

# The challenges of eventing in Africa

 By [Karen Ashwin](#)

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Working across borders is always a challenge. There are cultural, language and climate differences to overcome. Dealing in more than one financial currency adds to the complexities - but is doable - but more challenging on a fundamental level is being faced with a society that values and places emphasis on things that you may not. And then there is organising an event in Africa.



It's hard not to arrive on the scene with unbending first-world expectations and demands but you quickly learn the value of flexibility and thinking on your feet. When things are inevitably delayed, or not exactly up to par, it goes a long way to breathe, smile and simply make another plan.

## Curious and eager

Eventing in Africa is an enriching and fascinating cultural experience. Set against eye-opening backdrops, the people you encounter in many places are often curious and eager to help.

Over the years we've had many overwhelmingly positive, and some trying, experiences and overall have found there to be a few key challenges.

The supply and availability of technical equipment, structures and third party suppliers can be limited. What is requested is not always provided, either due to a lack of availability or a misunderstanding of exactly what is needed. We've found several places to have a "make do with what you have" standard - difficult but do-able.

To avoid unnecessary "surprises" we make sure that we are in close consultation with service providers from the beginning to ensure that communication of requirements and progress are kept on track. We've also learnt to adopt a "show me what you've done" attitude as opposed to just listening to what has been achieved to date.

## African time

Then there is the challenge of African time. Delivery is more often than not “on its way” and things take place at the last hour. Since we can never afford late delivery, particularly not on a project of a large scale, we build in a bigger time buffer than usual.

When working in Africa one often needs to work closely with local organisers. Their contacts and in-depth insight into how things operate in the country are invaluable; however, reconciling their agenda with yours can prove challenging. There may be an underlying perception of one entering the country to undermine local business by being too hands-on. “Political” wrangling, power and hierarchies are sensitive issues and one should take heed of this.

We've repeatedly been confronted with logistical issues - from problems with food and water to a lack of adequate systems in place for things like accreditation.

However, the “show must go on” so we've learnt to clarify as much as possible beforehand, to establish key elements such as holding and storage areas well in advance, and to have contingency plans. Transport can be unreliable and drivers may not understand or follow instructions. We've also encountered inadequate roads and poor to non-existent public transport facilities. There's safety and security to consider and in various countries we've also had to deal with military personnel, whom are typically co-operative.

## Infrastructure challenges

Other infrastructure challenges include poor Internet coverage and cellphone reception, as well as an unpredictable supply of electricity - the latter all too familiar to South Africans lately.

Nothing can be taken for granted. Even toilets can be, by South African standards, inadequate in number and quality, and no cleaning service may be provided. As event organisers, we need to ensure sufficient budget is allocated for such essential services, as aspects such as these may not make an event, but can certainly break one!

Some of the challenges discussed are not unique to Africa, and can pose a challenge on any event that one works on. As with all projects, and even more so in unfamiliar territory, communication is priority. With clear, open and frequent communication as well as a bit of ingenuity, most challenges are effectively overcome and valuable lessons are learnt.

## ABOUT KAREN ASHWIN

Karen Ashwin is the founder and MD of The Event Production Company ([www.theeventcompany.com](http://www.theeventcompany.com)), South Africa's event pioneer. Karen is considered one of the industry's leading personalities and with a 15-year track record, The Event Production Company has conceptualised and executed most of South Africa's largest and most innovative events.

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