

Championing African women in travel - Q&A with Alessandra Alonso

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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The inaugural Women in Africa Forum and group mentoring sessions took place on day one and day three of the recent 2018 World Travel Market Africa, which was held at the CTICC in Cape Town. Hosted by [Women in Travel CIC](#) founder Alessandra Alonso, the forum aimed to highlight the importance of women entrepreneurs in Africa.

Alonso set up consultancy Shine and co-founded the Shine Awards for Women's Achievement in travel, tourism, and hospitality and is generally considered an all around trailblazer when it comes to championing women in the travel and tourism industries. We got in touch post-conference to chat WTMA, gender diversity, and the rise of African women entrepreneurs.



Alessandra Alonso, founder of Women in Travel

How do you feel the Women in Africa Forum and the group mentoring sessions went?

The event has received some extraordinarily positive feedback both in terms of the debate and the mentoring. When women come together there's always a sparkle of magic.

What were the key take away points from these discussions?

I guess for me the key take away is the need to engage and collaborate with each other. Women are looking for opportunities to learn, grow, improve and their creativity is ignited by discussions and exchanges such as the ones we had in CT. We do not do enough of this, we must create more opportunities and this is what Women in Travel CIC is here to do.

What are your thoughts on WTMA as a whole?

A great event overall and an opportunity for me to get to know many women, many businesses and indeed a whole sector in one go. A very special opportunity. To this point, I must thank WTM Africa and V&A

Waterfront for making it possible.

What are the main challenges that African women face in the travel industry?

Women in Africa are really at the heart of society and sustainability. In Africa as in many other places, most obstacles are linked to personal challenges (lack of confidence; doubting oneself) and also practical things such as access to funding for entrepreneurs; reconciling work and personal life; having to deal with stereotypes and biases.



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What are some of the success stories you have witnessed since setting up Women in Travel?

Well, where do I start? I have been lucky enough to meet some amazing women who have started businesses and succeeded against all odds; who have managed to climb up the career ladder in very difficult circumstances; who have defied culture and status quo to make it happen. Most of all, the women I meet every day are passionate, energetic and driven by huge purpose, as well as profit.

■ **How does the South African travel market differ to the overseas market?**

For me, Africa is still a relatively untapped market so the opportunities are enormous because it offers so much. Also, the number of women who run their own businesses is much higher than for example in the UK and this means that they can greatly influence the way business is conducted and also the consumers: bearing in mind 80% of all (leisure) decisions are made by women worldwide.

“ *Woman In Travel From Start Up To Grown Up - Talk with founder of [@WTMWomen](#) [@WTM_Africa](#) [#WTMAfrica2018](#) [#DiamondWorksTour](#) [pic.twitter.com/ZoyuBKd0Es](#)— Anthea Poole (@Anthea_Poole) April 18, 2018* ”

■ **What have been some of your career highlights?**

I have had some amazing experiences in my life, during my time at the World Travel & Tourism Council; KPMG; and as my own boss for the last 15 or so years. Bumping into Mr Mandela in the corridors of WEF Davos must come in near the top.

■ **How have you seen the travel industry shift since your involvement in it?**

When it comes to gender and diversity, the subject was totally ignored when I started my first advisory business in 2004 focusing on this topic. I was considered some kind of ‘loony’ by most, men and women included! It took a while but finally, gender has made it to the top of business agendas and I am delighted to see greater awareness and more action on the part of the industry. Women are still underrepresented at the top though, there are far too few female entrepreneurs across the board and too many economically inactive women whose talent could be engaged in the sector instead, so our job is far from done!

■ **What are your top tips for aspiring businesswomen in the travel industry field?**

Be yourself; build knowledge and a good support network; don't be scared to ask for what you need and go for it!

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

Ruth is the production manager at Bizcommunity. ruth@bizcommunity.com
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