

Ghana eyes surfing to boost tourism numbers

KOKROBITE, Ghana - Brett Davies paced up and down the sloping sands of Kokrobite beach in Ghana, organising surfers from 20 different countries at his annual international competition. Along the beach, some 30km (20 miles) west of Accra, dotted with dug-out fishing boats, Rastafarians were selling T-shirts and small children were playing in the sand.



morrisync via [pixabay](#) - Kokrobite

Davies, 42, is leading the push to bring surfers to the West African nation as a way to help boost the country's under-developed tourism sector. The British national already runs a surf school at Kokrobite and has helped to bring surfing to Busua, near the border with Ivory Coast.

"The greatest thing about surfing in Ghana is that we have uncrowded world-class waves that appeal to the beginner and intermediate market. Most well-known destinations are very localised and very intimidating to the average surfer," Davies told AFP.

At the competition, which was held last month, local reggae boomed from the speakers stacked in the corner of a car-park.

In the water, Emmanuel Ansah cut across the breaks, deftly maneuvering his board, trying to catch the eye of the judges sitting on a wooden platform, looking out to sea. The 19-year-old from Busua started surfing five years' ago and described his first time on the waves "like having a new girlfriend". "I was so happy," said Ansah. Now he, too, wants to see Ghana become a surfing destination in its own right, and one day represents the West African nation at overseas competitions.

Visitor numbers set to increase

According to the World Bank, 897,000 international tourists visited Ghana in 2015. In comparison, just over 1.1m went to Kenya and 8.9m travelled to South Africa, but the World Travel and Tourism Council estimates numbers for Ghana could jump to nearly 1.3m this year and more than 2.0m by 2027.

In the last few years, travel and tourism have directly contributed \$1.3bn to Ghana's economy - the equivalent of about 3.0% of the gross domestic product. Tourism generally focuses on natural attractions like waterfalls and national parks, historic slave forts and cultural activities, but with some 550km's of unspoiled coastline, water sports on the Atlantic Ocean, off the palm tree-lined golden sands, are being seen as a major draw.

"Surfing has a huge potential. We have not developed our beaches. We have not done anything. It's a raw opportunity for anyone who wants to come," said Gilbert Abeiku Aggrey, Ghana tourism specialist.

Plugging the growing economic gap

Attracting surfers is seen as a good way to bring in middle-income earners to Ghana, plugging a growing gap between budget travellers, volunteers and those on business.

"The gap between the low end and the high end is very huge, it's an untapped market. It is because people aim at making a profit so they hike the price or rate looking for the high-end travellers," said Aggrey.

The high cost of flights and accommodation in Ghana has been blamed for deterring tourists. A stay at a standard three-star hotel in the capital can set travellers back \$100 (88 euros) a night, while flights even within West Africa can be mouth-wateringly expensive.

The head of the Ghana Tourism Authority, Kwesi Agyemang, said there are plans to start targeting different interest groups and improve regulation. The authority's work includes targeting other countries for visitors. The government's National Tourism Development Plan in 2012 noted there were "completely virgin" beaches in Ghana's Western Region because of lack of access.

They showed "great potential for development", it added.

Developing destinations

Ghana once celebrated for its rapidly growing economy, saw rates of growth slow to some 3.6% in 2016 - the lowest in two decades and well down from 14% in 2011.

Ghana's new government, in power since January this year, has put a fresh emphasis on tourism and wants to develop Accra's under-developed and impoverished beach front. The Marine Drive Tourism Investment Project aims to develop nearly 100 hectares (250 acres) of the shoreline with hotels, shopping malls, theme parks, an office, and casino.

In the 2017 budget, Ghana's finance minister Ken Ofori-Atta said tourism could help address soaring levels of debt and high unemployment.

Davies accepted that government help was needed, but, whatever happens, he will be encouraging people to ride the waves.

AFP

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