

Crossing the continent

The South African Ambassador to the Gabonese Republic, Mahlomola Jomo Khasu, tells why the launch of new flights between Johannesburg and Libreville is such a positive sign of strong ties with Gabon

WHAT IS THE significance of the recent inauguration by South African Airways (SAA) of direct flights between Gabon and South Africa?

Challenges in communication and transport across Africa have a big impact on inter-country trade so the new twice-weekly direct SAA flight between Johannesburg and Libreville brings much-awaited relief. It is bound to increase movement of people, in business and other fields, and later in goods too.

South Africa is highly rated in the world for its production of quality food, wine and other consumables, and Gabon can source these faster and more cheaply from us than from markets outside the continent. Many Gabonese are already travelling to South Africa for health, education, tourism and business, and the availability of reliable and hassle-free flights will only encourage them to do so.

The readiness on the part of our national carrier – our flag bearer – is an expression of confidence in our relations with Gabon. It carries with it the strong message of one of our known foreign policy pillars – the consolidation of the African Agenda.

SAA's arrival in Libreville really increases the options available for South Africans to visit Gabon. Until now there has only been one weekly flight offered by the privately-owned South African airline Interair. We now have more flights and, happily, competitive fares and service.

How would you describe bilateral relations between Gabon and South Africa?

We interact at the highest level. Gabon is seen as an important geo-political player in the region – it is stable and ready to extend democratic practices to its citizens.

Currently, we have signed bilateral agreements in general co-operation, protocol on regular diplomatic consultation, reciprocal promotion and protection of investment, trade, avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasions, education and training, arts and culture, tourism, merchant and marine shipping, and civil aviation. →

MARTIN VAN DER BELEN

Mahlomola Jomo Khasu, South African Ambassador to the Gabonese Republic, poses on the balcony of his residence over-looking downtown Libreville





significant employment-generating projects such as an inner-city crime surveillance operation by the South African company Omega Risk Solutions.

What do you feel Gabon might do to encourage more South African investment?

Businesswise, Gabon's image in South Africa is that it is still uncharted waters. To promote business, more effort and resources must be channelled. The biggest challenge is the policy and regulatory environment; another is a business culture that is vastly different to that of South Africa. In some areas there is also a lack of financial data from independent sources to guide decision-making.

But all of these concerns are becoming less relevant, thanks to the success stories some of our business entities are starting to record. So it's not surprising that I have seen a lot of interest recently from South African scouts exploring business opportunities in several sectors in Gabon.

South Africa has a reputation as a world-class tourism destination. The new SAA flights mean a potential influx of tourists for Gabon – a country that is aiming to diversify its economy through ecotourism. How do you rate its potential?

Very high given the country's pristine virgin forests. The decision by the country to create national parks to conserve its natural beauty has all the hallmarks of a great ecotourism future.

But parks alone, and even huge potential per se, are far from enough to generate economic benefits. An integrated, multi-sectoral and sustainable country plan with regional links will be needed to achieve real economic benefits. This requires the Tourism Ministry to be the anchor: with commitment from the Transport Ministry to provide access roads; a hospitality industry that is sensitive and responsive to tourist needs; and customs arrangements that lend themselves to the promotion of easy and secure movement of money and persons in and out of the country.

Do you view Gabon as a gateway to Central Africa?

We have a diplomatic presence elsewhere in Central Africa but reaching out more through Gabon has exciting prospects. The absence of violent conflict and disruptions in

We also co-operate on defence matters. This year we will conclude more agreements: one in the field of agriculture and another in medical evacuation.

France is Gabon's main trade partner, followed by the US, the UK and the Netherlands, each mainly trading in the oil sector. How important is South Africa as a trading partner to Gabon?

As a result of the transport challenges I mentioned earlier, our trade volumes remain low and biased in favour of South Africa. However, some South African companies such as Mvelaphanda [owned by South African millionaire businessman Tokyo Sexwale] are making serious inroads in deep-sea exploration of Gabon and others are working in partnership with international heavyweights.

Outside the oil sector, South Africa has a presence in the timber industry. Increasingly, we're seeing food and drink products in Gabonese supermarkets too. We also have some

Gabon makes it a gem in geo-politics in the region. This in large part can be ascribed to the personality of the Head of State President El Haj Omar Bongo Ondimba.

Libreville is the seat of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Central African Stock Exchange and is home to the representative offices of many international organisations including the Gulf of Guinea Commission and the United Nations. Our good relations with Gabon could well assist our fortunes in Central Africa.

How much can South Africa help Gabon in the development of its tourism industry?

We stand ready to partner with Gabon in the exploitation of its tourism potential. We hope too that any lessons we learn through hosting the 2010 FIFA Football World Cup may be replicated by Gabon when its turn to host the African Cup of Nations comes in 2012.

We see FIFA 2010 as more than just about football and stadia construction – it will be a tourism highlight. Ten venues will host the 2010 tournament, which will be the first time that the world's most popular sporting event has been staged on African soil.

We hosted two press trips for the Gabonese media to South Africa – one in 2005 and the other in 2007 – and in partnership with South African companies we sponsored trips for Gabonese delegations to Indaba, the largest South African tourism marketing event, in 2006 and 2007.

South Africa's education system attracts students from across the continent. How many are from Gabon?

Our educational exchanges with Gabon are enormous and very sound. We have about 1,000 Gabonese students in our universities and English-language instruction schools. Most of them are studying in Cape Town.

Our bilateral education agreement offers assistance to deserving Gabonese students, and we recently ran a campaign to supply information about our institutions in South Africa and the ease with which entry for study purposes can be obtained. Academics make regular exchange visits between our institutions, especially Stellenbosch and Omar Bongo universities. ■

Sarah Monaghan

NEW DEPARTURES

IT WAS WITH confidence that South African Airways (SAA) launched its direct Johannesburg-Libreville route using its Airbus A319 aircraft range in September.

"This is a proud moment to welcome Libreville into the family – a destination which we are confident will serve our customers well," said Rushj Lehutso, SAA's general commercial manager. "Libreville will be served

twice a week and is regarded as a prime business target," he added. He said that Gabon had established trade ties with Brazil and that these flights would complement additional SAA flights introduced to Brazil earlier this year.

The route is part of SAA's strategy of focusing on its operations in Africa – a key growth area for the airline. "Africa is one of our greatest strengths with over 16 destinations served directly by us," said Mr Lehutso. "We are further enhancing our extensive network and services in Africa with a host of improvements, including new routes, added capacity, larger aircraft and more lounge facilities."

Africa, he continued, had been earmarked as an important growth area as part of the airline's deep and fundamental restructuring process. Routes in Africa contributed about 16 per cent towards company revenue and over the last year, SAA's flights to Africa had averaged approximately 70 per cent in terms of load factors.

"As part of the mandate of being an African carrier with a global reach, we are determined to provide an efficient and effective network to the continent," he said. "Not only will this play an important role in helping to restore SAA to profitability over the coming 12 to 18 months, it will also facilitate the growth of tourism in Africa and further the objectives of NEPAD [New Partnership for Africa's Development]."

SAA also serves the following destinations in Africa: Accra (Ghana); Harare, Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe); Dakar (Senegal); Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania); Entebbe (Uganda); Kinshasa (DRC); Luanda (Angola); Lilongwe, Blantyre (Malawi); Lagos (Nigeria); Lusaka, Livingstone (Zambia); Maputo (Mozambique); Mauritius (Indian Ocean Islands); Windhoek (Namibia); Abidjan (Ivory Coast) and Nairobi (Kenya).

In October, SAA consolidated the new Johannesburg-Libreville route further by adding an onward connection to Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, SA086 departs Johannesburg at 11.55am, arriving in Libreville at 4pm. It departs Libreville at 4.45pm and arrives in Abidjan at 6.45pm. On Thursdays and Sundays, SA087 departs Abidjan at 7am, arriving in Libreville at 11.05am. It departs Libreville at 11.50am and arrives in Johannesburg at 5.55pm.

South African Airways is one of the world's oldest airlines and was formed in February 1934.



Above: South African President Thabo Mbeki is welcomed to Gabon by President Bongo in 2005. Below, from left: tourists enjoy South African wildlife; Stellenbosch University is popular with Gabonese and other students worldwide; South African wine is beginning to challenge French wine on Gabon's supermarket shelves

