

from a gap in the market to successful Kalahari lodge

 By Cari Van Wk 8 Nov 2016

Denise Koortzen, co-founder and co-developer of [Kgalagadi Lodge](#), is working hard to achieve her dream and fulfill her passion for hospitality. We spoke to Koortzen about her journey and what she thinks it takes to make it in the industry.



Denise Koortzen

Why did you decide on a career in hospitality? What inspires and drives you?

Denise Koortzen: A lot of people say you are born an entrepreneur, which I think is partly true - you need strong personality and the will to give up a steady income and normal day to day routine on something you are not 100% sure will work. For me, it was the combination of my strong will and inspiration from my mother. I grew up in a household where my mom has her own business and she is quite an inspiring business woman herself.

My mother, Amelia Booyen has a restaurant and shop at Upington Airport and I started working there as a teenager during school holidays and weekends. At school, I also had subjects relating to the hospitality industry and early on knew that I had a love and interest for this specific industry. I met my husband, SJ Koortzen when he was still managing Dregdom Kalahari Game Ranch for his father, Koos Koortzen and I started helping him out – we both have always enjoyed the hospitality industry, the challenges, and triumphs that come with it.

Being in the area, we spotted a gap in the market when we realised that Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park was always full and people were constantly struggling to get accommodation near the park. Our dream was to open a nature-friendly yet contemporary lodge near the Twee Rivieren gate and in 2012 Kgalagadi Lodge opened its doors.

I decorated all the chalets and took each chalet as a project - after I was done with one chalet it drove me to make the next one even better. This is an ongoing project that I absolutely love doing.

‡ ***What are your secret ingredients to success – what are the key things entrepreneurs need to make a business venture work?***

Koortzen: I believe that through hard work comes great success - be organised, be motivated and be involved in all departments and operations of your business. Do your research, identify your market, create business plan and implement your plan. Listen more than you talk, this will give you different and new insights in life and it will also give you a better perspective about your market. It is necessary for you to be informed on what is happening in the industry, local and abroad, make sure you read a lot.

‡ ***Tell us about your journey with Kgalagadi Lodge***

Koortzen: My husband and I have always been avid travellers and when we decided to open a lodge we did some extensive research to find the perfect location.

We have visited Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park numerous times and always noticed how full the accommodation got and realised there is a high demand for more accommodation in the area. This made us decide to open up our own lodge only five kilometers away to cater for guests wanting to experience the park but got turned away due to limited accommodation.

The location itself is so beautiful, surrounded by the red sand dunes of the Kalahari and overlooking the Botswana border. We knew from our first visit to the location that the spot had a lot of potential for creating the ideal desert haven where modern accommodation can meet wilderness.

‡ ***What were the most challenging things you faced in building and developing the lodge?***

Koortzen: We had some tough times with the planning of the lodge and it felt like it was taking forever to sort out all of the logistics such as EIA, rezoning, the subdivision of the property and the list goes on.

But one of our biggest obstacles has been the lack of skilled labour due to where we are situated. We realised that more time should be spent on training our staff than what we planned for, we recruit from the nearby communities and most of our staff has never even worked in the hospitality industry before, so we really had to invest in their training and education.

The distance has also definitely had a great impact on the construction and development which affected original cost estimates or even sometimes made it difficult to plan/budget.

We have come a long way and learned a lot from these obstacles, we now have certain suppliers that offer us good prices and now, we rather get a lot of on-site training done for our employees.

‡ ***What was your vision for Kgalagadi and have you achieved this vision?***

Koortzen: Our vision was to establish a lodge that is luxurious but still let the landscape set the mood. We always want our guest to really feel and experience that they are now in the Kalahari Desert when they visit us. It is very important to us to conserve our piece of land. We want guests to fall in love with our beautiful region.

We try our best to look after the daily needs and luxuries of our guests to a point that is possible for our location. We also strive to support the local community and uplift their quality of life by offering job opportunities and training.

■ ***What makes Kgalagadi a success in your opinion? What does it offer guests that make it unique?***

Koortzen: Kgalagadi Lodge do not have gate times like the park, which made it possible for visitors that travel from far to book in later and, therefore, enter the park early morning. This was also important for guests exiting the park - now they can still spend a full day in the park and have accommodation 5km from the park. We sell a larger variety of fresh produce, fruit, and vegetables, freshly baked bread, meat at reasonable prices.

There are various activities on site and in our nearby surroundings for guests to enjoy including education walks offered by the Khoisan, bird watching, game drives, 4 x 4 trails, cocktails and platters on a dune at sunset, as well as education walks with Prof. Anne Rasa who owns the Nature Reserve Kalahari Trails, just name a few.



Kgalagadi Lodge

■ ***Any advice you would like to share with other entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry?***

Koortzen: According to a study, fear of failure is the main concern for starting a new business. Yes, we all realise that most of the time, the type of business we want to start already exists, but do not let that put you down, just make sure that you offer a better product/service. Take the challenge and put your own spin on the business to make it unique/different. Having competitors keeps you on your toes, which is always a good thing. You have to be confident in what you do.

My advice for entrepreneurs who are thinking of getting into the hospitality industry: Make sure you do comprehensive research to determine what your goals are and what type of product and service you would like to offer. The site location is very important, make sure you know what natural recourse and services are available. Make sure you find the perfect location where you would like to create your establishment, determine the type of guests you would like to attract, etc. It is important that you put as much possible time and research into the planning phase of your business.

The more knowledge you have about what you want to do, the better you will be able to manage your business. Make sure to implement your research into your business plan, also make sure that your vision of what you want to achieve is possible with the natural resources available on your site. Having a solid business plan will help impress potential investors.

Once your lodge is ready, the actual hard work starts of managing it through all of the different growing phases. When you open your doors and start operating you have to start implementing all the different business aspects from marketing all the way to human resources. It is very important to always keep time in mind to train staff before you open your doors. It is very important to make sure everyone knows the structure of the company and where they fit in. Each employee needs a job description – specific position that you know is necessary. It is also very important to make sure that each employee understands what the role is and what are expected from them on a daily basis.

Interacting with people is a big part of our job. Your business may gain new customers because you made them feel important. Hire the right people for the job. Even though it's your business, you can't be skilled in all the various tasks, which is why you need qualified people to make sure it gets done properly. Hire people with skills and personalities that are the opposite of yours. They'll complement you and will bring different skills and talents to the business.

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