



THE ROYAL EXPERIENCE

To the thousands of golfers in the greater Gauteng region, the noun "Royal" is sufficient to conjure up visions of what could be described as a golfing nirvana. For the serious and less proficient players alike, Royal Jo'burg with its two superb courses, is just about as good as it gets. Of course at 19th holes in the region, well-lubricated "experts" will argue whether Glendower and other top layouts are as good a championship test as Royal East's course, and the debate concerning the virtues of Royal's East and West courses is likely to go on for years. The point is, Royal is always worthy of comment – the club is that special.

During the 125 years of its existence, Royal has played an important role in the development of golf, even though the club's early history was rather inauspicious as it battled to find a permanent home. At first, the simply but logically named 'Johannesburg Golf Club' was established where Clarendon Circle and Empire Road are today, but rapid development of the city caused it to move four more times before finally being positioned where it is now. At one point during the early days,

when the course was moved to an area to the south of the burgeoning city, it was thought that the ground below was too rich in gold-bearing ore to be wasted on a golf course, so again the club was forced to relocate. It is difficult to imagine a better position for these fine courses – relatively close to major arterial highways, nestling among leafy suburbs looked over by Linksfeld ridge. Walking the fairways on either course, where bird calls and rustling leaves on the trees are the only sounds that break the silence, one could be a world away from the frenetic pace of life in South Africa's economic hub.

Golf's academics will extoll the virtues of classic links courses and the great layouts in Scotland and Ireland that were fashioned by nature more than the hand of man, but Royal's two courses were very different. Old photographs of the original course show a sparse expanse of land with precious few trees, and those made up of a few spindly saplings planted by enthusiastic members. The one saving grace was the undulating terrain. In an era when designers of golf courses didn't have sophisticated earth moving equipment,

the existing changes in elevation on the existing ground lent itself to the creation of some interesting holes which have improved over time.

After moving to Linksfeld in 1909, there have been several important dates during the club's storied history. One of these was a visit by the Prince of Wales in 1930. The Prince, who later became King Edward VIII, bestowed the Royal patronage on the club a year later. Perhaps buoyed by this honour, the club decided to construct another 18 holes, and a neighbouring farm to the east of the course was bought for the purpose. The club professional Robert Grimsdell was tasked with designing the new layout, which was later changed to accommodate a new clubhouse. Grimsdell would go on to become one of South Africa's most celebrated course architects, and although some of his work at Royal has been modernised over the years, it is easy to see why his work is held in such high regard.

It wasn't until 1939 that the East and West courses were completed with the new clubhouse positioned between the two layouts, and since then this club

has hosted many of the most important amateur and professional championships. In 2005 Royal was the obvious choice as a venue for the Joburg Open, co-sanctioned by the Sunshine and European Tours, an event that is televised to the world.

Another important development in the history of Royal was the merger with Kensington Golf Club, and although negotiations began sometime before, in January 2000 the clubs officially became one – forming the Royal Johannesburg and Kensington Golf Club.

It is fair to say that the "old" Royal was, like many other prestigious golfing facilities, rather conservative, and was operated as a strictly private facility. Stringent dress regulations on and off the course were sacrosanct, and the rather dingy 19th hole did nothing for the atmosphere. Whether deserved or not, the club had the reputation of being an "old mans' club," but this perception has changed dramatically. It may be an exaggeration to suggest that the merger with Kensington "saved" this grand old golfing institution, but it certainly underwent a metamorphosis to herald in the new millennium. Since then, this club

has gone from strength to strength. The attributes required for a first-rate facility include the right location, a well-designed and conditioned golf course (or courses) and a clubhouse with all the bells and whistles, but just as critical is the quality

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of the management team to ensure that everything works well.

With the guidance of young CEO Chris Bentley, who unapologetically insists on diligent attention to detail, it is clear that his enthusiastic team makes every effort

to ensure that the "Royal Experience" is enjoyed by every member and guest. It is very obvious that the management and staff at this club fully appreciate the importance of meeting their customers' expectations, and levels of service have constantly improved in recent times. It would be difficult for any of the large membership and many visitors to Royal to find fault, and every aspect of the experience has been fine-tuned. Changes to the clubhouse and its surroundings, the halfway house's facelift, the improved practice facilities, the modern, well-stocked pro shop, and the two excellent golf courses all combine to offer an experience which compares with the best anywhere. The club must be complimented on the way it has, without compromise, managed to move with the times without diluting its historic character. It is rare to find a club with such a rich history which is steeped in tradition, that has successfully managed to embrace 21st century hospitality.

Importantly, it has been no secret that many established clubs have been struggling to recruit and retain members, but at Royal this trend has been reversed. "This has required some out-of-box thinking," explains the man in charge. "We have worked hard to formulate value added benefits for members which include all-inclusive access to our driving range facility. But whether welcoming members or visitors, our team understands that our customers are the reason they are there. Our philosophy is simple; we welcome visitors, we treat members like royalty, and guests must feel like like members."

A large part of this club's business is catering for conferences, private functions and of course they have a loyal group of corporates that wish to offer their guests a world class experience for their golf days. The facilities allow for this without members being inconvenienced.

Johannesburg and the city's surroundings have changed radically since the founding fathers of Royal began their ambitious project of establishing a golf club, and although none would recognise their club today, they would certainly be very proud. ■