

Golf's leading lady

Having been at Fancourt for 18 years, 15 of which she headed up the resort, working closely with owners Hasso and Sabine Plattner, more than a few eyebrows were raised at what seemed to be Ingrid Diesel's sudden and unexpected resignation.

In a wide-ranging interview, Compleat Golfer spoke with her about her decision to resign, her experiences and highlights at the forefront of South Africa's leading golf resort and estate and her plans for the future.

Compleat Golfer: Ingrid Diesel and Fancourt have become synonymous: when and how did your relationship start and how did it evolve?

Ingrid Diesel: I started at Fancourt in January 1991, initially working as the PA to the MD in the very early years. Then, when the resort went into liquidation as a result of the Masterbond debacle, I worked closely with the liquidators. It was during this period that I became directly involved with feasibility studies and investors, and it was in this role that I was introduced to the Plattners when they bought Fancourt.

I will always be grateful to the Plattners for giving me the opportunity to work with them in fulfilling their vision, and it was an opportunity that I really made the most of and gave my full commitment, loyalty and effort.

What was the Plattner's immediate vision for Fancourt?

The Plattners took over in 1994, and they immediately set about creating stability and confidence in the product. They delivered on all their promises to the existing home-owners before they even started marketing the resort, which was an incredible step of faith on their part.

How did this vision change and evolve over the years?

As their commitment and enthusiasm for the product grew, so they invested more and more in obtaining extra land, adding on extra facilities, and ensuring that what was there was world-class and of the highest standard. Their vision was always to be the best and they achieved that.

It is often said that "money was no object", but their involvement goes far further than that. They are so committed to the community and its needs, and the many, many projects that have benefited from their generosity are testimony to their commitment and overall belief in the country and its people.

Without the resources of the Plattners, what do you believe might have happened to Fancourt?

It probably would have remained a run-of-the-mill golf resort, with a small hotel, 27 holes of golf and many, many more houses than exist now over four golf courses – just on the 27 holes! There probably would have been a developer who made as much money as possible out of the real estate and who when moved on, leaving the resort to the members and home-owners to run.

What prompted your decision to resign after 18 years?

The actual building of the Fancourt brand probably started 20 years ago, and for 18 years I was part of that experience. For 15 of those years, I was CEO. It is absolutely natural to question oneself and wonder when the right time would be to hand the reins over. I have been doing exactly that for a little while now – both for my own sake and for the sake of the company. My passion is Fancourt, and I often thought that I would not like to stand in the way of change or more longterm thinking, for my own selfish reasons. I have always had to handle huge amounts of stress and, although I have become resilient to that to some extent, after 18 years you start asking yourself whether this is something you want forever, and I did not want it.

It was a tough decision, but I took all my courage and made the decision, and I know I will never look back..

It seemed sudden, why did you not work out your “notice period”?

In any high-level position such as I held, and particularly because I had been in it for nearly 16 years, if a change is to take place, it should take place quickly. I did not want to be an obstacle in the way of change. It really was the best way to do it, taking into account the nature of our industry and also the tough economic times which all businesses face today. There are many business decisions that have to be made, and the person who would be in the driving seat going forward needs to be making those.

Why has Bramble Hill been “mothballed”?

I can only talk about the time prior to my departure. In any tough economic times, one is always forced to take a good and proper look at all your business units, and that is what we did. Bramble Hill just did not have enough rounds to justify carrying the losses that came with it, and hence the decision. It was purely a business decision.

Should this be seen as a warning to South African golf?

I would like to say that we should rather try and understand the context of the decision. Bramble Hill was really not part of Fancourt’s core business, and when examining your business in times such as we are experiencing, those are the first areas that need scrutiny. Fancourt’s offering is so much bigger, and the need to focus and produce on the core business was essential.

The golf offering – especially on the Garden Route – has really grown in the past few years, and each facility’s slice of the cake has not grown at the same rate. And added to this we are in uncertain and extremely tough economic times. It makes complete sense to put a Bramble Hill on hold for the time being.

What are some of your proudest achievements at Fancourt?

There have been so many wonderful moments at Fancourt, the most significant of these being The Presidents Cup of course, the Womens World Cup, the SA Open, the 46664 concert which was a totally different experience, and, one of my own personal highlights, when I was nominated as one of the five finalists in South Africa’s Businesswoman of the Year in 2004.

I am also proud of being one of the founders of the Golf Summit, which has become such an important event for the people in our industry. Prior to this, none of us were talking, and we have now set up an incredible networking opportunity for all sectors of the golf industry in South Africa.

But deviating from all the glamour and big events, I really do cherish the wonderful relationships that I have built over the years – with employees, with colleagues, with business professionals and with our members. These actually mean more to me than the one-off experiences, because they will go on forever. This also includes work done on the Fancourt Foundation and also my involvement with the Ernie Els and Fancourt Foundation – this is very rewarding work and I have enjoyed it tremendously. It certainly brings one back to the real world.

For the past two years I have worked very hard on trying to secure a Seniors event for South Africa. I had an experience with the European Seniors Tour in Switzerland a few years back, and just knew it was something that Fancourt had to do. I am so pleased that that was one of my final achievements – and I am really grateful, firstly, to Dr Hans Walter Peters of the Berenberg Private Bank in Germany for boldly sponsoring the event and to Andy Stubbs of the European Tour for supporting the event. The Berenberg Bank Masters will now take place at Fancourt at the end of March 2010 and I know it will be a great event for South Africa.

What does the future hold for Fancourt and the Garden Route and golf tourism in general?

Fancourt will always be a drawcard to the Garden Route and, with the Plattners behind it, I have full confidence in its future.

I am, however, cautious about there being too much golf on offer on the Garden Route. This is good for the consumer – who has a wide choice – as long as it does not become cut-throat. It would be far better to see those places that have had the courage to develop, making a real go of it and, for this reason, I don't believe there is place for much more. There is nothing worse for a region than when developments flounder. I would like to see the current golf courses and resorts reaching somewhere near capacity. This creates stability in the region.

The Garden Route will always be a beautiful area, but there are constraints in getting here. It is not close to a major metropolitan area, and to reach desirable occupancy levels – whether it's hotel rooms or golf-course rounds – will always be a challenge.

I remain absolutely confident about golf tourism. We have the greatest climate and world-class facilities here in South Africa. Golf attracts a market that can normally afford to travel, and hence tourism will always benefit. The golf tourist is the best kind of tourist and we need to ensure that we attract them as we need them in our country.

What does the future hold for Ingrid Diesel?

Firstly, I will be supporting the Berenberg Masters event in terms of PR and media in this country, and I am extremely excited about this. I have some exciting new challenges that I need to decide on. But I am taking my time.

I do know for sure that I want to stay fully involved in the business of golf in South Africa, and I want to put back as much as I possibly can – I love the business and I believe I have a lot to offer. My mind

does not stop thinking, and I have some great ideas up my sleeve, but I need to think them through carefully. But, at the same time, I need time for myself –something I have not had much of for 18 years, so I look forward to being able to enjoy time with my family and friends and perhaps doing some travelling – which includes playing golf all over the world!