



Best of DEI in the travel industry celebrated at the IWTF Awards 2026

London, 17 September 2026: Social enterprise [Women in Travel CIC](#) has revealed the winners of the annual [International Women in Travel and Tourism Forum](#) (IWTF) Awards 2026, which celebrate diversity, equity and inclusion in the travel and tourism sector.

The IWTF Awards ceremony took place this week at Union House, a historical venue in Utrecht as part of the first ever IWTF in continental Europe. The host for the evening was Frank Radstake, Director of ANVR (the Dutch Association of Travel Agents and Tour Operators), while the keynote was delivered by Gwendoline Cazenave, CEO of Eurostar.

Reflecting Women in Travel CIC's work championing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Female Leadership, and Allyship, the award categories recognised both businesses and individuals for their achievements, resilience, initiatives, advocacy and progress in the DEI space.

For the first time in the IWTF Awards' history, there were joint winners in one category, and also the judges were moved to award a special Outstanding Contribution award outside of the established categories.

The winners were as follows:

Individual Awards categories

Woman Leader for Impact and Inclusion (Corporate)

Joint winners:

- [Natalie Lyall-Grant](#), Head of Positive Impact, Jacada Travel
- [Stroma Cole](#), Professor of Tourism and Human Rights, University of Westminster, and Co-Director, Equality in Tourism

Highly commended:

- [Tonya Fitzpatrick](#), Journalist and Author of Destination Stewardship; Co-Founder, World Footprints and Board Member of Maryland Tourism Development Board

Judges' comments:

For the first time at the IWTTF Awards, there were joint winners in this category.

Judges praised Stroma Cole as follows:

“Throughout her career—and from a very early age— Professor Stroma Cole has lived and breathed her commitment to equality. She has transformed this mission into a truly impressive career, inspiring new generations through her work at universities while challenging businesses and policymakers to rethink the status quo through research and data. Her impact, passion, knowledge, and inspiring way of presenting make her a highly deserving winner of this IWTTF Award.”

Judges praised Natalie Lyall-Grant as follows:

“We were particularly impressed by Natalie’s ability to turn purpose into measurable action. From advocating for stronger animal welfare standards and child safeguarding practices to launching initiatives that create opportunities for women in tourism, she has consistently demonstrated that impact and inclusion can be embedded at the heart of a successful business. Her collaborative approach, industry influence and commitment to creating lasting positive change make her a highly deserving recipient of this award.”

Woman Leader for Impact and Inclusion (Entrepreneur)

Winner:

- [Shailza Sood Dasgupta](#), Co-Founder, Homestays of India

Highly commented:

- [Lucky Karki Chhetri](#), Co-Founder, 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking

Judges’ comments:

Judges praised Shailza Sood Dasgupta as follows:

“In just seven years, Shailza has achieved impressive growth with 1,300 women becoming financially independent. Her passion and strong business model convinced us that the initiative has real potential to expand into other regions of India and possibly beyond.

We also really appreciate how she aims to instil pride and ownership in the women and communities she is helping with building their homestay.

The mindset shift she is driving in rural communities is commendable. Her work demonstrates that women can become successful entrepreneurs and have the ambition and ability to build businesses of their own.”

Judges praised Lucky Karki Chhetri as follows:

“Special mention to Lucky - I think all of us would love to show our appreciation for 30 years of breaking down barriers for women in Nepal's tourism industry.”

Ally for Social Impact and Community

Winner:

- [Kerrie Bartholomew](#), Account Director, Clear Marketing International

Highly commended:

- [Victoria Martinelli](#), Director of People and Culture, Lemongrass Marketing

Judges' comments:

Judges praised Kerrie Bartholomew as follows:

“She matches the definition of ally perfectly as described in the category, and through examples of the work she has done — and most importantly why — we believe she will continue scaling this in the travel industry and making a difference. We were inspired by her genuine, values-driven motivation, and the impact it's had on so many.”

Judges praised Victoria Martinelli as follows:

“We also loved the work Victoria is doing in-house, and we see her having potential to go further, particularly if mentored by someone who is already doing great work and influencing others.”

Woman in Tech and AI

Winner:

- [Veerle Witte](#), Founder and CEO, Travel Diaries

Judges' comments:

Judges praised Veerle Witte as follows:

“Veerle’s humility and commitment to integrity shone through with her fundamental understanding of the importance of not just pushing through barriers but also ensuring that her breakthroughs fundamentally help others follow. Her own frankness about the struggles and challenges she faced as a woman, that she still faces, building her own company brings home the challenges of elevating the voices of leaders like Veerle to the C-suites and industry’s financiers. In an industry still overly dominated by men, she is on a mission to seek out better access to capital for female solo founders, better advice and networks to help support these female entrepreneurs. Based on what she has delivered and her plans to grow, I think we are only just at the start of witnessing her impact.”

Organisational Awards categories

DEI Courage and Resilience

Winner:

- [Rederij Lampedusa](#)

Judges' comments:

Judges praised Rederij Lampedusa as follows:

“The judging panel was very impressed by the ingenuity of Rederij Lampedusa’s concept, its commitment through ten years of setbacks and the tangible impact of its work. Beyond the strong outcomes, what shone through was the team’s passion, humanity and unwavering belief in the power of stories to bring people together.

The panel particularly applauded an organisation that uses real migrant stories to bridge the gap between potential travellers and marginalised people from other parts of the world. Importantly, Rederij Lampedusa does not only engage those who already support its mission. Through schools, universities, corporate programmes and events beyond Amsterdam, it actively reaches audiences who may hold very different views. In the face of rising political dissent, this is both highly commendable and much needed.

Rederij Lampedusa has built a model of inclusion that feels authentic, sustainable and genuinely life-changing, making it a deserving and inspiring winner.”

On all three finalists in this category (including the TUI Care Foundation and the Muslim Women Travel Group), the judges said:

“All three finalists were worthy candidates, tackling different, important and emotive subjects within the area of human rights. What impressed the judging panel most was the authenticity behind their work. Each organisation identified people facing genuine barriers and took practical, meaningful action to create opportunities, build confidence and drive lasting change.”

Inclusive Work Place

Winner:

- [a&o Hostels](#)

Highly commended:

- [Intrepid Travel](#)

Judges' comments:

Judges praised a&o Hostels as follows:

“a&o Hostels have a commitment to inclusivity in the workplace that feels totally authentic; there may be strategic and regulatory reasons for it, but deep down they are

just good human beings who want to create a workplace where anyone feels welcome. It feels like inclusivity is something they instinctively do, and the fact they don't make a big deal of it externally reinforces this: it is not a box-ticking exercise. Two things that particularly impressed the judges were the investment in youth, and the way the interviewees made their commitment to inclusivity come alive during our discussions."

Judges praised Intrepid Travel as follows:

"The work they've done in inclusivity and ESG initiatives in general has been ground-breaking and sets the standard for the rest of us to follow."

Inclusive Business Practice

Winner:

- [Community Homestay Network](#)

Judges' comments:

The judges praised Community Homestay Network as follows:

"Community Homestay Network has shown strategic thinking in its growth the business/network: changing focus as needed and recognising the influencing opportunities through partnership, allies and stakeholders on a local, national level and international level. They have developed the infrastructure to support the network/entrepreneurs through policies and frameworks and partnered with operators in India to reach the most remote network members.

Inclusion is wrapped into the DNA of the business. This win is validation to keep driving responsible travel, amplifying their platform in Nepal to motivate their existing entrepreneurs and encourage new ones."

In an unprecedented move, the judges decided to make a special award for

Outstanding Contribution to:

- [Klaudija Janzelj](#), **General Manager, Tourplan Europe**

The judges awarded this "in recognition of the work Klaudija has done volunteering for Women in Travel CIC. She has been tirelessly supporting the Tour Guiding Academy, mentoring and coaching women in training and as well as established guides. She has opened doors to successful partnerships for example with the TUI Care Foundation."

IWTTF Judges include leaders from across the industry, including Debbie O'Neill, MD of Jules Verne Ltd; Andrew Hunt, CEO and Co-Founder of Holiday Architects; Carol Dray, Director and Portfolio NED, R&W Consultancy; Lina Kiubere, Learning and Development Specialist, Interrail; Elle Pinkard, Founder and CEO, Destination Rainbow; Carla Francisco, Head of People, Conscious Group; Sara Monnik, Head of People at Sawadee Reizen; Hafsa Gaher, CEO at the Halal Travel Network, and more.

Each was carefully selected and assigned to an appropriate category to ensure integrity and relevant expertise across the board.

Alessandra LoTufo Alonso, Founder and Managing Director of Women in Travel CIC and IWTTF said:

“What I have been particularly struck by this year is how global the IWTTF Awards have become in nature – the entrants have truly come from far and wide. I am also struck by the real and tangible impact of the work that is being done – we work in an industry that really does care about our people, our planet and our communities, and I am constantly moved by the endeavours of all our entrants, nominees and winners, often in very humble circumstances.

“The IWTTF Awards exist to recognise and shine a light on the endeavours of changemaking businesses and individuals whose work is often under-valued or under-recognised but is making a real difference. Most importantly we are a platform to share that work publicly, so that we can all learn from it, as it is more vital than ever that we celebrate every step that brings us closer to a more inclusive, equitable and diverse industry and society.”

Now in their fourth year, the Awards are part of IWTTF 2026, which included a full forum day of learning and ideas sharing. Under the overarching theme of *Inclusion Driving Growth*, the programme explored what genuine inclusive leadership and true allyship looks like in 2026, travel’s potential for positive impact and how businesses can embrace the growing phenomenon of the solo woman traveller.

Sponsors of IWTTF 2026 included Founding Partner Intrepid Travel alongside BCD Travel, Interrail, DiamondAir International, Conscious Hotels, Eurostar and Union House.

For more information on IWTTF, please visit: www.iwttf.com

For more information on Women in Travel’s important work, please visit www.womenintravelcic.com

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A link to an image of the Award winners and sponsors is available [here](#).

A link to the criteria of each category and the judging panel is available [here](#).

About Women in Travel CIC

Women in Travel is a UK based, award-winning social enterprise that fosters inclusion in industry by connecting underserved women with employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. By bringing together women, employers and allies in meaningful

partnerships, we create lasting social and economic impact across the travel and tourism industry. Women in Travel CIC will be celebrating ten years of operation in 2027.

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