

# Careers on a cruise



By Eugene Yiga

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In his role as cruise director of MSC Opera and MSC Sinfonia, Stephen Cloete has been to over 65 countries around the world. He tells Eugene Yiga about his love for life (and work) at sea.



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## ***What does a cruise director do?***

I look after all the entertainment on board from shows, games, activities and bands for adults and children. I manage a team of about 60 entertainers in the department. But due to my levels of training in a variety of facets I often have to adopt additional roles outside of entertainment which might include performing wedding ceremonies, development and training of staff, and lecturing on a range of subjects like Greek Mythology and Astronomy.

## ***How did you get started?***

I had always done entertainment as a hobby and had my own professional stage show in my late teens.

## ***What do you love most about your work?***

I enjoy the fact that my job encompasses so many elements, from management to live performance.

### ***What's challenging about the job?***

For example, in our theatre, we put on a different show every single night. And for people who combine cruises back to back, we have to find a way to give them seven different shows to cover the full week. It's difficult but for longer cruises, we'll bring on additional entertainment in the form of artists and performers from around the world. That's how we can do a brand new show irrespective of the length of the cruise.

### ***What options are there for careers on a cruise?***

Many people think it's just about the people on the frontlines. But the ship employs a lot of people behind the scenes (like maintenance staff, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, fire brigade, medical staff, and so on).

### ***What opportunities are there to advance your career at sea?***

There are lots of opportunities for career progression. In my case, I started out as a performing artist and then went on to manage the entertainment department before I became a cruise director. For Casey, who's in charge of our children's club, she started as a junior hostess and then progressed to her role within two years. So you can definitely grow a lot.

Of course, some people are just comfortable to be in their area and don't want to climb the ladder. Or else they just want to work on a ship for a gap year and then let that be the end of it. How quickly you advance is dependent on your own abilities. But we actively promote from within and train our staff to help them move up within the company.

### ***What are the requirements or qualifications?***

We employ people on a contractual basis – mostly seven months at a time – so the staff change based on the seasons. To work on the South African season you just need to speak English but you should be multilingual for the international seasons. For example, you should be able to speak Italian, German, Spanish, or French for the European seasons and Portuguese for the season to South America.

### ***What about the 'softer' skills?***

So personality depends on your department and what you're applying for. If you're a refrigeration technician, we're not looking at your personality; we're looking at your technical skills. But if you're going to work in the entertainment team, we don't care if you're a computer programmer or whether you're an accountant; your personality is the key.

### ***What training does each staff member go through?***

We do a lot of training and preparation on land. Every single person, right down to the kitchen staff, is qualified in first aid, fire-fighting, and marine disaster management. Training takes place every day behind the scenes and total certification time for practical and theory components is seven to ten days.

### ***Who typically applies for these jobs?***

Normally, it's only people over twenty-one; we prefer those who have some life experience so that they are better able to deal with guests compared to people who just left school. But there is no maximum age; it just depends on what department you're working in and as long as you're suitable for the position. Right now, we have several agencies to handle local and international recruitment; the main one is in Italy. We also don't have any quota systems. Who we hire depends on where the ship is going to be. For example, it's more important to get South African staff for a South African cruise so that they can better relate to local passengers.

Of course, there are also the jobs we create on Portuguese Island, starting with construction and on-going maintenance of our facilities there and the market stalls we built for vendors to sell their wares to the visitors. Right now, we hire local

shoremen, skippers, beach assistants, lifeguards, security guards, boat owners, dancers to perform for the passengers, and so on. In addition to informal and skills-based training, we continue to provide opportunities for the local population to benefit from the growth in cruise tourism by increasing the number of excursions each year.

***What advice would you give to someone considering a career in cruise travel?***

Be driven by passion. There are times when being away from friends and family are tough, but the pros outweigh the cons. There is nothing like staring at the countless stars on a cloudless night with a light ocean breeze gently kissing your skin to put life into perspective and realise that a life in this industry has its own amazing rewards.

***What's the best career advice you ever received?***

Do what you love, and love what you do, and you'll never work a day in your life.

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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