

A COMING OF AGE

WORDS **ATHANE SCHOLTZ** PHOTOGRAPH **MELANIE MARÉ**

Twenty-one years after the Plattner family rescued Fancourt from liquidation, Sabine Plattner reflects on the luxury golf and lifestyle estate's steady progress to maturity and the dawn of a new era as the reins are passed on to her daughter Tina and a fresh management team.



T rue to form, the town of George was cold, wet and misty the first time prospective buyers Hasso and Sabine Plattner visited the flailing Fancourt estate with their young daughters in 1994.

“We knew nothing about golf, and were initially not interested in buying, but the price was good and we did not want to miss out on an obvious investment opportunity – but mostly, there was an energy and beauty to the place we found irresistible,” says Sabine.

Originally from Germany where Hasso co-founded computer software company SAP, the couple had been visiting South Africa since Hasso’s mother moved here in the 1970s. “We owned property in Cape Town and very much wanted to be constructively part of the transformation of a new South Africa. Fancourt was an opportunity to help a community on several levels – from stabilising the homeowners on the estate’s property value to providing financial and social security for existing and future staff and their families.”

While Hasso was involved in business across the globe, Fancourt became Sabine’s project, but from the start she encountered complications. “The court proceedings surrounding the liquidation, fighting to keep the Fancourt coat of arms, dealings with the homeowners and a riotous staff were just the beginning.

“The men-only golf legacy and its associated pompous approach were unacceptable to me. At our very first visit, when we were considering buying

the estate, the girls were not allowed inside the clubhouse and I was only permitted because I was inspecting the facilities for purposes of buying – I was determined that Fancourt would be for families with accommodation and facilities to suit.”

Sabine had big plans for the estate, including building a five-star hotel, a spa, restaurants, shops and more golf courses. “At the time there were only the old Manor House, Montagu golf course and clubhouse, and some private homes. We considered Fancourt a long-term investment – it was not about making quick money, but rather working towards a solid business that could sustain a community well into the future.”

The Plattners poured millions of rands into developing the estate and bought additional adjacent land to fulfil their dreams. Sabine, an avid gardener, found great pleasure in planning the lush gardens and outdoor features. A personal favourite is the tree-lined entrance for which she trucked in mature oak trees from around the country. “Trees are inherent to a place’s atmosphere. To this day, Fancourt continues to plant trees everywhere we can.”

The Plattners’ philanthropic work is world-renowned, especially in education, health care and rain forest conservation. In 2001 Sabine started looking outside Fancourt for ways to help the broader community. “I am a trained school teacher and children’s needs pull at my heart strings.” A trip into Thembalethu culminated in the opening of Nikiwe Educare Centre, and her on-going relationship with the George Child and Family Welfare Society continues to

advance the lives of families across the region. Outside South Africa, Sabine remains especially involved in the Republic of Congo and Germany.

Looking back over 21 years, Sabine finds it difficult to pinpoint her Fancourt highlights. “There are obvious things like turning an old air strip into the world class The Links golf course and hosting the President’s Cup, the 46664 concert and the Women’s World Cup of Golf. But for me, the entire Fancourt journey also reflects my personal development from a relative wild child into contented maturity. It was a hard walk in which I had been emotionally involved, but ultimately it has come full circle.”

With maturity comes new focus and while Fancourt may have been ticking over financially, Sabine believes it is time for a stronger business approach. “We have been fortunate to have the financial resources to grow and weather the storms, but it is time to stabilise and be a strong, profiting business that can forerun prosperity for the town and region. Over the past five years we have restructured and streamlined our processes and last year appointed new CEO Georgie Davidson to take us into a new era,” says Sabine.

Another development is the increased involvement of Tina, the Plattners’ oldest daughter, at Fancourt. “Hasso and I had been consolidating our interests to ensure that our children were not left with financial burdens when we are gone, and the girls could decide where they wanted to be involved. Tina chose Fancourt and Steffi got involved in Germany. It is very rewarding to have one of my daughters take over the reins of a project that has been such a big part of my life for so long.

“While so much has happened at Fancourt, and to me, in the past 21 years, a visit here still holds for me the magic of that first time in 1994. When I drive through that tree-lined entrance, it still feels like home.” ■

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