

# MEET THE BLUE TRAIN MANAGER, SIYATHEMBA MBAMBO



Watch Siya's [Video Intro here](#)

**Siya is one of The Blue Train's two Train Managers. Bongi is the Train Manager on Train Set 2. Siya is known for his infectious smile and is incredibly passionate about his job. He loves nothing more than injecting happiness and joy to all those on board. We decided it was time to get to know him a bit better with a quick Q & A session...**

**To kick this interview off in style, tell us some interesting facts about yourself:**

I grew up in a lovely town called Eshowe in KwaZulu-Natal. I am 36 years old and have been working in hospitality since 2000. I am married to Nokulunga (meaning peaceful and kind – which suits her perfectly!) and have 3 children including a 7-year old son and two daughters aged 4 and 9 months.

**Tell us a bit more about your background and training?**

I studied Hospitality Management at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, before heading over to Florida as part of a cultural programme to work at Walt Disney World's Animal Kingdom for 15 months. It was a fantastic way to kick start my career as the team at Disney teach you about service and how to sell happiness and joy like nobody else! Not to just smile and look happy – but to actually BE happy, THINK happy, SMILE happy and even WALK happy - which is key to imparting the Disney magic and resulting in genuine joy in those around you. I try to instil this skill as a manager today so that my team give off this same positive vibe and pave the way for our guests' dreams and expectations of The Blue Train to be met and exceeded.

**Where did you go after Disney?**

After my time in the USA I headed to the UK and worked at the Scarisbrick Hotel in Southport, Liverpool and then at the Greswolde hotel in Birmingham, working in the kitchen as a Commis Chef. I then moved to Hertfordshire and gained invaluable skills and experience working at the West Lodge Park Hotel which is the top-rated hotel in North London and Hertfordshire. I was employed as Demi Chef de Partie in their restaurant which is rated AA Four stars 2 Rosettes.

I then moved back to South Africa and worked as Food & Beverage Manager at the Protea Richards Bay Hotel which is near to where I grew up - and then later as Head Chef at Hotel Izulu in Ballito on the North Coast.

I then accepted a position at the renowned Fairmont Zimbali as Chef de Partie which I felt rounded off my experience in the kitchen beautifully. I was promoted to Food & Beverage Manager across all 6 of Zimbali's restaurants from 2011 to 2014. I felt as though I had completed the full circle and ensured that I am equally comfortable on both sides of the pass.

I then took up a lecturing position at my old alma mater Durban University for a year before spotting the opportunity to secure a role in Operations at Transnet via their Young Professionals in Training Mentorship Programme. I moved to Pretoria near the Blue Train's head office and did my

internship at Sabi Sabi's Bush Lodge.

I loved my time working in Operations under my mentor Vincent Monyake who has since been promoted to Executive Manager of The Blue Train. I then accepted a promotion to become Train Manager which is where I am today!

**Are there any exciting things happening onboard in the next year?**

There have been a lot of exciting changes over the past few months. We have relaunched the whole Blue Train experience as a new 2-night "slow travel" experience for 2019. Train Set 1 where I am based has a brand-new observation car and we have two new passenger carriages due to be added soon so that both train sets will have a similar layout.

Another new addition has been introducing entertainment on the train in the evenings which is going down very well with guests so far. We wanted to inject a bit more fun now that we have 2 evenings on the train and it is certainly working to create a jovial, relaxed atmosphere which encourages guests to relax and mingle - if they want to. We have a talented jazz musician called Ayo who plays the sax during dinner and then plays music later in the lounge car from those who wish to dance and enjoy themselves. There is also another lady entertainer who sings for guests and we are looking at other artists to enhance the experience too. The Observation car and Club Car offer a quiet space for those preferring a more demure evening.

**What kind of manager are you?**

I always try to be fair and approachable - but I am also strict because we have to uphold incredibly high standards on the train. We have been entrusted with one of South Africa's most iconic national treasures and we are world leaders in luxury rail travel so we continually strive to be better than the best!

**Any famous faces you have served on board?**

In my 5 years on the train I have met Denzel Washington (who was a true gentleman!) as well as local celebrities like Former Miss SA and businesswoman Basetsana Kumalo and multi award-winning actress Terry Pheto (Tsotsi) who is also one of the Blue Train's ambassadors. Before my time guests included Kylie Minogue, Naomi Campbell and Madiba himself!

**Are there any real characters on board?**

There are many! William has worked on the train for over 20 years and his sense of humour in the dining car is legendary. Eunice has been on the train for 17+ years and Joyce for nearly as long.

Esther Ndlovu is our longest serving staff member – she has been cooking up miracles in her tiny moving kitchen for well over 20 years! She even cooked for Nelson Mandela in 1998.

Simon, our bar man is also a great hit with guests.

**Who is your foodie hero?**

Heston Blumenthal! I love how he uses science to create innovative dishes.

**On the Cape Town/Pretoria journey is there a particular favourite spot you always make sure to stop and look out the window for?**

Just as the train approaches Kimberley on the Southbound journey (or just after if heading North) is Kamphers Dam where guests can spot a lake of pink flamingos. It's a bit dry at the moment so numbers are not as impressive as usual - but it is truly a sight to behold. It is also very beautiful as you travel through the Hex River valley and winelands.

**What are your favourite and worst things about working on the train?**

When guests come up to me after their journey and say "Wow Siya, you have really made this dream trip of a lifetime come true for us". The worst things are the delays on the track which are out of our control such as hook ups.

**Thank you very much Siya – you are a true inspiration and a credit to The Blue Train**