



Artisans hope for sales only when a tourist vehicle finally stops, but with the portal, sales can be made virtually.

# How an online portal is rewriting community tourism in Uganda

The portal allows advance booking. The tourist knows who they are buying from, and the seller gets the real price of their product.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

For years, community artisans near Uganda's major national parks have relied on chance encounters with tourists to sell their crafts, often facing confusion, missed opportunities, and undervalued products. A new digital platform, the e-Business Eco-Tourism Portal (EBEB), is now seeking to change that narrative by placing community tourism products online before tourists ever arrive.

## Community livelihoods

Musa Chemonges, a senior warden-in-charge of Bwindi's Southern Sector, notes that Bwindi has benefited from strong collaboration between the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and surrounding communities. However, despite their role in protecting the forest, many community members have struggled to benefit economically.

"Artisans and small-scale producers often sell their crafts in an informal manner, relying on chance encounters with tourists," he says. "When you are standing by the roadside, you do not have the power to set fixed prices. Instead, you sell because you need the money."

He adds that improving how

community products are presented and marketed can directly uplift livelihoods while reinforcing conservation.

## The digital solution

David Luganda, the project manager, says EBEB, an ICT-driven initiative supported by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) under the Universal Service and Access Fund, aims to connect underserved communities directly to global tourism markets while ensuring sustainability, inclusion, and fair pricing.

"Tourists do not just buy a product; they buy the story behind it, who made it, how it was made, and whether it supports the community," he says.

He adds that the project started in Bwindi and Kibale national parks, targeting communities long excluded from formal tourism value chains. "These people had no digital space to sell their products. Yet a tourist booking a trip from Spain would want to know in advance

where they can buy authentic crafts."

## How it works

Bonny Kagaba, a team leader at Likana Safaris Uganda, explains that the platform allows artisans, accommodation providers, and service operators to list their products online with descriptions, pricing, and stories.

"Instead of everyone converging on a tourist's vehicle, the portal allows advance booking. The tourist knows who they are buying from, and the seller gets the real price of their product," he says.

For those without smartphones, community digital hubs have been introduced where members can receive bookings and updates. The project has also partnered with Africa's Talking to enable SMS notifications for bookings.

"This is not just about technology; it is about skills, confidence, and ensuring communities are part of national development goals," he says.

Susan Nakanwagi, the manager for Projects and Partnerships at UCC, says EBEB emerged from a highly competitive selection process where six projects were funded.

Each received up to Shs300m for implementation from October 2025 to September 2026.

"What stood out was the focus on communities that rarely benefit from tourism despite living near major attractions," she says.

She notes that every project was required to submit a sustainability plan, with some introducing small user charges while others cross-subsidise to ensure continued access for underserved communities.

## What artisans say

Sarah Kanyihamba, an artisan living near Bwindi, says the portal will bring peace of mind. "Previously, we waited for a miracle. Sometimes we spend a day without any sale."

She describes waking up to the mist over Bwindi's hills, arranging wooden carvings and beadwork by the roadside where tourists pass on their way to see mountain gorillas. Her brother carves gorillas from local wood, while her mother makes colourful beadwork that reflects their community's culture.

"When a tourist vehicle finally stops, my heart beats faster. I greet the visitors warmly and explain how the carvings are made. Some people pick up the wooden gorillas and smile," she says.

Even when visitors do not make purchases, she finds meaning in the conversations. "Others ask about life near the forest or about the animals they have come to see. Even if they do not buy anything, the conversation makes the long hours of waiting feel worthwhile."

She notes that sales help her family pay for food and school fees. "When someone chooses a piece of art and decides to buy it, that small purchase helps my family. If my basket is online, the price is known, and people understand the work behind it. Even if they do not meet me physically, they can still buy my products. This gives us hope."

