

City Lodge Hotel Group director retires: Patrick Tate looks back on a life in hospitality

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There is a solution to every problem, says Patrick Tate, retiring divisional director of operations at City Lodge Hotel Group (CLHG). This approach, coupled with a lifetime of experience, steady and grounded disposition, and an abundance of patience has made Tate excel as a hotelier.

City Lodge Hotel Group will bid a fond yet sad farewell to Tate on 30 November 2020 after 32 years of loyal service with the company. He was appointed by the group's founder, the late Hans Enderle – also Tate's mentor – in 1988 when the group only had three hotels: City Lodge Hotel Bryanston (then called City Lodge Randburg), City Lodge Hotel Sandton, Katherine Street (City Lodge Sandton at the time) and City Lodge Hotel Johannesburg Airport, Barbara Road (previously known as City Lodge Jan Smuts Airport). Tate was no stranger to the team he was joining as he had worked with all his new colleagues previously at Holiday Inn, before that group was bought out by Southern Sun (now Tsogo Sun).

Tate left his post at Holiday Inn Eastern Boulevard to manage City Lodge Cape Town (now City Lodge Hotel Pinelands) on 1 August 1988 – the group's third birthday. He initially worked out of City Lodge Randburg with then general manager, Clifford Ross, who was preparing to open City Lodge Durban. Together with Ross and Lynda Schroeder, Tate learned the City Lodge way of operating through assisting in opening the group's first hotel in KwaZulu-Natal, and went on to open City Lodge Hotel Port Elizabeth while the delayed Cape Town construction continued.

City Lodge Pinelands was successfully opened in 1989 under the capable control of Tate, who then moved on to open City Lodge V&A Waterfront in 1992. He fulfilled his role as general manager at the latter hotel until his promotion to divisional director of operations at central office in 2001, at the same time that Ross stepped up as managing director.



Patrick Tate

Tate's current position as divisional director of operations was carried out with boundless energy and unrivalled commitment to the continuing success of the group. His last day reporting to duty is 30 November 2020 but he will always remain a friend to the group.

Looking back over his prolific career, Tate is a hotelier to the core. When he left school, he initially wanted to be a dentist, but didn't get into the one dentistry school he applied to. He did a stint at Safmarine as a navigational cadet, and on his return to South Africa his call-up papers saw him heading off to Upton to start his national service. While in Namibia (then South West Africa), he became friends with a chef who was a trainee at Holiday Inn in Cape Town. After national service, the two of them returned to Cape Town and Patrick joined Holiday Inn in 1976 as a trainee in the kitchen. He worked in the kitchen in a hotel in Polokwane (then Pietersburg) for a year before working his way through all of the hotel's various departments. His next move was to Eastern Boulevard Holiday Inn in Cape Town where he worked with Tony

Balabanoff, fellow divisional director of operations at CLHG, for 18 months and becoming very good friends in the process.

His career has taken him to hotels in Zimbabwe and all over South Africa, initially with Holiday Inn, then three years with then Southern Sun, and later with CLHG. During his working life, there is little he hasn't seen or had to deal with. In the late 1980s, CLHG head office was then too small to accommodate Tate and Ross and they then rented office space in Sandton and shared a secretary who was known to be highly efficient between the hours of 8am and 1pm, only to return from a liquid lunch a bit worse for wear most days. As none of them could type or use the dictaphone, they learned to time their most important work for the mornings. "In those days, you didn't get fired for drinking whilst on duty as it was the accepted norm to be the *mein host* – that certainly wouldn't fly today," he says laughing.

Commenting on what he has seen change during his working life he says: "While I understand the need for it, legislation has by and large greatly restricted the hospitality industry. In the early 1980s, we were involved in true hotelkeeping, where guests expected us to join them at the bar every evening and dine with them at night. Guests came back to your hotel because of you. It was fun, there were almost no rules other than being a great host, showing a profit and running a shipshape establishment, many a deal was concluded with a handshake, and life seemed simpler. Whilst at work, we bonded with colleagues and worked exceptionally long hours – way beyond the end of our shifts – to help out wherever we could. Nowadays hoteliers have a huge amount of administration work, complying with time-consuming red tape."

Tate has served as general manager of four hotels during their opening phase, and overseen and assisted general managers at about 15 new hotel openings during his time as divisional director of operations. In the early days, they had a guideline manual called *Critical Path* that was designed to assist general managers with the opening of new hotels. Every property launch is different, Tate notes, affected by various laws in each of the provinces and nuances on the ground.

"At the end of the opening phase, we would update the *Critical Path* with any generic information that would prove useful in future. Hans also kept a little book called *We'll do it better next time*, which was passed on to new opening general managers, together with *Critical Path*, to help prepare them for the task ahead. These manuals would instruct on who to employ first, how to open a post box and a bank account, and so on. Much of this is now done by the central office. Then, employing staff had a lot to do with gut-feel not psychometric tests and profiling as we do today. If you got along, you would shake hands and sign a letter of appointment. The Golden Rule with Hans was you should hire for attitude and train for skills, as a person with a good attitude will be open to learning anything," he explains.

Tate's transition from being general manager of one hotel to being promoted to central office and overseeing 15 hotels was a big step. "Initially, I wanted to get into the detail of each property with all of the general managers, but it's not humanly possible as there are only 24 hours in the day. I soon realised that I needed to trust and empower people, and make them accountable for their actions. What I did on my first round of operational visits a month or two after my promotion was to ask the general managers: 'What must I do to get the best out of you?' The results were interesting: some said they preferred to chat once a week on a given day; others said they're seasoned general managers and we didn't need to be in each other's pockets; and a few of the newer general managers noted that they liked to have access to me several times a week or even a day while everything felt so new. And that is how we set the ground rules."

Looking ahead, Tate is keen to continue his passion for golf, enjoy his physical activities of swimming and running, his hobbies of photography, birds and wildlife, and 'wearing shorts and flip flops'. When international travel resumes, he's looking forward to visiting his brother in Australia and sailing to Tasmania. He has relocated to Nelspruit and would love to be involved with the 'honourary rangers'. With this, and his lifetime of experience as a hotelier, he hopes to serve as a locum general manager to some of the properties in and around the Kruger National Park that are family-run and need a trustworthy person to run their establishments while they take those much-needed breaks.

We asked Tate what he thinks makes him a good hotelier: "I am a good teacher and a good listener as I have a lot of patience; I am extremely astute so quickly pick up from a person's tone and manner if something is wrong, I'm grounded and self-disciplined; and, from experience, I know that there is always a solution. I aim to add value to people's lives – not only in the work environment – by being kind and caring. And I definitely don't think I would have had as much fun if I had become a dentist!"

Andrew Widegger, CEO of City Lodge Hotel Group, says: “On behalf of the entire company, I would like to thank Patrick for his contribution to the group at every stage of his career. His management of people, properties and processes has been exceptional and, after so many years working alongside each other, we consider him a friend. Patrick, we wish you well on this next leg of your life journey and know that whatever you turn your hand to, you will be successful.”

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