

Nibela Lake Lodge's Gemma Linforth talks making it in SA's hospitality industry

Meet Gemma Linforth, general manager at Nibela Lake Lodge, one of 23 properties in the Dream Hotels & Resorts family.

Linforth was awarded the group's general manager of the Year and in celebration of #WomensMonth, I sought to find out how she began her career in the hospitality industry

 By [Chelsey Hale](#) 22 Aug 2019



Gemma Linforth

How did you start your journey in the hospitality industry?

I grew up in the small town of Howick. Most of my childhood was spent in game reserves in and around South Africa with my parents and two older brothers. I grew up with a yearning to teach children, and to live in the middle of nowhere in a little house surrounded by wildlife, driving my old Landrover and living off the land. Basically, I wanted to be like Kuki Gallmann in *I Dreamed of Africa*... That was my dream of what I wanted.

After school, I completed a bachelors degree in education majoring in Geography. However, after losing one of my brothers in a car accident, I knew I couldn't just disappear into the middle of Africa. My best friend's brother worked in Madikwe Game Reserve, and I accompanied him for six weeks on a 'working holiday' (we would work a cycle of six weeks on with two weeks of leave).

I started at the bottom, doing admin, room checks, and spent two weeks in the boiling sun building a rubbish cage (growing up with a dad who is a mechanic, two older brothers and a male best friend, Linforth says she learned how to do 'manly things').

Standing on the deck of the lodge speaking to guests about their game drive, watching the African sun setting, I knew that this was where I belonged. To cut a long story short, I never left. That six-week working holiday turned into 12 years. I gained experience wherever and from whomever I could, and got a permanent position at a neighbouring lodge and worked my way up to where I am today.

How did you get your foot in the door at Nibela Lake Lodge?

After 10 years of working in Madikwe, I was in a small predicament of schooling for my five-year-old son (the closest form school to our last lodge was a 2.5-hour drive). In 2017, my partner, Ryan and I were looking for the perfect property and company that we could join for the long-term, and he stumbled across the advert for Nibela on Dream Hotels & Resorts' website.

We had an initial interview over the phone and a secondary interview at the Head Office in Johannesburg; then we came to see the property, and we fell in love. Even though the closest school is 40 km away, we haven't looked back on our decision at all.



Nibela Walkways

Nibela is an amazing lodge. It is one of the only lodges situated right on the Northern banks of Lake St Lucia, on a peninsula and many of our guests love the fact that they feel like they are on an island.

As a GM, what advice can you offer other women who want to get started in the industry but have little experience?

This industry is tough for women but one of the key factors, I have found, is finding a solid recruitment company, to begin with, because they help you with the presentation of your CV and they have the first pick of job openings. At Nibela, when we recruit, we contact recruitment agents that deal specifically with lodge and hotel placements. They ensure that we get the right CVs for that specific vacancy.

Up-skilling yourself and gaining experience should also be a top priority, and not just in your relevant field of interest. In the industry, you have to be able to step in wherever required.

Getting your foot in the door is the hardest part, fresh out of university or school with no experience, but don't be afraid to drop the bar a little and start at the bottom. Take it from me, if you work hard, gain experience, are loyal, and willing to do things out of your job spec, you stand a good chance of getting promoted or moving into the department that you want to be in.

And, if you haven't moved into the right position after a few years, you will have gained enough experience to maybe move into that management position at a new company.

What do you enjoy most about your role as a GM?

I have worked in several departments during my career - except the kitchen because, if you ask my family, I'm not the greatest cook! I even became an honorary officer for North West Parks Board, focusing on anti-poaching, but once my s

was born, I had to resign myself from the dangers of this.

Of all the departments and positions there are in this industry, being a GM is the highlight for me because I enjoy not being too focused on one department. As a GM, you are doing a lot of everything: hosting guests, budgets, training, skills development, sales & marketing, human resources, projects, procurement, and community development. The list goes on.

And, working in hospitality?

My favourite thing about it is meeting new people, and, by that I mean, sitting on the deck sharing stories and experiences our lives, having them show me pictures of their new grandson or favourite pet (yes this happens), chatting away like friends sharing their first elephant sighting or braai. This is what we in the hospitality industry mean by 'meeting new people'.

I have guests that I met in my first few years of work that I am still in contact with today. I love hearing about different countries and cultures and enjoy seeing Africa through our guests' eyes.

Another wonderful aspect of this industry is watching families have a good time together. At Nibela Lake Lodge, family is important to me, and seeing a couple enjoying a walk together, or a family all coming together to celebrate a birthday is very special. And it's great to know that I - or we with my great team of staff - were a part of making that moment so special.

What skills are needed to 'survive' in South Africa's hospitality industry?

Problem-solving, especially in isolated lodges. Every day is different and comes with a problem of some sort: a broken vehicle or oven, a sick staff member, a late food delivery, a burst pipe on the main water line, or, heaven forbid, all five of those in one day!

Quick but responsible decision making is also important, but you have to learn how to turn off and give yourself a little TLC to recoup, and find your zen.

How have you seen the industry change and evolve?

This industry has become a lot more competitive over the years. With almost everyone having access to the Internet, you can pick from thousands of hotels, lodges, and guest houses in one area. Sales and Marketing teams are having to work harder to promote properties, and reservationists have to work harder to secure bookings because of the competition.

With the digital evolution, everything a guest does gets posted on some form of media, so we have to be at the top of our game all the time, responding to reviews and pictures, which can have a big impact on bookings.

I have also seen a big change in family holidays. There has been a shift in our industry to focus on families and children. We know that technology is a big part of our children's lives, and, I think subconsciously, as a society, we are trying to find ways to spend more quality time with our families. Previously, the marketed group for holidays was adults and couples, but now it is more focused on family adventures.

Lastly, tell us a bit more about Nibela, what can it offer guests?

We are located on 260 hectares of unspoilt forest, with an array of walking trails and a few roads that access different parts of the property. It really is the place to come if you are looking for relaxation and a little digital detox. However, there is Wi-Fi and TVs for those who want to catch their favourite show or sports game.

We also have activities for guests who want adventure, with boat cruises on the lake, quad bikes, guided birding, butterfly walks, and fishing. The birding is wonderful with many rare species; the forest boasts trees that are so big and beautiful and the butterflies are truly special. But my favourite thing about Nibela is sitting on the deck at dawn with a cup of coffee watching the sunrise over the lake.

ABOUT CHELSEY HALE

Having lived in Thailand, South Korea, and the U.K, Chelsey finally returned home to South Africa in 2016 where she now sails the adventurous tides of travel content writing. While she has a special focus on the travel industry, she also creates written content across multiple industries. She enjoys all things related to travel, spending much of her time looking for a great news hook and working alongside the team at Big Ambitions. Email: chelsey@chelseyhale.com
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