

Nairobi's Tourism Dominance: Connectivity, MICE, Business, Gateway and Urban Attractions, 2018–2025

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how Nairobi stayed the top travel and tourism base in Kenya from 2018 to 2025. It focuses on several drivers, such as links to other countries, meetings and MICE travel, the role of the city as an entry point, and local urban attractions. The work used a review of existing materials. The sources included reports from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, official tourism documents, and published academic studies. The results point to major transport strength. In 2025, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport recorded about 1.72 million international arrivals. For the same year, Moi International Airport recorded about 235,184. These figures support the idea that Nairobi functions as Kenya's main entry hub. The study also finds a strong meetings scene. Kenya reported 998 international conferences in 2025. Most of these were hosted in Nairobi. This pattern suggests that business travel and MICE tourism matter for the city's edge. Nairobi's tourism offer also appears wide and varied. Visitors can find wildlife sites, cultural experiences, heritage places, ecotourism options, food and dining, and entertainment. These features help Nairobi compete well. In the end, the study calls for several actions. It suggests joint destination management, more funding for roads and other key tourism infrastructure, better tourism data collection, and plans that share tourism gains with other counties.

KEYWORDS

Nairobi tourism, destination competitiveness, MICE tourism, gateway tourism, international connectivity, urban tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Tourism plays a big role in Kenya's economy. It brings in foreign exchange. It also supports jobs, attracts investment, and creates ties with many other fields. These include transport, hotels, food services, farming, leisure, and other services. Kenya has a wide mix of tourism assets. There are parks with wildlife. There are coastal beaches. There is culture and shared history. Visitors can also see different landforms and enjoy local hospitality. Cities add their own appeal too. Even so, tourism is not spread the same way in every part of the country. Activity is stronger in some areas than in others. Nairobi stands out within this pattern. The city works as a place people visit. It also serves as a main entry point. Travellers can pass through it on the way to other areas of Kenya and to places in East Africa. Nairobi also links

to business travel and major events. Nairobi is Kenya's capital. It is also among the key urban centres in East Africa. Nairobi City County says many travellers arrive there. The county points to the city's many international flight options. It also highlights road routes in the region. Nairobi blends wildlife sights with culture and local heritage. It offers entertainment and food experiences. It is also a hub for trade, meetings, and events like incentives, conferences, and exhibitions.

Nairobi is more than a place people visit for rest and fun. The city acts as a key hub for trade, government affairs, and public bodies in the region. You can find multinational firms here, along with regional offices, embassies, and large international institutions. This includes bodies linked to the United Nations. Because of that mix, the city draws a steady flow of business trips. It also needs hotels, dining options, meeting spaces, transport, and other services for visitors. One tourism site calls Nairobi a centre for talks, money matters, and fresh ideas. It also points to the city's MICE setup as a part of how Kenya stays strong in business travel. Air links help Nairobi hold its place as well. Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, or JKIA, links Kenya with Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. In practice, the airport works as a main arrival point. It also serves as a route into wider travel across the country. Many travellers land at JKIA and then move on. Their next stops often include the Maasai Mara, Amboseli, Mount Kenya, Samburu, Nakuru, Naivasha, and the Kenyan coast. So, Nairobi can still gain tourism spending even if the main sightseeing is far from the city limits.

The role of this gateway function shows up clearly in arrival numbers. Kenya had about 2.035 million overseas visitor arrivals in 2018. The figure was close to 2.028 million in 2019. It then dropped to around 579,600 in 2020. In 2021, arrivals rose to about 871,300, and in 2022 they reached roughly 1.541 million (KNBS, 2023). After that, arrivals moved up to near 2.087 million in 2023 and about 2.401 million in 2024 (KNBS, 2024). In 2025, Kenya recorded close to 2.551 million international visitor arrivals, which is about 6.2% higher than 2024. Nairobi also stands out. JKIA handled about 1.720 million international arrivals, while Moi International Airport recorded about 235,184. This gap points to Nairobi staying as Kenya's main international aviation entry point (KNBS, 2026). The years from 2018 to 2025 matter because they cover steady tourism activity, the COVID-19 shock, then recovery and later growth. In 2020 and 2021, international movement fell a lot due to the pandemic. Afterward, Kenya managed a strong rebound. Nairobi's performance across this stretch suggests its travel value does not rely only on leisure visitors. It appears to be linked to several demand sources that work together.

Saying that Nairobi is the most travelled city in Kenya needs care. Many official sources count arrivals by where travellers enter the country. They list points like JKIA and MIA. That does not tell us where people then went to sleep. So, the number of arrivals at JKIA cannot be treated as the same thing as Nairobi tourist stays. Still, JKIA arrivals do matter. They can show how central Nairobi is to travel into Kenya. For this reason, the study looks at the structural drivers behind Nairobi's long run lead in Kenya's travel and tourism system.

B. Statement of the Problem

Kenya has tourism assets spread across many regions, but Nairobi still draws more visitors than other places. One reason is that the city has most of the transport links. It also holds many offices for trade and services, conference venues, hotels, and major tourism sites.

This strong pull can support jobs, new investment, small enterprises, and wider growth of destinations. At the same time, it brings side effects like traffic congestion, strain on shared services, harm to the local environment, uneven sharing of tourism gains, and heavy reliance on one main entry point. Many tourism reports talk more about wildlife areas and coastal scenes. They often say less about the underlying setup that keeps Nairobi at the front. Also, arrivals at JKIA are not always counted in the right way. Some people treat all airport arrivals as if they are only going to Nairobi. Because of this, there is a need to look at Nairobi in separate roles. It can be a tourism destination, a gateway for arrivals, a stop on a longer route, a place for business, and a central hub for how tourism moves. This study looks at what has kept Nairobi important inside Kenya's tourism system from 2018 to 2025.

C. Research Objectives

The general objective of the study was to examine the factors responsible for Nairobi's sustained dominance as Kenya's leading travel and tourism hub between 2018 and 2025. The study was guided by four specific objectives:

- To examine the influence of international air connectivity and Nairobi's gateway function on travel flows between (2018-2025)
- To assess the contribution of business tourism, MICE tourism and Nairobi's institutional functions to the city's travel dominance;
- To examine the influence of Nairobi's urban, cultural, wildlife and hospitality attractions on its competitiveness as a tourism destination; and
- To evaluate the role of Nairobi as a gateway and tourism distribution hub connecting visitors to Kenya's wider tourism circuits.

D. Research Questions

The study sought to answer four questions:

- How has international connectivity contributed to Nairobi's position as Kenya's dominant travel gateway?
- How have business tourism and MICE activities contributed to Nairobi's travel flows?
- How do Nairobi's urban, cultural, wildlife and hospitality attractions influence its destination competitiveness?
- How does Nairobi's gateway function connect visitors with tourism destinations elsewhere in Kenya?

E. Scope of the Study

The work looked at Nairobi in Kenya. It covered the years 2018-2025. The research broke the topic into four parts. These were how well Nairobi connects to other places and acts as a gateway. It also looked at business travel and MICE tourism. Another part focused on city life and tourism sites. The final part considered Nairobi's function as a place where tourism gets routed and shared. For the data, the study relied on existing records. It did not use first hand surveys of visitors.

II. METHODS

A. Research Design

The paper used a review of existing data and a descriptive approach. This fit the goal of the study, since it aimed to pull together earlier statistical results and published views about why travel and tourism stayed strong in Nairobi during the last eight years.

B. Data Sources

The work used several main sources. These included Economic Surveys from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. It also drew from Kenya tourism sector reports and from releases by the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife. Nairobi City County also had useful tourism information. In addition, the National Tourism Service Portal provided some information. The study further relied on peer reviewed papers about tourism and destination competitiveness.

Published research on business events and tourism in Nairobi was also used. KNBS is the main body in Kenya that gathers, reviews, and shares official statistics. The Economic Surveys include yearly figures on tourism and aviation, as shown in KNBS (2026).

C. Data Analysis

Numbers were reviewed with simple descriptive stats. I also checked percentage changes. Trends were compared across time. Non number notes were sorted by theme. This was done in line with the four study goals. Four themes came out. They were: international links and the gateway role. Next was business and MICE travel. Another theme covered city sights and how well the area competes as a destination. The last theme looked at gateway and distribution functions.

D. Methodological Limitation

A key issue is how to read the airport arrival figures. The JKIA numbers show people who enter Kenya via Nairobi. They do not always mean the travellers will end up in Nairobi. Some passengers head out right away to other cities. Because of this, the study does not say Nairobi gets every passenger that lands at JKIA. The figures are used to show how important Nairobi is in Kenya's wider tourism network, at both the national and nearby regional level.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. International Connectivity and Nairobi's Gateway Function

The first objective examined the influence of international connectivity and Nairobi's gateway function.

Table 1. Kenya's International Visitor Arrivals, 2018–2025

Year	International visitor arrivals ('000)	Annual observation
2018	2,035	High pre-pandemic level
2019	2,028	High pre-pandemic level
2020	580	Severe COVID-19 disruption
2021	871	Initial recovery
2022	1,541	Strong recovery
2023	2,087	Return to approximately pre-pandemic level
2024	2,401	Strong expansion
2025	2,551	Continued growth

Source: KNBS (2023, 2024, 2026).

From 2019 to 2020, the numbers dropped a lot. International arrivals fell by about 71%. After that, the trend moved up again. In 2023, arrivals reached 2.087 million. In 2024, they rose to 2.401 million. Then in 2025, Kenya reported around 2.551 million international visitor arrivals (KNBS, 2026).

Table 2. International Arrivals through JKIA and MIA, 2024–2025

Point of entry	2024	2025	Change
JKIA	1,637,063	1,719,842	+5.1%
MIA	205,051	235,184	+14.7%
Other border points	559,142	595,615	+6.5%
Total	2,401,256	2,550,641	+6.2%

Source: KNBS (2026).

The numbers show why JKIA matters a lot. In 2025, about 1.72 million visitors arrived in Kenya through JKIA. In the same year, around 235,000 came through MIA. That means JKIA made up roughly two thirds of the international arrivals counted at Kenya's main entry points. This also backs the idea that Nairobi's strong travel position is tied to how easy it is to get there. Nairobi sits where three kinds of movement meet. It links international air routes, regional road links, and trips within the country. Because of this, Nairobi works like a chain that boosts the next step. International flights bring people in. They then stay and use local services. After that, they move around for work or for leisure. Some travellers continue on and later come back through Nairobi again.

B. Business Tourism and MICE Tourism

The second aim focused on business travel and MICE tourism. Nairobi stands out because it serves as a key hub for trade and diplomacy in the region. Many global companies have

offices there. Regional groups are also based there. Diplomatic missions and other international bodies operate in the city, along with government offices. Because of this, people keep traveling for work and official meetings, even when they are not choosing normal holiday trips. MICE events matter a lot as well. In 2025, Kenya held 998 international conferences and 12,671 local conferences. The count of international conferences stayed near 1,000. (KNBS, 2026)

Table 3. Selected Indicators of Nairobi's MICE and Business Tourism Environment

Indicator	Evidence	Tourism implication
International conferences	998 in Kenya, 2025	International visitor demand
Local conferences	12,671 in 2025	Domestic business travel
KICC	Major conference facility	International MICE attraction
Bomas International Convention Complex	Large-scale events	Conference diversification
Multinational organizations	Concentrated in Nairobi	Business travel
Diplomatic institutions	Major regional concentration	Official and diplomatic travel
Hotels and restaurants	Extensive hospitality supply	Visitor accommodation and expenditure

Source: KNBS (2026); National Tourism Service Portal (2026); Nairobi City County (2026).

Nairobi's tourism economy is backed by many kinds of businesses working together. When someone comes for a conference, they may need airport pickup, a place to stay, a venue for sessions, meals, local travel, and time for fun. They might also want trips outside the city. Because of this, MICE guests can spend more money across different hospitality services. A study on Nairobi's business-event visitors looked at what shapes how they view the place. It pointed to venue services, hotel options, local attractions, and ease of getting around, safety and security, and cost levels. So, Nairobi is not competitive just because it has conference rooms. The city stands out when it can link solid meeting services with tourism and leisure activities.

C. *Urban, Cultural, Wildlife and Hospitality Attractions*

The third goal was to check Nairobi's tourism sites. Nairobi offers a mix of travel options. You can find wildlife areas, cultural places, and local history. There are also museums and parks, plus forests to visit. Food is part of the experience, along with markets and places to shop. In addition, there are shows and events to attend.

Table 4. Major Tourism Product Categories in Nairobi

Tourism category	Major examples	Contribution to destination competitiveness
Wildlife	Nairobi National Park, Giraffe Centre	Safari experience within metropolitan area
Culture	Bomas of Kenya, cultural performances	Cultural experience
Heritage	Railway Museum, Karen Blixen Museum	Historical tourism
Museums	Nairobi National Museum	Educational and cultural tourism
Ecotourism	Karura Forest	Nature-based urban recreation
Business	Corporate headquarters, diplomatic missions	Business travel
MICE	KICC, BICC, hotels	Conference tourism
Gastronomy	Restaurants and hotels	Food tourism
Entertainment	Events, music, arts and nightlife	Leisure tourism
Shopping	Malls, markets and craft outlets	Retail tourism

Source: Nairobi City County (2026).

Nairobi has a clear pull for travellers because many kinds of activities sit close to one another. You might go to a conference in the morning. Then you can head to Nairobi National Park later that day. After that, you can try local food or catch cultural shows in the evening. What makes the city stand out is how city life and wildlife both show up in the same trip. Nairobi City County calls the city the "safari capital." It also points out that a national park exists right in the city. The county further lists a wide range of cultural, past related, nature focused, and leisure options. (Nairobi City County, 2026) Because of this mix of offerings, Nairobi can draw in more than one kind of visitor at the same time. That helps the destination stay competitive.

D. Nairobi as a Gateway and Tourism Distribution Hub

The fourth objective examined Nairobi's role in connecting visitors to other tourism destinations. Nairobi operates as a tourism distribution hub. International visitors arriving at JKIA can connect with numerous destinations through road and domestic air networks.

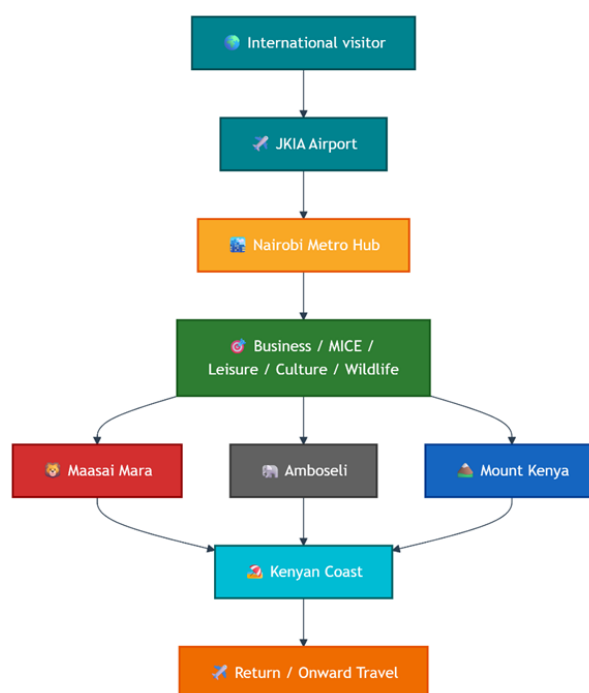


Figure 1: Nairobi's Gateway Tourism System

The gateway role means Nairobi gains from tourist trips that spread past those who name the city itself as the main place to go. Say a traveller plans to visit Maasai Mara. That person might stop in Nairobi for at least one night before the safari and again after it. While in Nairobi, the traveller can rely on local transport firms, stay in city hotels, eat at restaurants, and book through travel agents. Because of this, Nairobi's tourism spending does not end at the city limits. It goes outward through the wider visitor journey. This fits Leiper's idea of a tourism system where transit paths and destination areas link up instead of working as separate parts (Leiper, 1990). Nairobi's role as a gateway also comes from where it sits on the map. The city is set in a relatively central spot for reaching several well-known tourism circuits. Nairobi City County points to this as a key strength, noting that the city connects well to other East African towns and tourism sites.

E. Integrated Findings

The four objectives demonstrate that Nairobi's travel dominance is not caused by one factor.

Table 5. Integrated Explanation of Nairobi's Travel Dominance

Objective	Main determinant	Evidence	Contribution
Objective 1	International connectivity	JKIA handled 1.72 million international arrivals in 2025	Makes Nairobi Kenya's principal international gateway

Objective 2	Business and MICE	998 international conferences nationally in 2025; major MICE facilities in Nairobi	Generates year-round business travel
Objective 3	Tourism diversification	Wildlife, culture, heritage, nature, food and entertainment	Creates multiple visitor motivations
Objective 4	Gateway function	Road and air connections to major tourism circuits	Distributes visitors throughout Kenya
Overall	Integrated tourism ecosystem	Multiple interacting advantages	Sustains Nairobi's travel dominance

Source: Author's synthesis from KNBS (2026), Nairobi City County (2026), National Tourism Service Portal (2026), Leiper (1990), and Ritchie and Crouch (2003).

The results fit the destination competitiveness idea. This view says a place does well when several elements work together. These include what it offers, the resources behind it, how easy it is to reach, its infrastructure, how it is run, and the conditions that make all of this possible (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Nairobi seems to have both kinds of strengths. On the one hand, it has comparative advantages. These are tied to its location and how close it is to wildlife. On the other hand, it also shows competitive advantages. These come through its links to the wider world. They also come from its hotel and guest services, its business groups, its conference spaces, and its tourism promotion. Destination management plays a role as well.

IV. DISCUSSION

Nairobi appears to lead on travel for reasons that are built in, not just luck. Being the national capital gives it an advantage that other cities in Kenya cannot copy in the same way. Many bodies keep moving people in and out, including government offices, embassies, international agencies, firms, banks, colleges, and research and development groups. Because of this, the city gains travel from both tourism's pull and travel that comes from institutions. That is different from places where visitors are mostly leisure travellers. Easy access matters when a destination wants to win. Even if a place has strong sights, it may still get fewer foreign visitors if getting there is hard or costly. Nairobi does well because it has wide air links via JKIA and strong road links to other parts of Kenya and nearby regions in East Africa. In this sense, the airport is not only transport. It also helps tourism stay competitive. The 2025 JKIA figures back up that view. About 1.72 million international visitors entered Kenya through JKIA, which is much higher than arrivals through MIA (KNBS, 2026).

Leisure tourism is not steady. It can change with the time of year, the weather, the state of the world economy, and events that hit a specific place. MICE travel adds another pull for customers. People attend conferences based on event dates. They do not rely only on the usual holiday season. This steady flow can help hotels, eateries, conference halls, transport firms, and other local tourism businesses keep running across the year. KNBS also reports more international and local conferences, which points to how much this group matters for Kenya's tourism recovery (KNBS, 2026). Nairobi has a major strength. It lets one trip include many types of activities. A guest may visit for business and also attend a conference. They

can then see wildlife, visit cultural spots, try local food, go shopping, and enjoy nightlife. This mix opens the door to bundling. Hotels, travel agents, conference teams, restaurants, cultural groups, and transport services can join together and sell related experiences as a set. The city's tourism mix shows this range, from parks and heritage to food, nightlife, wildlife, culture, and MICE events (Nairobi City County, 2026).

People should not treat visitor gateways and attraction locations as the same thing. Nairobi can pull many outside visitors since JKIA brings them in. Yet places like the Maasai Mara, Diani, Amboseli, Tsavo, and Mount Kenya may still matter more for certain holiday plans. So, Nairobi has a strong role in the wider tourism system, but not because it fully swaps out those areas. It is strong because it links them. This point matters for how tourism policy is set. Backing Nairobi does not have to mean putting every tourism budget there. A better idea is to use Nairobi to spread visitors and spending to other counties too.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The study looked at why Nairobi stayed the top travel and tourism base in Kenya from 2018 to 2025. Overall, Nairobi's strength comes from several linked factors. These include how well it connects to other countries, its business and conference travel, a wide mix of visitor sites, and its role as an entry and handoff point for other places. To start, international links matter a lot. In 2025, JKIA logged about 1.72 million international visitor arrivals. That figure was much higher than what came through MIA. This points to Nairobi as the main entry route for visitors into Kenya. Next, Nairobi also pulls in travellers for work. The city acts as a business and diplomatic centre. Because of that, travel demand is not limited to vacations. MICE travel adds to this. It brings in people for meetings, corporate trips, and visits tied to outside agencies. Another reason is the spread of what visitors can do in Nairobi. The tourism mix is not narrow. Wildlife experiences, cultural sites, history and heritage, eco travel, food spots, shows and events, places to shop, and business-related travel are all present within the city area. With this variety, the destination can appeal to more visitor types. It also lowers the risk of relying on just one kind of market. Finally, Nairobi works as a gateway for the larger tourism network in Kenya. Many visitors arrive in Nairobi and then move on to other destinations. They often still use services based in Nairobi along the way. This includes hotels, transport options, tour operators, travel agencies, and other hospitality services. So, the study concludes that Nairobi's lead is not just about having more things to see than other sites. The key is the way its parts fit together as a tourism system. Its position, airport access, business setup, conference travel base, tourism variety, and gateway role all feed into one another and keep the advantage in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Nairobi should be treated as a key entry point, but the gains from tourism must spread beyond the city. National and county tourism teams should build clearer links between Nairobi and other areas. Tour plans ought to join Nairobi with the Maasai Mara, Amboseli, Mount Kenya, Nakuru, Naivasha, Samburu, and the coast.
- Hotel groups, airlines, tour companies, event organizers, attractions, and county authorities should put together joined-up travel bundles. These bundles can mix

meetings with a Nairobi city visit. They should also pair wildlife stops, local culture, safari time, and time near the coast. The goal is longer trips and higher spending by visitors.

- Kenya should keep funding conference sites that are up to date, easy to reach, and kinder to the environment. Nairobi should not be seen only as a place that hosts meetings. It should be pushed as a top business-events stop in Africa.
- Nairobi's ability to compete depends on how easy it is to move around inside the city. So, tourism plans should come with investments in public transport. Airport access matters too, along with safer footpaths, better traffic control, and smarter transport tools.
- Nairobi also needs a clear plan for managing destinations. This work should bring together the national government, Nairobi City County, Kenya Tourism Board, and private hospitality firms. Airlines, tour operators, culture groups, and local residents should all take part.
- Tourism should grow without damaging Nairobi's natural assets. Nairobi National Park, Karura Forest, city parks, wetlands, and heritage sites should be kept safe. At the same time, visitor numbers can rise in a managed way.
- Future tourism data should sort people by how they enter and how they move. It should track those who come in via JKIA, those who stay overnight in Nairobi, and those who only pass through. It should also separate business guests, MICE participants, and leisure travelers. It should include people who use Nairobi as a stop before going to other counties. This approach would give a clearer view of how Nairobi tourism is really doing.

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