (at least 6 months validity)	Passport (at least 6 months validity)
Passport-size photo	Passport-size photo	Passport-size photo	Passport-size photo
Travel itinerary	Travel itinerary	Return ticket	Ticket reservation
Hotel booking	Hotel booking		
Tour plan			

Source: Websites of country-specific ministries of internal affairs or immigration agencies.

Figure 1: Number of Visa-Exempt Countries for Uganda and Selected East African Countries



Source: Author’s construction using data from tourism reports and statistical abstracts

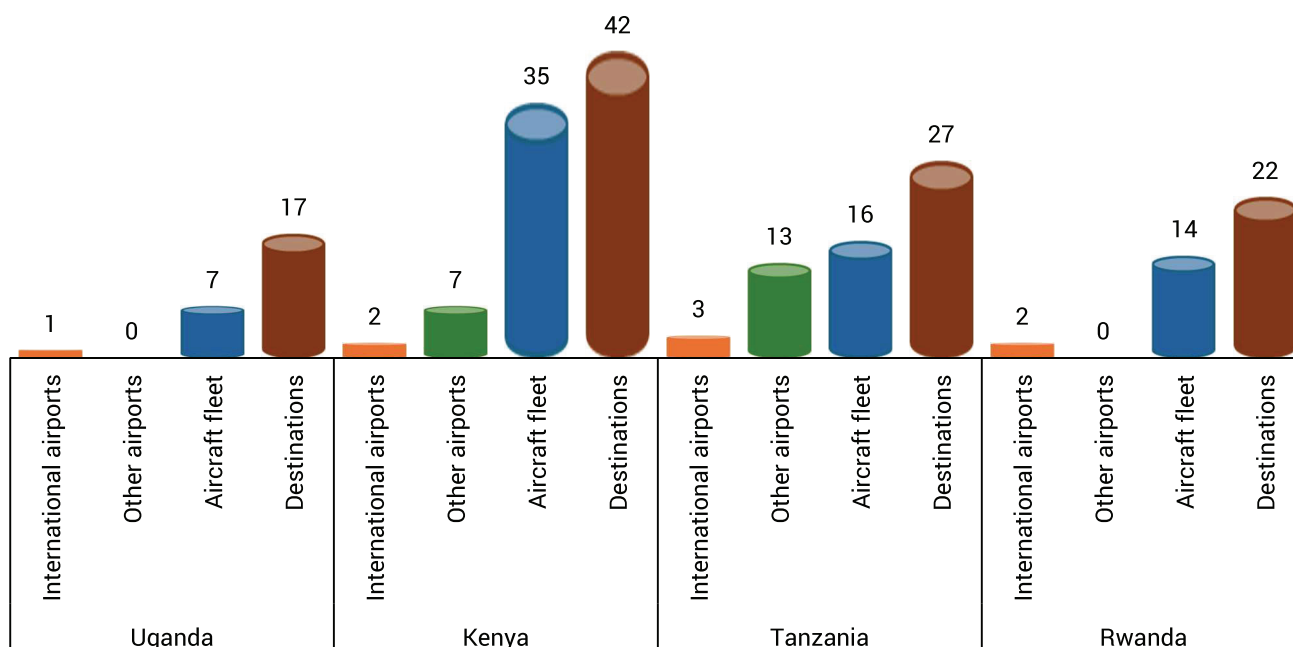
Uganda also lags behind in air transport capacity. Uganda Airlines operates a fleet of only seven aircraft, far fewer than Kenya Airways' approximately thirty-five (35), Air Tanzania's sixteen (16), and RwandAir's fourteen (14). Similarly, Uganda's route network remains the most limited in the region, serving only seventeen (17) destinations, compared with Kenya Airways' forty-two (42), Air Tanzania's twenty-seven (27), and RwandAir's twenty-two (22). This smaller fleet and route network restricts travel convenience and accessibility, potentially making Uganda a less reachable destination for international tourists. Nevertheless, Uganda has made notable progress in establishing new routes, particularly given that Uganda Airlines was only revived in 2019, whereas Kenya Airways and Air Tanzania have operated since 1977 and RwandAir since 2003.

Policy Recommendations

Uganda can boost its international tourist arrivals to reach or surpass pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels by implementing the following strategic actions. The government should:

- a) **Implement visa facilitation reforms.** These reforms should focus on simplifying visa requirements and liberalising the visa regime. Liberalisation can be implemented in a phased approach, prioritising visa exemptions for strategic partner countries, particularly within Africa. This process could start with full implementation of the African Union's Free Movement of Persons Protocol, followed by reciprocal agreements with high-potential tourism and investment markets.
- b) **Expand Uganda Airlines' fleet and route network.** Air transport is critical for increasing international tourist arrivals. The government should therefore continue to support Uganda Airlines in expanding its fleet and operating additional destinations to remain competitive in the regional aviation market.
- c) **Prioritise the completion of Kabalega International Airport.** The airport was initially expected to open by August 2025 but remains incomplete. Once operational, it will significantly boost international tourist arrivals by improving direct access to key destinations, especially the Albertine region, which is home to a burgeoning oil and gas sector.

Figure 2: Uganda's Air Connectivity Compared to Regional Peers



Source: Author's construction using data from ministries of internal affairs and national carriers' websites

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