

In the business development driving seat with Simone Kuhn

 By [Cari Coetzee](#)

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It's always refreshing to find a woman in the business development driving seat, a sector that has traditionally been dominated by men. We chat to Simone Kuhn, Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group's business development manager for Africa and Indian Ocean and one of [Africa's Top 100 Women in Tourism](#) - she knows all about doing business in Africa and finding ideal locations and partners to grow the group's hotel presence on the continent.



Simone Kuhn, Business Development Manager for Africa & Indian Ocean, Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group

Tell us about your journey with the Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group

Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group is one of the leading and most dynamic hotel companies in the world. Our business is to operate hotels under one of our internationally recognised brands. Currently, Carlson Rezidor has 78 hotels (16,500+ rooms) under operation and development in 29 countries in Africa under either the upper upscale Radisson Blu brand, upscale lifestyle select Radisson Red brand, upper midscale Park Inn by Radisson brand or the luxury Quorvus Collection brand.

I joined this pioneering group in 2011 as a business development coordinator, fully supporting the business development team and the roll out of the Africa Strategy.

In 2016 I was promoted to assistant business development manager, responsible for developing my own leads and signing new hotel deals. I am currently responsible for Anglophone markets with a focus on Ethiopia, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Malawi and achieving our 2020 team target of 23,000 rooms in operation and under development.

Tell us about both the most challenging and exciting parts of doing business in Africa and the Indian Ocean

The most exciting part of the job is that no deal is the same. Each deal comes with a different owner which results in a different dynamic. Travel, of course, is quite exciting, especially when you're doing business in countries you've never been to. Most importantly for me are the relationships I have built with owners, stakeholders and professional teams as well as meeting new people and learning about different cultures, which is critical for a successful deal.

The challenging side is to ensure you are partnering with the right owner. In essence, it's like a marriage and, therefore, the basics have to be right, such as understanding and trust. One also has to have the right tools to execute the strategy,

which offers its own obstacles. Out of our control, for example, are political stability and recessions which affect our operational hotels, however, on the flip side of the coin, this is the time to get into the market for new leads.

■ ***What has been the biggest challenge in breaking into what is generally a male dominated industry - Business development in the hotel industry?***

I wouldn't say it has been a challenge as such, as ultimately, it's not about who you work with or the environment you work within, but ensuring you create your own opportunities, network and get yourself out there. Overcoming self-negative talk and knowing what you stand for is key. I believe ensuring people know they can count on you is crucial to any professional relationship.

“ I grew up in the hotel business... it's definitely in my blood. ”

■ ***What made you choose a career in your industry? What motivates and inspires you?***

I grew up in the hotel business as my father was a GM within Sun International for many years, it's definitely in my blood. It's the diversity that comes with being in business development from the initial phone call to the final chase of the deal that motivates me. To see how far Carlson Rezidor has progressed in a brief period is a clear indicator that we are doing something right. This, in itself, opens up the future to many more opportunities on the continent which is incredibly inspiring.

■ ***What advice would you offer other women in the industry with the same aspirations as you?***

To ensure you surround yourself with like-minded people that you can learn from and grow with. To not be so hard on yourself, you know more than you think and to never underestimate the value of relationships.

■ ***What are your plans and goals for the year ahead?***

To progress to business development director and grow our African portfolio to the depths of the markets with clustered growth through our brand portfolio.

■ ***What is your recipe for success?***

Always stick to your gut, learn from your mistakes, use your resources, ask plenty of questions along the way - both internally and externally - and don't lose who you are.

■ ***What is your Women's Month message?***

Be prepared to go anywhere, as long as it's forward.

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

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

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