

Women in travel

# Five women leading the industry

Women in the engine room at MSC SA

Leading with empathy



A community built for women's success

Premier East London's dynamo

# Women in travel

Women play a defining role in the success of the travel industry, strengthening businesses through leadership, innovation and collaboration and often empowering other women to do likewise. *Travel News* turns the spotlight on the women shaping the industry today.

## Five women leading SA's travel industry

CHRISTIAAN SCHULTZ

**T**RAVEL News asked readers to nominate the influential women making the biggest impact on South Africa's travel industry – and the industry responded.

The nominations recognised women who have built successful businesses, championed innovation, advocated for travel professionals and inspired those around them. While each has followed a different path, all have earned the respect of their peers.

The *Travel News* editors selected five of the nominated women who are helping shape South Africa's travel industry through their leadership, innovation and influence.



Photo: Pexels Kampus

### Strength and determination

"Jo is always there to solve any issue that may occur while leading her team with strength and determination."

**Jo Fraser**, Executive Manager of the Club Travel Franchise, says travel has been part of her life since infancy. She has spent nearly four decades in the travel industry.

Born in Scotland, Fraser spent her childhood between South Africa, Nigeria and the UK, with family holidays across



Jo Fraser

North Africa and Europe igniting a passion for seeing the world.

She completed a Higher National Diploma in Business, specialising in travel and tourism, in London before embarking on her own adventures, working on a kibbutz, teaching English in Cairo and renting motorbikes to tourists in Crete.

Fraser joined Club Travel after founder **Wally Gaynor** offered her an opportunity that would shape the next 35 years

of her career.

She progressed through the ranks as a travel consultant and branch manager before moving into marketing and, later, the franchise division.

When she joined the franchise business in 2005, Club Travel had around ten ITCs. Today, the Club Travel family has grown to approximately 420 partners, alongside the recently added Sure Travel Group.

Throughout this journey, Fraser says the highlight

has been being part of a family, including colleagues and clients.

"I can walk a mile in another woman's shoes because I have walked that journey. I personally know my clients' needs and frustrations, as I am first and foremost a travel agent."

Reflecting on her career, Fraser said: "Nothing gives me greater joy than seeing a travel agent become an entrepreneur and own their own business and thrive."

### Service above all

"A giant and a pioneer in shaping the future of the travel industry."

**Linda Edwards**, MD of XL Turners Travel, has a career that has spanned more than three decades.

After returning to South Africa following overseas travel and a role at the South African Embassy in London, she decided to pursue a career in an industry she had always enjoyed as a traveller.

She joined XL Turners Travel in 1992 as a junior consultant and steadily expanded her expertise across corporate travel before taking on leadership

roles that led to her appointment as MD.

Among the milestones that stand out is overseeing travel arrangements for around 12 000 delegates attending the International AIDS Conference in Durban in 2000, when ticketing was still entirely paper-based.

Another pivotal moment came when a single client request introduced XL Turners Travel to the offshore oil and gas sector, which has since become one of the company's specialist areas.

Perhaps the achievement



Linda Edwards

of which she is proudest, however, is steering the business through the pandemic without

retrenching staff.

"Our strength and creative skills at managing offshore travel assisted us greatly during this time and stood us in good stead with organising repatriation travel for our clients."

Edwards believes her greatest impact has been understanding clients' needs and preferences, setting high service standards and building a culture of professionalism.

"As travel managers, we must compete with travellers' perceived belief that DIY bookings on the web are both easy and economical. To combat

this, we have built very strong relationships with suppliers so we can compete on price while providing personal service that is second to none."

With the advent of AI, she thinks this is more important than ever.

"There is no doubt that AI will change the way we do business, but as an industry we need to ensure that as travel managers, we remain at the forefront of corporate travel. With all the tech and AI, our team is still, by far, the most important part of our company."

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*planned.*.....

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*unplanned.*



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From page 2

Five women leading SA’s travel industry

Outspoken advocate

“She is a firehouse in our industry.”

That’s how the nomination for **Paula Martini**, owner of CoTravel, described the energy and determination that have made her one of the industry’s most outspoken advocates.

Travel has been part of Martini’s life since childhood, thanks to her father’s long career with SAA. After building a successful career in corporate travel, she stepped away from the industry for seven years to raise her children before returning as a single mother.

By then, the industry had changed dramatically. “I felt like I needed to restart and learn all



Paula Martini

over again. Coming from an era of ticket printers and handwritten MPDs, e-tickets were all new to me, as well as direct airline bookings with low-cost carriers,” she said.

After restarting her career, she transformed

a small agency into an award-winning business through Thompsons Travel before becoming a fully IATA-accredited agency, a Virtuoso Travel Professional and an unbranded Flight Centre Independent.

“Through several associations, I now have access to a wealth of services and products, allowing me not only to look after my clients but to help other travel professionals navigate the business of travel. In travel, knowledge is power and I continue to keep myself educated on all things travel at all times,” she said.

This year marks two decades since CoTravel was established. During

that time, Martini has expanded her role, becoming a published author, national radio commentator and champion of independent travel advisers.

“What began as a girl in love with the experience of far-off places became three decades in travel. It’s now also the work of helping others do the same, with more leisure travel than corporate these days, as I help my clients find purpose. My philosophy is a simple one: only humans can truly move humans.”

Her proudest achievements?

“I weathered COVID when much of the industry did not. I was nominated for the

Virtuoso Sustainability Award (which remains one of the achievements I am quietest about and proudest of), I published my first book, *Travel with Purpose: A Journey Beyond the Destination*, and I became a trusted travel voice on the radio across several stations, reaching listeners far beyond my own client base.”

Yet she believes her biggest contribution has been supporting fellow travel professionals.

“Outbound travel in this country runs on these quiet, capable individuals. Giving them recognition and a way to support one another is the contribution I care about most.”

Voice for agents

“An incredibly dynamic lady, leading the way in our industry.”

There are many ways in which **Rachael Penaluna** has contributed to the industry, including consulting, mentoring, journalism and board leadership.

As MD of Sure Maritime Travel, Penaluna has experienced almost every aspect of the travel agency environment since qualifying with a National Diploma in Travel and Tourism.

She began as a junior consultant before building experience across sales, consulting, operations, marketing, social media, tenders, corporate contracts and technology, which now forms part of her daily job.

“I have been very fortunate to have worked with many good people, from all areas of travel and always grabbed the opportunities that were offered to me.”

Today, Penaluna combines



Rachael Penaluna

her agency responsibilities with serving as Chair of the Sure Travel Board and writing extensively about the industry.

“Writing for media, speaking to different players in the travel environment and promoting travel professionals is my passion. It’s hard work juggling two careers, but they overlap and have provided me with opportunities and influence that I hope will

positively affect the South African travel industry.”

She believes her writing is an extremely important tool she uses to promote travel professionals as high-trust consultants rather than clerical order-takers in the modern digital age of travel.

“My contact with many different people in the travel environment through my agency work informs my writing. It’s given me a voice I use to stick up for the consultant. I believe I am respected for that!”

Partnership builder

“Some people hold a title. Others hold an industry together. Linda is the latter.”

It’s ironic that **Linda Scott-Hayward**, Head of Commercial at Travelstart, never expected a career in travel.

“I had wanted to be an extremely famous sports commentator and I briefly worked for the Cricket and Rugby World Cups in the UK. From there, I returned to South Africa and accepted a role at Flight Centre. I thought it would simply be a chance to enjoy a few free flights and a good party or two before I moved back to sports. Instead, I discovered my purpose

and have been in the industry for 26 years!”

For the first half of her career, Scott-Hayward focused on developing people and leading teams across South Africa, the UK, Australia and the US. Today, she works with tourism boards, governments, airlines and industry stakeholders to build partnerships that encourage travel and strengthen destinations.

Despite joking that ringing the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange is certainly one for the dinner party stories, Scott-Hayward says the milestones she values most are those that have created lasting impact.

“One defining moment came during the COVID-19 pandemic. As traditional travel revenue disappeared almost overnight, we developed new partnership models that helped sustain our business while supporting destinations as they rebuilt their tourism industries.”

She also lists representing South Africa on international platforms as a tremendous honour.

“Every opportunity to showcase our country’s innovation and collaborative spirit helps strengthen South Africa’s position within the global tourism industry. South Africans are resilient and we are often one of the



Linda Scott-Hayward

first markets that bounce back from whatever the world throws at us.

“I love showing international organisations the value of the South

African traveller and what we can contribute to a city or country. Alongside our incredible colleagues and partners, we then attempt to make travel more accessible, affordable and meaningful to drive passenger numbers,” she said.

The most satisfying part of her job is seeing partnerships turn into real benefits for the tourism ecosystem and surrounding communities.

“It is most rewarding when that contribution is in our own country because it truly changes livelihoods, creates jobs and generates opportunities.”



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# Designed for life, chosen by women

“I’VE spent my entire career in this industry and the thing I’m most proud of is watching women who started out doubting themselves, transition to become business owners who mentor others. That’s what the right structure makes possible.”

These words carry particular weight coming from **Chantal Gouws**, GM of Envoyage South Africa. Gouws is a newly-inducted member of the Flight Centre Travel Group Global Hall of Fame – one of the most prestigious career-level honours the global travel giant bestows. She has earned the authority to define what the right structure looks like. And she has spent years building it.

She’s also the first to acknowledge that the model works beyond its predominantly female membership. “You’ll be surprised how many men are doing this as well,” she

says. But she’s equally clear about why women have claimed this model so decisively and why that’s no accident.

“Envoyage was never designed specifically for women,” says Gouws. “It was designed around life and the idea that your career should fit the way you live, not the other way around. Women have historically had far more reason to need a model that does that. The world has asked more of us outside the office for a long time, so when something comes along that delivers on flexibility and independence without asking you to sacrifice ambition, it resonates.”

Envoyage’s membership is predominantly female – a reflection of something deeper than preference. In South Africa’s tourism sector, women make up almost 70% of the workforce, yet fewer than 40% of leadership roles

are held by women. Only around 5%-8% serve at board level. The participation is there but the progression, historically, has not always followed.

The ITC model dismantles some of that friction. There’s no ceiling to bump against when you own the ceiling. When you set your own hours there’s no penalty for school pick-up (or for the solo adventure you’ve been planning, or the fur-child who needs walking at 10h00). There’s no permission required to grow, pivot or build something new – because the infrastructure to do all those things is already in place and it belongs to you. Whatever your life looks like, the model fits around it.

Chantal Gouws



What makes Envoyage distinctive is that the infrastructure is truly world-class. Backed

by Flight Centre Travel Group, members access global buying power, a comprehensive product marketplace, dedicated marketing support and a digital ecosystem built specifically for independent travel professionals. The support of an international corporation; the soul of a small business. Both, simultaneously, on your terms.

And then there’s the community. “I’ve always worked with women,” Gouws says, “and what I know is that something extraordinary happens when women support each other. We share knowledge. We share momentum.”

Envoyage didn’t set out to solve a gender problem. It built something that meets people where they are. And women, it turns out, have been waiting for exactly that.

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# Women in the engine room at MSC SA

THIS Women's Month, MSC Cruises South Africa celebrates three women whose leadership, expertise and passion help shape the cruise line's success behind the scenes.

For **Candace Beaver**, Head of Revenue at MSC Cruises, a career in travel has always been about people.

"I started my career in travel in 2007 as a call centre agent, where I quickly realised the travel industry was about far more than selling holidays," she says. "I saw it was about creating meaningful experiences and understanding the impact travel can have on people's lives."

Since then, Beaver has progressed through operations and commercial leadership roles at Flight Centre, Imagine Cruising and now MSC Cruises. Along the way, she has learnt that successful businesses are built by empowering teams, putting customers first and embracing change.

Reflecting on her journey, Beaver credits the people



Candace Beaver

around her for shaping her approach to leadership. "I've been lucky to work with colleagues and mentors who have challenged and inspired me. I'm passionate about encouraging more women to pursue leadership in travel and I hope my journey shows that careers are built through curiosity, opportunity and the people who help you grow along the way."

**Brand builder**

MSC's Marketing Manager, **Nompumelelo Vundhla**, brings 10 years of marketing and

communications experience to the table. She has contributed to internationally recognised brands, including LUX Resorts & Hotels and MAC Cosmetics Sub-Saharan Africa, before stepping into senior leadership at MSC Cruises.

"I began my career as an intern and have consistently advanced through dedication, continuous learning, strategic thinking and a passion for delivering meaningful results," she says.

Her role at MSC focuses on accelerating commercial growth, strengthening brand



Nompumelelo Vundhla



Thango Gombiza

value and enhancing customer engagement.

"For me, marketing is about more than promoting a product, it's about inspiring people to experience something meaningful," says Vundhla.

**Leading together**

For **Thango Gombiza**, Public Relations Manager at MSC Cruises, the women who have surrounded her throughout her life have played a defining role in her personal and professional development.

"Throughout my life, I have been surrounded by

extraordinary women whose support, guidance and inspiration have shaped me. These are women who have led me, women I have had the privilege to lead and women with whom I have worked side by side."

Having started her career in communications in 2008, Gombiza has worked with several brands, including some in the travel and tourism sector. She recognises that it's a sector that plays a vital role in South Africa's social and economic landscape, creating opportunities, connecting people and contributing significantly to economic growth.

She highlights MSC's people as one of its greatest strengths, noting that MSC Cruises' South African operations are powered by a workforce that is 80% female.

Her message to women entering the industry is simple: "Embrace every opportunity, make the most of every space you occupy and leave a positive and lasting impact wherever you go."



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# Leading with empathy

AS SOUTH Africa celebrates Women's Month this August, conversations around women in the workplace often focus on leadership statistics, diversity targets and corporate milestones.

While these are important to Club Travel, the company believes that true empowerment starts with something much simpler: empathy.

In July, Club Travel celebrated 39 years in the travel industry, and throughout that journey one of its core values has remained unchanged. "Walk a mile in another woman's shoes," says **Mandy Rautenbach**, Franchise Support for Club Travel.

**People-focused**

Travel is a people business, says Rautenbach. Every booking, every challenge and every success story involves understanding someone else's perspective.

The same applies within Club Travel's teams.

"We recognise that every woman has her own journey, balancing careers, families, personal ambitions and life's unexpected challenges. Taking the time to understand one another creates a workplace built on respect, trust and genuine support."

Women are at the heart of Club Travel's operations.

"Our workforce is proudly made up predominantly of women, with many of them having built long and successful careers within the Club Travel Group," says Rautenbach.

Beyond Club Travel's own business, many of its consortium partners are women who have taken the leap into business ownership, building successful travel companies while serving their clients and communities with passion.

"What makes these women remarkable isn't simply that they own businesses. It's the resilience they demonstrate, the relationships they build



**Mandy Rautenbach**

and the willingness they show to support fellow women within the industry," she

says. "We celebrate their achievements just as much as our own."

Rautenbach believes the travel industry is one built on collaboration rather than competition.

"We see women sharing knowledge, mentoring new consultants, celebrating one another's successes and stepping in to help when challenges arise. Those everyday acts of kindness often have a greater impact than any formal programme."

"As we celebrate Women's Month, we're reminded that creating opportunities for women isn't only about opening doors," she adds.

"It's about creating an environment where women feel supported, understood and encouraged to succeed in whatever path they choose."

Club Travel remains committed to building a culture where empathy comes first.

"When we take the time to walk a mile in another woman's shoes, we don't just become better colleagues, we become better leaders, better partners and ultimately, better people," says Rautenbach.





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# The powerhouse behind Premier East London

FOR **Joanne Duffin**, GM of Premier Hotel East London, leadership in hospitality is rooted in resilience, curiosity and the ability to connect people, business and purpose.

Her journey began at 18, when an open day at the Hotel School at the Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein introduced her to an industry that would become her career.

After completing her studies, she built her experience from the ground up, spent four years working abroad and returned to South Africa as an Assistant F&B Manager.

A defining step came when she served as an Acting GM. The experience gave her a wider view of the business and confirmed that she wanted to lead, influence change and help shape the careers of others.

After holding her first



**Joanne Duffin** permanent GM role in Gauteng, she joined Premier Hotels & Resorts as GM of Premier Hotel Cape Town in early 2024. Nearly two years later, she accepted the opportunity to lead Premier Hotel East London in the East London International Convention Centre complex.

Duffin now oversees a product positioned to serve corporate, government, conferencing, events and leisure

markets. With spacious accommodation, Indian Ocean views and integrated access to the convention centre's expo and auditorium facilities, the complex provides a one-stop destination for meetings, events and stays.

Her commercial approach is grounded in understanding the right market for the product, protecting rate integrity and creating value through thoughtful guest touches, visible management and a motivated team.

Her leadership style is people-centred and supported by strong financial discipline. Mentorship has played an important role in her own journey and she now hopes to provide that same encouragement to others.

Duffin is passionate about creating stronger pathways for women in hospitality. She believes



**Premier Hotel East London – next door to the city's International Conference Centre.** Photo: Premier Hotels & Resorts

women bring resilience, warmth and decisiveness to leadership but should not be treated as exceptions. She says companies need to give capable women genuine opportunities to grow rather than allowing family responsibilities or a lack of previous exposure to become barriers.

As travel becomes more technology-driven, Duffin remains a strong advocate for preserving the human side of hospitality. Automation may improve convenience, but important moments such as check-in, restaurant service and departure should remain personal.

Her ambition is to help position Premier Hotel East London as a flagship property while building a legacy defined by the people she has developed and the example she has set for future female leaders in travel.



She leads and inspires.  
She runs her business  
on her own terms.

*"I am surrounded by some of the most radiant, driven women in this industry. What Envoyage offers them is a brand and a business model worthy of everything they bring to it."*

**-Chantal Gouws, General Manager, Envoyage South Africa**



LEARN MORE

# A community built for women's success

AT TRAVEL Counsellors, women are not expected to build businesses alone. They lead with the freedom of independence backed by technology, mentoring, marketing support and a community that wants them to succeed

It's a community where women lead not only through individual success but through the way they support, inspire and empower one another.



Charmaine Higgins

**Freedom**  
For **Charmaine Higgins**, a Travel Counsellor since 2007 and the very first of South Africa's Travel Counsellors, leadership has been built on trust, relationships and consistency.

After joining Travel Counsellors in its early days in South Africa, Higgins found the freedom to run her business on her own terms, backed by the support of a trusted franchise partner.

Within months, she was named South Africa's Top Travel Counsellor, a title she retained for six consecutive years. Yet, for Higgins, her greatest achievement is the loyalty of clients who have stayed with her for more than 18 years.

**Innovation**  
**Melissa Ridley**, a TC since 2020, represents a new kind of leadership:



**Melissa Ridley**  
innovation with heart.

As an enthusiastic early adopter of AI, Ridley has embraced technology as a way to enhance, not replace, the personal relationships at the centre of every Travel Counsellor's business.

She uses AI to personalise client communications, streamline marketing,

create complex itineraries and work more efficiently. This gives her more time to focus on her clients.

By openly sharing her experience and encouraging fellow Travel Counsellors to explore AI with confidence, Ridley is helping others discover how technology can strengthen their businesses and improve the customer experience.

**Mentoring**  
For **Karin Livingstone**, leadership is about lifting others. As a mentor, she believes one of the greatest strengths of the Travel Counsellors community is that no one has to succeed alone.

Having experienced the uncertainty of asking for help when she first started in 2017, Livingstone now enjoys helping fellow Travel Counsellors build confidence, make informed

decisions and grow their businesses.

Her approach is not simply to provide answers, but to guide others through challenges so they can develop confidence to navigate future situations themselves.



Karin Livingstone

**Support team**  
"Behind these business owners is a dedicated support team equally

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**Walk a Mile in Her Shoes**



Only 3% of drivers of land transport in the tourism sector are women. Photo: Magnific

Women face barriers in tourism transport

WOMEN remain significantly underrepresented across the global tourism transport sector, according to UN Tourism’s *Global Report on Women in Tourism Transport*, the first report to provide global, sex-disaggregated data on women working across air, land and water passenger transport.

The report highlights the legal, cultural and structural barriers that continue to limit women’s access to decent work, career progression and leadership opportunities throughout the sector.

The report also points to workplace safety and legal protection as ongoing challenges. According to UN Tourism, one in five countries still lacks legal protections against workplace harassment.

ITF General Secretary **Stephen Cotton** said the report marked the beginning of a joint commitment to turn evidence into action by tackling inequalities across tourism transport.

“Our responsibility now is to ensure that the women who keep this industry moving are also able to help lead it.”

To address these challenges, UN Tourism and the International Transport Workers’ Federation have signed a three-year work plan to implement the report’s Action Plan for Women in Tourism Transport.

The partnership will work

with governments, unions, workers and industry partners to strengthen gender-responsive policies, improve working conditions, expand training and leadership opportunities and improve the collection and reporting of data.

UN Tourism Secretary-General **Shaikha Al Nuwais** said the report provided a foundation for meaningful change.

“Tourism is meant to connect people and open doors. Yet in every part of tourism transport, too many doors remain closed to women. This report gives us the data to act with precision, not good intentions alone. Our responsibility now is to ensure that the women who keep this industry moving are also able to help lead it,” she adds.

Women drive tourism forward

WOMEN continue to play a vital role in the global tourism industry, yet significant gender gaps remain in leadership, entrepreneurship and decision-making, according to UN Tourism.

As part of its ongoing work to advance gender equality, UN Tourism highlights both the progress made and the challenges that still need to be addressed to ensure women can fully participate in and benefit from the tourism sector.

Some of the key takeaways from research into women’s roles are:

- Women make up 56% of the global tourism

workforce

- In Africa, women make up 69% of the tourism labour force

- Women earn, on average, 15% less than men in the tourism sector

- 30% of tourism ministers in 2025 were female

- Women make up 36% of aviation workers, but just 6% of pilots

- 96% of all tourism transport workers work in land passenger transport, only 3% of them are women

- 12% of water passenger transport workers are women

- 1 in 5 countries still don’t have legal protections against harassment at work.



In the tourism sector, women earn, on average, 15% less than men. Photo: Magnific

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A community built for women’s success

**From page 10** committed to their success. As Marketing Manager for Travel Counsellors South Africa, I have the privilege of supporting our business owners with the marketing, tools and guidance they need to help their businesses grow,” says **Marinda Ramalheiro**.

She told *Travel News* that

one of the most rewarding parts of her role was seeing Travel Counsellors, especially those who had never marketed themselves before, grow in confidence as they began to embrace marketing and even enjoy the process.

“Hearing their success stories and seeing how the right support can help them connect with

more clients is incredibly fulfilling,” says Ramalheiro.

For women who want to build something of their own, Ramalheiro believes Travel Counsellors offers more than a franchise model.

“It offers a partnership built around independence, support and shared success. With the backing of expert Head



Marinda Ramalheiro

Office teams, innovative technology, marketing guidance, mentorship and a community that genuinely wants all members to succeed, female business owners are empowered to grow with confidence, lead in their own way and build businesses that reflect their ambition, their expertise and the fact that they care.” ■