

Handcrafting bespoke luxury experiences across Africa with the Holts

 By Cari Coetzee

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Concepts Collection creates unforgettable luxury experiences - be it in the shape of a destination wedding, corporate event, group incentives, private celebrations or the ultimate in African holiday adventures. We chat to Founder and Managing Director Christina Holt and Group CEO Richard Holt to find out how it all started and what it takes to run one of the leading luxury brands in SA.



Tell us about Concepts Collection and how it all started

Richard: A chance encounter in the Cape Winelands in the year 2000 created the backdrop for our business success story. It was here that we met – as a German and UK traveller on separate life journeys - but starting an enduring love affair with South Africa and each other. After courting Cape Town and each other, a joint background in hospitality and a shared love for travel and adventure saw us marry here in 2003 and pack our bags and move here in 2004.

Christina started the exclusive event management company Wedding Concepts with a South African partner that year. A niche business that focused largely on the increasing demand from international clients wanting destination weddings to South Africa. With a growing portfolio of discerning clients seeking exclusive and opulent celebrations for hundreds of guests, Christina's international background in luxury hospitality meant she was definitely in the right place at the right time.

By 2008 Wedding Concepts was at the forefront of the wedding industry in South Africa, designing and managing some of the most spectacular events in the country. With around 40 events per year

ranging from 20 to 600 guests, a growing team, and increasing demand from both international and local High-net-worth individuals (HNWI), it was time for further expansion of the business.

How has it evolved and where is it today?

Christina: Until this point, Richard with his other work had largely been acting as a part-time strategic advisor, but with his business background and ability to spot new opportunities he joined the business full time in 2008. We bought out the other partner and embarked on a plan of diversification, growth and international marketing.

First up was the immediate launch of Travel Concepts, set up specifically to cater for the 4,000-5,000 largely global guests who were attending Wedding Concepts weddings every year. It was just a perfect synergy and extension to our business. Our research showed that most international wedding guests were new to South Africa, would stay in the country at least seven to 14 nights and combine attending the wedding with a holiday. At the same time, our bridal couples were excited about working with integrated wedding and travel business, knowing that their guests were getting the same level of highly personalised attention and service.

We literally had a significant potential new customer-base right at our fingertips and merely had to get our bridal couples to endorse us as part of their wedding. With the same focus on luxury Africa, Travel Concepts now successfully recommends

and books exclusive African itineraries, honeymoons, arranges transportation, specific tours and concierge services for bridal parties and their guests. Repeat business and continuous referral from past clients as well as continued bookings from new wedding guests, seeing the business go from strength to strength.

Event Concepts was the third company we launched in 2010, providing the same standards of exclusive event design, planning and management for corporate and private clients. Having already married many of South Africa's most prominent business people by this point and with many others attending our weddings and experiencing our work first hand it seemed a natural extension of our existing work and leveraging from the success of Wedding Concepts.

To date, we have worked with some of the most recognised global and local corporate brands and, of course, Travel Concepts equally integrates providing in accommodation, transportation, tours and local experiences for corporate and private groups large and small.

Richard: As well as launching the other two complementary companies, Wedding Concepts continues as our flagship, not only establishing itself as a luxury brand in SA, but we have worked hard in developing the brand globally. As part of our international marketing strategy our work, our team and opinions are regularly featured in top industry magazines and blogs across the world, Christina is regarded as one of the elite wedding voices, being asked to speak and share experiences at leading wedding, tourism and hospitality events across the world.

In 13 years we have come along way and are now at the helm of the brand Concepts Collection a family of the three companies Wedding Concepts, Travel Concepts and Event Concepts. Whilst focused on different markets, we are hugely proud of our talented team who ensure that each company lives and breathes our core values of a truly bespoke, personalised event experiences, creative design flair, natural-born style and an unmistakable passion for service excellence and attention to detail at every level.

With our offices located in Cape Town and soon to be Johannesburg, we conceptualise and create everything from designer wedding celebrations to special corporate events and brand launches, incentive travel and tailor-made holidays across Africa.









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■ ***Tell us about Travel Concepts specifically and what differentiates it from any other travel operator/experience?***

The world of travel is a hugely saturated and competitive industry and as a single business, we would never have started Travel Concepts. But being able to tap into another large customer base so close at hand was a “no-brainer”.

“ *Travel Concepts offers a very personalised and bespoke service - we don't sell travel packages or discount holidays and are all about handcrafting unique travel memories.* ”

We like to understand the individual personalities and styles of our customers and through offering very popular insider tips, inspiring insights and highly personal attention, we create exciting itineraries that really connect people to the heart of Africa. Like the rest of our business, it's small touches that make all the difference, like unexpected gifts on arrival with some thought, suggestions on where to wine and dine and simply sharing our deep knowledge of the latest, best and most authentic places to stay and explore.

■ **What, in your opinion, made Concepts Collection a success?**

Undoubtedly spotting a niche in the market back in 2004 and being in the right place at the right time as South Africa was emerging as a top tourist destination.

Having a global background with experience in international hospitality combined with a real understanding of 5-star service standards and high client expectations and applying this in an African context. Our team's international mindset, attention to detail, not compromising our brand and of course building great industry relationships locally are at the heart of our success too.

“ *As a business in the service industry we are all about people after all - and recruiting, developing and trusting the right people to represent our brand is key.* ”

We have a very open style of management and engage, grow and reward our team. Most of them have been with us for years and have becoming a crucial part of our success and brand.

■ **What does it take to run one of the leading luxury brands in SA? What is in your entrepreneurial toolbox?**

- **Understanding the mindset of the HNWI globally,** locally and the levels of expectations, standards they have.
- **Luxury is personal.** We engage with our clients on a very personal level to create a wedding, event or journey that's truly reflective of who they are.
- **Learn to say no, don't compromise.** For us, we are in a very niche market and it's been crucial for us to focus on that, not be tempted to compromise our brand and standards by taking on projects that just aren't right.
- **Little things make a big difference.** For us, the smallest touches count.
- **Integrity and honesty.** A very personal belief for us and our team is the way we conduct ourselves. We are proud of some of the long-standing relationships we have with past clients and the relationships we have with industry partners in Africa.

■ **What advice would you give other entrepreneurs in the industry?**

- What do you want to really achieve with your business? Is it about creating a lifestyle or building a business that can grow and create value. They are two completely different things and require different approaches and skill sets from their owners from the outset.
- Be clear what differentiates your business from competitors - create a compelling value proposition that makes you stand out.

- A sound financial mindset is key – in an industry famous for being creative, each project still needs to make a profit.

■ **What does the future hold for Concepts Collection?**

The luxury hospitality sector in Africa is one of the fastest growing markets, which means greater local expectations and desire for world-class events, plus an increase in international business and tourism clients visiting emerging African countries. We are already working across borders and are increasingly being asked to quote for events and celebrations in countries like Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania and Angola.

“ The expansion of our business into select African countries and the creation of new partnerships across the continent is, therefore, at the forefront of our development. ”

In this regard, it's important that we develop our exit strategy over the next decade, in a way that guarantees the right leadership to take the Concepts Collection on the next phase of its journey into rest of Africa and creates a legacy. We are working on that and are developing a team that can realise this opportunity and will drive a new phase of growth for the business whilst maintaining our position and reputation in South Africa.

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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