

Constant growth in Italian market



Agostinella Ribero is owner and MD of Namibia Travel Connection

Like marketing trends, travelling trends have changed. Agostinella Ribero, owner and managing director of Namibia Travel Connection, explains: "Seventeen years ago people came to Namibia because they had read or heard about the abundant wildlife and stunning landscapes. These are still the major draw cards, but now many more are coming here because they have seen Namibia on television, or because coming here has become a trend. As part of its marketing strategy, Namibia Travel Connection has regularly attended international trade

fairs and advertised in the *Namibia Holiday & Travel* (NH&T) tourism guide and South Africa's *GSA* (General Sales Agent) *Travel Marketing Magazine*. "But in the past few years we have done fewer travel shows and concentrated more on the website, as well as advertising in NH&T and GSA. We have also advertised in a couple of publications internationally and we currently have a spot in the *Activity and Adventure Guide* in the UK. We have also done trips for travel magazines in Italy. Today, the bulk of our business comes via tour operators and travel agents overseas. They have been dealing with us since we opened and are still faithful clients. Only about 10% of our business comes via Internet requests." Agostinella says that many tour operators, especially those from Europe and the USA, do not attend trade shows anymore, as email is now the easiest way of communication. Shortly after independence, Agostinella came back to her country of birth, newly qualified in languages and with a degree in Economics and Social Sciences from the University of

Cape Town. She established Namibia Travel Connection with Italian partners with the intention of bringing Italian businesspeople to invest in Namibia. Tourism, she says, was actually a spin-off that proved to be the future of Namibia Travel Connection, one of the most successful Namibian tour operators specialising in the Italian market. "Although we started out to capture the Italian market, our British, Belgian, Dutch, French and Swiss business has increased over the years. To a lesser extent we also deal with Canada and the USA." An Italian travel agent comments: "Namibia has had a constant growth in the Italian market for the past 15 to 20 years. The beauty of the country, the desert landscapes and the amazing safaris are positive assets that induce the Italians to visit. In addition to this, the food is excellent! However, in the last two years the requests seemed to have slowed down. This is due partly to the exchange rate between the Namibia dollar and the euro, and also the fact that prices in Namibia have increased."



After more than 17 years of catering mainly for the Italian market, Namibia Travel Connection is still a force to be reckoned with. In general, clients travel anything between 10 to 21 days. The main season is still from July to November, but more and more people are starting to travel in the other months as well.



Namibia Travel Connection has a vast range of clients, varying from the extremely wealthy to the regular man in the street. Accordingly their services vary from self-drives to guided tours and fly-in safaris. The company also offers special-interest tours that run for specific clients, such as university groups from the USA.



Agostinella shares her advice with newcomers. "Firstly, I have stuck to markets that I know well, especially the Italian market, knowing what the exact needs are and ensuring that each client gets the package to suit his needs. Secondly, I still personally run the business and I'm also involved directly with the clients."



A symbiosis of conservation and tourism



The Hanssen family owns and runs Okonjima and The AfriCat Foundation

"The 'green' touch has thankfully become an irreversible trend and 'green credentials' should become the goal we all aspire for," says the Hanssen family. "Responsible tourism is now becoming a popular trend. Tourists want their holiday to be experience-based, more than just a holiday, and if that experience will make a difference, then tour operators will use it as a selling point, because then they feel they are also indirectly supporting the global trend of 'going green.'" Conservation is a topic much talked about, and even in schools, environ-

mental education has become a priority. "Conservation needs to be a long-term investment and in that sense, education is the only way forward. And this education cannot be species specific; it needs to inform about the balance of nature and how we need to protect it." Donna believes that, had it not been for Okonjima, the AfriCat Foundation would not have been able to achieve what it has. After all, the success of Okonjima and the AfriCat Foundation lies in the symbiosis of conservation and tourism. "One cannot survive without the other," says Donna. "Tourists want to become involved, they want to learn about the projects and experience as much of the action as possible, but at the end of the day they still expect a good meal and a cosy bed. For us, the tourism side of business is the real challenge, as we have to meet really high standards. The AfriCat project is what comes naturally. It is our love and what keeps us all going." Over the years, the approach of the Okonjima team to tourism and

marketing has changed in accordance with new tendencies in the sector. "We've realised that we need a product for all walks of life, and not just something for those who can afford the luxury. We've also realised we need to invest more in our staff and that they need to see Okonjima as their life and not just as the place where they work." Donna also believes that, when marketing abroad, there's no point in selling your product only. You have to sell your country! Twenty years down the line, AfriCat and Okonjima are in the fortunate position of being able to depend on the support of many individuals, organisations and friends who believe in their cause. As Donna says, word of mouth still goes a long way. The team has also invested in 'cyber marketing' channels, converted the newsletter to an electronic format, and remained adaptable and flexible to the needs and expectations of guests, while still concentrating on what they want to offer as an experience.



The Grand African Villa at Okonjima



The select private Bush Suite



AfriCat runs the worlds largest cheetah and leopard rescue-and-release programme

At the 2011 Indaba travel trade show, the AfriCat Foundation received the conservation award in the category Best Wildlife Organisation Operating in Africa. The great strength of the Foundation has been its ability to make contact with guests and demonstrate the impact of its work. AfriCat was founded in 1993 with the vision to be committed to the long-term conservation of the large carnivores of Namibia and their habitat. In 2011 AfriCat merged with the AfriLeo Foundation, which was registered in 1997. AfriLeo has now been renamed AfriCat North and together they are working towards the credo *A Free Cat*.

