

How to weather economic meltdown



As job cuts see well-paid workers with time on their hands, can Africa's enticing tourist destinations slash fees and cash in, asks Amy Fallon

Long-haul luxury might not be top of everyone's credit-crunched wallet when it comes to planning their next holiday, but some African destinations are coping beautifully. For some, the global economic crisis has created a desire to get away from it all. "A lot of people working in the financial sector have been laid off," says Isiah Thomas, sales and marketing manager for Kumika, which runs overland, lodge-based and self-drive tours in Africa. "They're thinking 'I don't want to stay here in the doom and gloom, I'll go and travel.'" Weak currencies mean some more usually Europe-bound holidaymakers are keen to make their money stretch further, presenting north Africa with a chance to cash in and beat southern Europe at its own game. "Tunisia has seen a lot of interest due

to the current economic situation," says Fiam Dawes of the National Tourist Office. "Being out of the euro zone, the pound stretches much further in Tunisia than in Europe."

Tunisia has been particularly successful at offering luxury products at affordable prices and is now behind only France in the area of spa and thalassotherapy.

Although Morocco saw an 18% drop in British arrivals last year, down to 332,000, the tourist board has been quick to respond with a series of incentives for visitors via a website aimed at the 150 tour operators who serve British and Irish holidaymakers. "Once they complete a set of modules they will be awarded with PVAs, iPhones and trips to Morocco," says Jamal El Jais, events and promotion manager for the Moroccan National Tourist Office. Some believe

that no matter how gloomy the economic climate, travel in Africa will maintain its appeal. "True travellers will tend to carry on as normal," says Gad Warden of the Ethiopian embassy in London. "Some tourists will always seek out the new and lesser known, off the beaten track. Ethiopia is far less affected by the credit crunch [than other nations]."

Ethiopia is not alone. Thomson Worldwide has introduced a new 2009 tour of Rwanda, claiming there has already been steady interest in it.

Spendthrift times

Markets that fail to recognise the changed environment may lose out, however. High visa and park fees are unlikely to attract the cash-strapped. "It's generally about US \$50 to get into African countries [for a visa]," says Isiah Thomas. "In the Middle East you're looking at \$15-20 to get in.