



The flower lady of Lagos

HEINEKEN expat partner Ida Rutten had never launched or run a business in her life. Could she successfully set one up in Nigeria? There was only one way to find out.

Great birthday present

After moving to Lagos, Ida soon noticed how much she and her friends missed having fresh flowers around. That's what inspired her to set up a company – named Dutch Flowers in Lagos – importing flowers from Holland. At first, demand came from fellow flower-starved expats but now the bulk of her business is wholesale. "At first, I wondered if I'd see a single flower arrive in Lagos," recalls Ida. "When that first shipment cleared customs on October 7, 2015, I was overjoyed. It also just happened to be my birthday. I will always remember that day."

Professional advice

In 2015, the World Bank ranked Nigeria 169th out of 189 countries for ease of doing business. As an expat partner, who had never opened a business of any kind, wasn't Ida daunted? "I was just curious. I wanted to see if this could work. I have also sought professional expertise at various stages, which I would advise others to do no matter where they are in the world. That way you can focus on what's important: your products and services. Personally, I also didn't want to be completely consumed by my business. This had to be something I could balance with family life."

Starting off 24/7

"At first, I was thinking about it 24/7. When meeting up with friends, I was probably always talking about flowers. But now it's more stable and I try to talk about other things when socialising!" says Ida, who has no employees although she hires florists for corporate events and weddings for which she supplies flowers. She also took a course in flower-arranging so she can communicate more effectively with the local florists. "I still find it funny when I meet people for the first time and they say, 'oh, you're the flower lady!'"

Supportive kids

"I am not sure what I will do when the day comes that we leave Nigeria, but for now I will keep developing the business. If you assume that you might be leaving soon, you're already packing your bags. You never know when you'll be relocated so I try to live in the present," says Ida. "All in all, I am very happy to have given this my best shot. I have learned so much about Nigeria and about running a small business and I think my boys have too! They saw everything get off the ground and along with my husband have been so supportive throughout the whole process."