

Cape Town's Singing
Dustman James
Bhemgee makes a
new bid for stardom

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South Africans must rise
to defend the rights
they fought and died
for, says Siphon Pityana

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New laird at Matjiesfontein plans to keep his uncle's vision intact



Trust: Jonathan Rawdon outside the Lord Milner

PICTURE: TONY JACKMAN

THERE'S a new Rawdon in Matjiesfontein. After more than four decades of this tiny colonial resort town being owned and run by David Rawdon, the legendary South African hotelier who created the concept of the "boutique hotel", his nephew Jonathan Rawdon has taken the baton.

David Rawdon died on Friday, August 13, having spent his final years in the village he turned into a hotel. The legions of Matjiesfontein regulars want to know what will happen next – will new brooms sweep out the old and remove all that character with it?

Jonathan Rawdon is keen to put their minds at ease.

"Matjiesfontein is a magical place wrapped in history, and David always said he loved it when people would say, 'I remember it 30 years ago and it's exactly the same'. His intention was that in the future things should remain as they are. So my plan is to ensure it runs smoothly and to ensure David's vision continues." Young "Jon" Rawdon is 40. "David started fixing up Matjiesfontein in 1968, and I was born in late 1969, and as a family – we lived in Johannesburg – we used to go down and see Uncle Dave during all our holidays."

He and his uncle were always close. "You were mesmerised by David; as a young kid you idolised him, we all did. He was the person you'd want to be when you grew up."

These words, with hindsight, seem prophetic. "Later in life I worked closely with him. We came to Matjiesfontein for most of two years in 2004-2005. It was a great time when I really got to know Dave. He knew I was interested (in Matjiesfontein). He had made me a trustee maybe five years before that – he was worried about Matjiesfontein and what would happen to it when he passed away. I think he saw an opportunity in me."

Jonathan is keen to emphasise that he is not the sole "young Rawdon" in the new vanguard. His brother Thomas, 42, and sister Sian, 37, are involved, as is their father Benjamin, David's younger brother. Jon's wife, Judy, is a great admirer of Matjiesfontein and they and their children (Zachary, nearly 3, and Joshua, 2) may soon move back to South Africa from Bermuda.

"I think we'll do what Dave did – he'd go to Matjiesfontein for a night a week."

Whereas David Rawdon was a hotelier through and through – he started as a smous (wandering trader) in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, then built the original Rawdon's at Nottingham Road in the late 1950s – Jonathan is a corporate controller and considers his accountancy background his biggest strength as he faces a future of stepping into his uncle's formidable shoes.

There is a renovation under way at Matjiesfontein, and it is worth noting that this was put in place by David Rawdon in the months before he died.

"In the past couple of years we have spent quite a bit fixing up the exterior. We've spruced her up. My brother, Tom, and my dad have been looking at each and every room. We don't want to change the look and feel of the rooms – we want to keep that old-world charm – but we wanted to see if there was anything we could do to make guests more comfortable."

To that end, new curtaining and carpeting are on their way. "But one thing David never wanted was TV in the rooms, and we'll continue in that way," Jon is quick to add. "People come to Matjiesfontein to soak up the history, and we want them to be able to do that with a little bit of comfort."

TONY JACKMAN