

ATA Congress opens

Tuesday, May 18, 2010



« prev 1 of 2 next »

The four-day Africa Travel Association (ATA) 2010 World Congress opened Monday at the Sheraton Resort and Spa Hotel in Brufut.

The congress brought together more than 300 travel experts and industry professionals, including tourism ministers, tourism board heads, travel agents and tour operators who market, sell and specialise in Africa, airline representatives, travel, trade, media and hoteliers, hospitality, tourism and African studies faculty and students from

Africa, Asia, Europe and America. This hallmark event will engage international delegates in discussions on a broad range of industry topics, such as marketing and branding, niche markets and emergent trends, responsible tourism, sustainable travel and hospitality education amongst other things.

In addition to ample networking opportunities and gala dinner during the four-day event, the congress will further engage delegates in discussions on a range of industry topics, such as public-private sector partnership and branding industry standards and its trends (i.e. eco-culinary, heritage, medical and culture tourism) and climate change.

Delegates will also have the opportunity to explore leading sites in The Gambia, including the Roots Heritage Tour and the world renowned Mandina Eco-Tourism Lodge in the Makasutu Forest. Declaring the congress open on behalf of the Gambian leader, Aja Dr Isatou Njie-Saidy, the vice president and minister of Women's Affairs expressed Gambia governments continuous strive to serve as a source of strength for growth, development, unity, peace and preservation of the fauna and flora and rich cultural diversity.

She expressed confidence that the forum would not only be successful but also accord The Gambia the opportunity of exposure.

VP Njie-Saidy also informed the gathering of Gambia government's commitment and unflinching support to the tourism and travel trade, hinging on the vision of transforming

the country into a tourist paradise, thriving on free-market policies and a vibrant private sector that is self-reliant and enterprising. "To achieve this vision, we have already elaborated a tourism master plan which is currently being implemented and focuses on the growth, development and marketing of The Gambia as an interesting, attractive and exciting tourism destination," she said.

She explained that the tourism master plan of The Gambia seeks to improve the quality of tourism product as well as ensure diversification in such areas as eco-tourism, sports tourism, cultural and heritage tourism. She said the master plan sets out priority actions that emphasise the linkages between agriculture, infrastructural development, benefits to the local communities, environmental conservation and long-term sustainability and capacity building for small and medium-size enterprises.

VP Njie-Saidy, however highlighted some pressing challenges in the sector. According to her, air access for the enhancement of Africa's travel industry, which depends considerably on international tour operators calls for a concerted effort. She finally thanked the organisers for bringing together such high-profile people and experts in the travel industry to grace the occasion.

Speaking earlier, Fatou Mass Jobe-Njie, the minister of Tourism and Culture underscored the importance of the forum. She described The Gambia as a renowned country in Africa, and expressed appreciation to ATA for giving the country the opportunity to host such a high-profile international event for the second time. This, according to her, shows the increase in international confidence on the travel, tourism and hospitality industry of The Gambia.

She further observed that this development did not happen by accident, but rather as a result of a policy of the Gambia government under the visionary leadership of the Gambian leader, His Excellency Sheikh Professor Dr Alhaji Yahya Jammeh to utilise intellectual, human and material resources to ensure that The Gambia becomes a tourist paradise. "This philosophy is borne out of the tourism industry pivotal to the socio-economic development and the poverty alleviation of The Gambia," Minister Jobe-Njie noted, citing the high-profile participation of international delegates as a manifestation of the Gambia tourism industry as a key player in the global economy.

She then described tourism as one of the world's top job creators, and largely seen as a driver for potential economic growth which depends on the viability of many small and medium enterprises, adding that it also provides employment opportunities for youths, women, children and the rural community most of whom are unemployed.

Alieu Secka, the chairman of the Gambia Hotel Association, who doubles as the chairman of the ATA local host committee, informed the gathering that there exists a very strong public and private sector partnership in The Gambia, and further disclosed that the organisation of the four-day event was done by the private sector at the invitation of the government. He expressed hope that the forum would provide them the opportunity to share the knowledge and ideas of travel and tourism with their colleagues from other

parts of the world.

For her part, the regional director of Sales and Marketing, Africa and Indian Ocean, Martina Boettcher on behalf of Sheraton-Gambia, welcomed the delegates to The Gambia, the Smiling Coast of Africa. She then spoke at length on the friendliness of Gambians and their hospitality. According to her, Sheraton-Gambia is among the 36 hotels in 17 countries in the world that has made them the largest hotel chain in the world. Other speakers at the opening ceremony included Edward Bergman, the executive director of the ATA, and Shamsa Mwangunga, the minister of Natural Resources and Tourism of Tanzania, who doubles as the International president of the ATA.

Binta Jobe, the director general of the Gambia Tourism Authority (GTA) delivered the welcome remarks, while Alieu Secka moderated the opening session. The speaker of the National Assembly, Elizabeth Renner; the chief Justice of The Gambia, Emmanuel Agim; and the ministers of Trade and Industry, Abdou Kolley; Forestry and Environment, Jata Sillah; Energy, Sirah Wally Ndow-Njie; Attorney General and minister of Justice, Edward Gomez; Interior and NGO Affairs Minister Ousman Sonko; amongst a host of dignitaries and members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps also graced the opening session.

Ministers of travel and tourism in Africa are attending the congress, which will alongside go with a ministerial conference today, Tuesday, May 18. ATA's Young Professionals Network meeting was also convened shortly before the official opening yesterday. It could be recalled that The Gambia last hosted the ATA conference in 1984 during the association's ninth congress.

Author: **Musa Ndow**

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