



Meet  
**Karabo Sepharatla**  
Camping Khapela

Camping Khapela is an innovative Southern African convenience adventure camping service company run by Karabo Sepharatla. A premium service that takes the effort out of camping, clients can simply arrive, relax and enjoy the experience.

Meet owner

## Karabo Sepharatla



Every need is taken care of from transport to scenic destinations, activity plans, camping gear and campsite set up, to three meals a day, portable showers and toilets. Camping Khapela is also stationed at the campsite 24/7 to ensure security. The idea for this business was ironically born from a camping misadventure in Mozambique.

### A young entrepreneur is born

I was born in Pimville, Soweto, and fortunate enough to attend Model C schools in the 90s. I became a young entrepreneur straight after finishing high school when a friend and I started our own meat business. Unfortunately, just as it was looking promising, our investor pulled out.

Undeterred, I went on to launch an events company, Shwamari Solutions, doing top-end events in and around Soweto. At one of these events, an SAB employee approached me and explained that the company was looking for an events coordinator. He had enjoyed our event and asked me to apply for the job, which I succeeded in getting, and I spent the next eight years at SAB.

I was given a company car and allocated 4 000km. When I realised I had only used 2 000km, I embarked on my first cross-border trip – this was in my 20s – and from there, I travelled all over the country during my SAB years. The travel bug had bitten.

When I resigned from SAB, it was with the intention of finding out what I wanted to do with my life and my career. I went to work at Glenfiddich for a year; the second year I spent in limbo and in the third year, as I was considering going back to corporate, my friends and I decided to go on a trip but to do something different – attend a festival.

It was disastrous from the beginning! We got lost and arrived at the border late. We hadn't bought enough supplies and had to cram into one tent. Some revellers tucked into our food while we were taking a nap, leaving us with nothing to eat. I then went over to chat to a 4x4 group and saw that they were fully equipped with a stove, supplies and a local guy, who was setting up and tidying up for them. When the group went off to do activities, he would look after the campsite and their belongings and prepare the braai

for later. I thought to myself that I would pay top dollar for a service of having everything organised and taken care of on a camping trip.

It also got me wondering why I never saw people of colour or women going camping. I was usually the only one or among a few. I also considered how popular our South African music festivals are, held in the most beautiful settings, such as the Drakensberg, well-curated and organised, and I started thinking I could inspire people to go camping.

On the way home from that trip, I was thinking of a name for a business. Recalling the local guy helping the 4x4 group, he reminded me of a character on the local soapie Generations called Khapela, the butler to a wealthy businessman. That local guy was like a camping butler, a camping khapela and that's when my business started taking shape. My friends laughed at me and thought I was joking until I registered the business.

I then proceeded to do some "market research", chatting to people, specifically women, about camping. Some others were commenting on Facebook, asking where we had camped and saying while the experience and destination looked great, they didn't do camping. So, I asked them: what if everything was organised for them? What if they had a camping butler? And people immediately said in that case, they would do it.

## **A lucky break**

Three months after the camping trip, I switched on the radio and heard the presenter saying that people of colour don't camp. I called in to the radio station and said that I have this business – in the meantime, it was all in my head – and as I was speaking, I was quickly updating my Gmail and Twitter accounts from personal accounts to business accounts, changing

my profile picture, because I knew I would have to give out contact details at the end!

Straight after that call, a man phoned saying he had just heard me on the radio and would like to book a camping experience for himself and five friends. I asked him where he wanted to go, and he said Coffee Bay. I had never heard of the place and really hoped it was in South Africa. I had to google it!

Next, I walked into Game, priced everything needed for five people on a camping trip, added a bit of a mark-up and quoted my first client. After receiving a 50% deposit, I bought the items and paid for transport, which is how my business was born, back in 2014.

I had always wanted to create something different, and I really enjoy the outdoors. Camping Khapela speaks to both. I am also the target market, so creating this business around what my peers and I want has been easy. Many of us strive to be the first in a group to do something new, and there is a demand for festivals, so this is a focus of my business, as well as cross-border experiences and encouraging more women to camp.

From that first client, my business gained momentum quite quickly, mostly by word of mouth; people were interested in this niche experience. Some business came from social media – individuals who had joined us on a camping experience would post photos on social media. They liked the convenience, the safety element, and having every detail taken care of.

Even today, we receive business via word of mouth and referrals from people who have been on our experiences. Our repeat business is strong, especially on our festival packages. While we operate primarily in South Africa, the furthest we've been in Africa is to festivals in Uganda and Kenya.

Our tagline is: “The ultimate camping convenience” and our USP is our premium service. **Our offering is also flexible – clients have the option to curate their own experiences or hop on and hop off our curated experiences.**

We were the trailblazers, and now other players are doing something similar. The market is growing. It’s a compliment that we are on the right track, and that’s why I never call them our competitors; they are our “complimentors”. However, the butler/khapela service remains unique to us.

We are also still leaders in terms of the destinations and festivals we go to – we are usually the first there. Looking back to when we started out, people were saying they didn’t want to camp but look at them now! Another major accomplishment is that 80% of our business comes from women.

## Challenges and learnings

As with most entrepreneurial businesses, our biggest challenge was cash flow. We started a business without financial backup, without investors. As a self-funded business, we couldn’t save and had to rent equipment. The model we based Camping Khapela on was the Uber franchise – we didn’t want to have assets if we couldn’t afford them.

The BidTravel Group, part of Bidvest, heard of my journey and what I was trying to achieve by inspiring people of colour to camp. They loved my story, started to get to know me a bit, and find out about my requirements. After a few meetings, they began to believe in me and invested in my business through enterprise development funding and mentorship.

Camping Khapela is now an Enterprise Development partner to Rennies BCD, CWT and Travel Connections. As sponsors, they assist with finance for the development of my business and the acquisition of equipment to make my

business scalable. Last November, they placed me in the SATSA Tourism Business Incubator Programme run by Sigma International. This tourism sector-adopted programme provides operational support and business development. However, the infusion of partner programmes of Sigma International makes this a true business scholarship for my business, and the value I have been given is immense.

Going through the incubator programme has broadened my knowledge and understanding of the travel and tourism industry. The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) master classes have taught me about accounting and budgeting, while I am also gaining other business skills, such as how to craft business plans and gain market access. I can honestly say my experience with BidTravel and Sigma International has been life-changing and I am truly grateful to Bidtravel’s Chief Executive Officer Lidia de Olim Folli, and Head of HR Gillian Ismail, for believing in me and investing in my business.

## Looking ahead

From our original local target market, there’s now an international market we can tap into, creating huge potential for growth. We are also always looking for investors to join us as equity partners, however they must be the right kind of investors who share our vision and want to join us for the long-term.

A major focus for us this year will be to differentiate ourselves even more. The incubator programme has come at the right time to guide Camping Khapela in this direction to give it the competitive edge. Ultimately, our goal is to be the best convenience adventure camping company in Africa and continue leading the way.