

By Eugene Yiga

The house that Dogon built

Denise Dogon's real estate company, Dogon Group Properties, recently sold the most expensive house ever in South Africa. We chat to her to find out how she rose to success in this industry.

Dogon Group Properties recently sold a fully furnished three-storey Bantry Bay home for a whopping R290m to a German couple, the highest price ever achieved for a residence in the country. The property, which offers 360° views, was designed by architects SAOTA and built in 2014.

Dogon Properties' founder and CEO Denise Dogon has been a successful property agent for more than 40 years, and founded her own real estate business in 2002.



Denise Dogon
CEO of Dogon Group Properties

could simply start and sell and get your commission virtually immediately when the deposit came in. You didn't have to wait for the transfer to go through.

HOW DID YOU MAKE YOUR FIRST SALE?

I sourced what was for sale at the time, advertised the property, and a buyer responded. I arranged a viewing for the prospective buyer and he purchased it! For me, it was like a duck to water and I immediately realised that a career in real estate was meant for me.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GO INTO REAL ESTATE?

In my early 20s, I was visiting a friend who had started practising as an estate agent. She suggested I try it out. It was an unregulated industry in those days; you

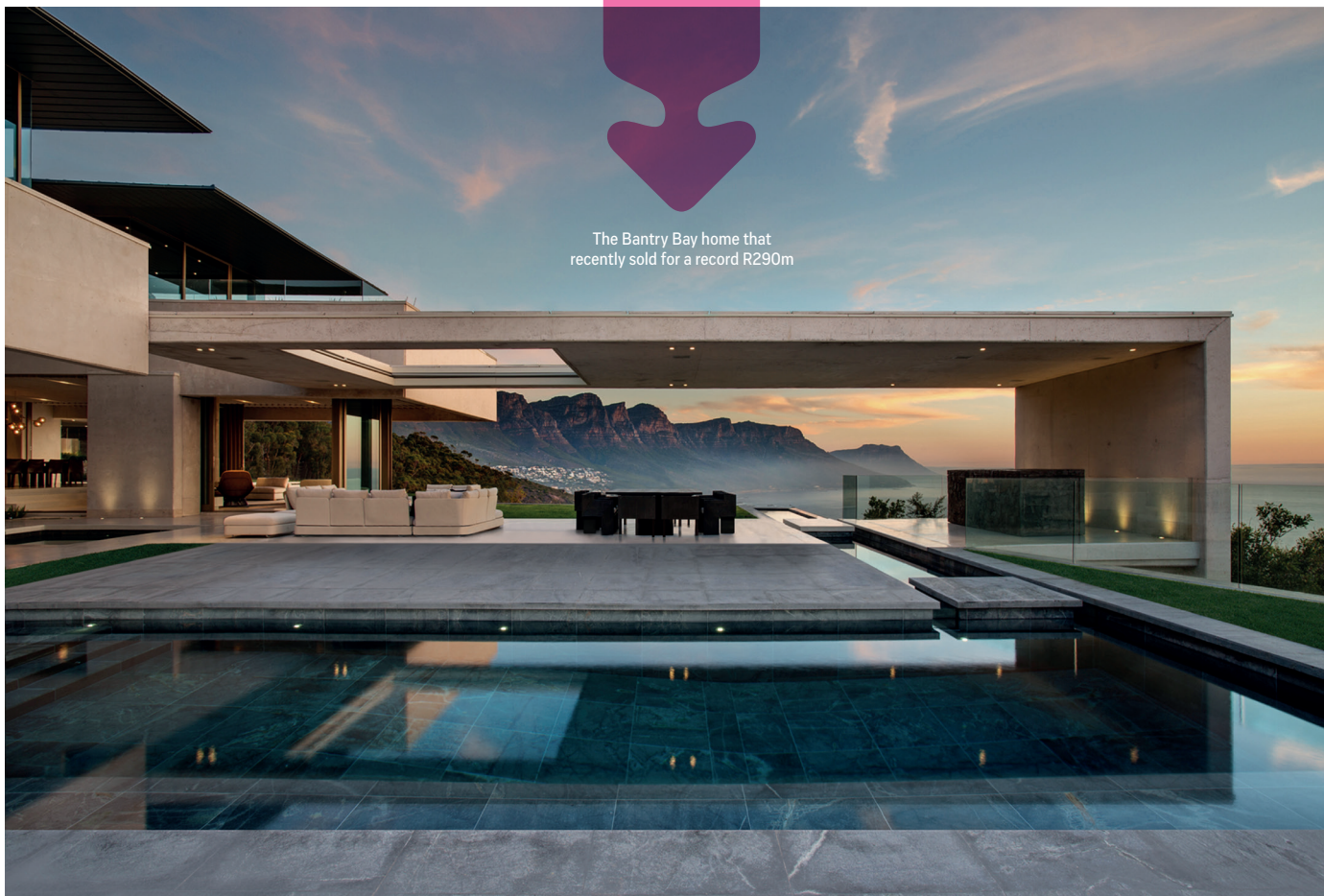
This included the Bantry Bay home that sold for

R290m,

the highest price ever achieved for a residence in Africa.

WHAT DID YOU DO PRIOR TO STARTING YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

I started working in 1975 with one of the leading real estate companies at the time.



The Bantry Bay home that recently sold for a record R290m

Q&A:

The company had a footprint in most of Cape Town and its environs, but minimal representation on the Atlantic Seaboard. I was thrown into the deep end, received no training, and began by working for them from my home. The company had two offices at the time – one in Newlands and the other in Pinelands. I visited each office once a week to catch up with the rest of the people in the company and connect with what was happening in those areas.

Shortly afterwards, I was made a director and stayed with the company for 23 years, at which time I was seriously considering going on my own when Pam Golding personally head-hunted me. I was appointed a director at Pam Golding Properties and tasked with focusing on the international division as a result of an increased demand from the high-end market. I remained in this position for many years.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO START YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

With South Africa emerging as a young and dynamic new democracy, the timing was right for me to take the proverbial plunge and head out on my own. I have been fortunate to travel abroad, which gave me the advantage to see the bigger picture. Seeing how exciting the property market was, particularly in the United States, gave me fresh ideas that I could easily adapt to the South African market. It was therefore time to move on.

WHEN DID YOU OFFICIALLY START OPERATING?

Dogon Group Properties launched in October 2002 with a huge bash attended by over 500 high-profile guests. I was back to working from my home and between the launch date and January 2003, sales in excess of R100m were achieved before Dogon Group moved into its new official state-of-the-art home, designed by Stefan Antoni & Associates, in Camps Bay in January 2003. The construction of the new offices was scheduled to take six months, so during this time I had low overheads and

worked from my home office and also from the bonnet of my car!

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE THREE BIGGEST DIFFICULTIES YOU'VE HAD TO OVERCOME?

1. Coping with the normal facets of a business, such as controlling overheads and keeping admin staff and agents motivated, productive, and happy.
2. Training our team to strategise and think beyond the local domestic market. SA's economic borders had been closed for so many years that we all needed to think more globally as the Cape Town real estate market was attracting international buyers.
3. Keeping standards high on every level.

HOW TOUGH IS COMPETITION IN YOUR SECTOR, AND WHAT DIFFERENTIATES YOU FROM OTHERS?

We were revolutionary when we opened in 2002. We tried to upgrade the look and feel of the real estate industry in SA. We opened with a state-of-the-art office on the beachfront in Camps Bay. At the time, there were many potential international buyers coming to SA for the first time.

We focused on new technology, setting new standards in the industry, boasting a designer office with a lounge advertising properties on a plasma screen (and the luxury of a cappuccino in hand) together with a fleet of branded Mini Coopers. Our concept was adopted by many other agencies soon after we launched with avant-garde marketing.

WHAT IS THE BEST BUSINESS ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

The best advice I have ever received was given to me by a captain of industry and is that you can never do everything yourself. Success is a team effort. The other bit of advice that I can give is that there is no-one else to blame except yourself when things go wrong – if it is to be, it is up to me!



Dogon Group Properties' head office in Sea Point

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A Clifton property that was sold by Denise Dogon and her partners Adrien Epstein and Vicky Atlas

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST LESSON YOU'VE LEARNT?

You are powerful when you operate ethically and with integrity. In my game it's about finding that happy medium where both parties of the property transaction are content with the sale. Not an easy achievement, I may add!

HOW DO YOU STAY MOTIVATED?

Success is about attitude, especially in real estate. When you are selling real estate in one of the most desirable cities like Cape Town, it is easy to stay motivated, as it is a privilege to be selling property in such a beautiful city. I'm always reminding myself and the Dogon Group team that, at the end of the day, we're selling a lifestyle dream in one of the globe's most desirable cities. Cape Town has it all, and more, and it's a pleasure and a privilege to work here.

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WHAT NON-WORK HABITS HELP YOU WITH YOUR WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

At heart I am a family person and my time is balanced between my work and my family. I married early and both my children are now grown up – one's a medical doctor and the other recently obtained his PhD in chemical engineering. We enjoy one another's company, weekends in nature and travelling.

WHAT IS YOUR THREE-YEAR GOAL FOR YOUR COMPANY?

We currently employ around 60 people. We're in the process of expanding and plan to open an office in Gauteng in the near future. Going forward, I would like to develop a training programme and assist the real estate industry in becoming more representative of SA's demographics and embrace transformation. ■
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