

FOR SALE



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WORDS: DAN READ



In 2007 work began on a leisure park at the Nürburgring. Up went the sausage emporiums and posh hotels and a rollercoaster. It would be, said the backers, a magical place for the whole family. A NüroDisney in the misty mountains. It even had a castle in the middle! So the doe-eyed government invested, but when much-needed private funds didn't arrive, the local authorities – or rather, a state-owned bank – was forced to pump in more cash to keep the dream alive.

So instead of the Ringplex landing in private hands, it remained in the government's custody. Then the rollercoaster crashed. Twice. And the *wieners* remained uneaten and hotels unoccupied because, really, the people who visited this remote corner of Germany came for one thing only: motor racing. The Nordschleife. The Grand Prix. The grassroots motorsport that had nourished the place since it opened in 1927. They never asked for shopping boulevards aimed at ladies with quilted handbags.

But instead of being handed over to someone who understood what people really wanted, the 'Ring was rented to two blokes linked to the theme park's

birth: Kai Richter and Jörg Lindner, who continued to run things their way until eventually their contract was terminated in February 2012. The reasons for this are still unclear. What we do know is this: in 2011, the local prosecutor began an investigation into the former CEO and current MD of the Nürburgring. Politicians have resigned. The EU is investigating whether the leisure park at the 'Ring was an appropriate use of its state funds.

Eventually, the government declared the 'Ring bankrupt late last year. State-appointed administrators took over, and on 28 Feb 2013 it was announced they would be selling the place. For just over 100 million quid. All of which raises a few questions...

● WHY DID THEY BUILD NÜRODISNEY ANYWAY?

The 'Ring was failing. From as far back as the early Nineties, the management was making questionable decisions (its published visitor numbers didn't tally with actual bums on seats). Carmakers were paying peanuts for development laps and motorsport wasn't paying its way. Come 2007, Germans were staying away from motorsport after Schumacher hung up his helmet and went fishing. So the new park

● Jackie Stewart in the wet at the 'Ring in 1968 – probably the most famous GP performance ever

● The RingWerk entertainment complex has become a ghost town since opening in 2009. Running next to the GP track, the rollercoaster was supposed to be the world's fastest. But it crashed twice in testing, and still isn't operational, making it the second-most dangerous twisty thing in the area

WORDS: DAN READ IMAGES: GETTY, LAT



• The 'Ring isn't just a mecca for M fans. The letters AMG, GT and RS are also popular there...

€330MILLION
-
€120 MILLION
=
€210MILLION
LOSS?



• Below: the barriers open for a session of Touristenfahrt. Turn up, do a few laps, then put a sticker on your bumper to prove you definitely didn't die there



• Officially, Bernie has signed a deal to keep F1 at the 'Ring for 2013. But watch this space...

was supposed to be a defibrillator to shock it back into business.

● SO WHO'S SELLING?

The regional Rhineland-Palatinate government. It owns 90 per cent of the business (the remaining bit is owned by the sub-district of Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler), and has appointed two blokes called Jens Lieser and Prof Dr Dr Thomas B Schmidt – a multidisciplinary – as administrators. It's their job to find investors and broker the sale.

● EXACTLY WHAT ARE THEY SELLING?

Two tracks (the Nordschleife and the GP circuit), the new buildings, the hotels, and the rollercoaster. "The Nürburgring may be sold either as a whole or in individual parts – such as the hotels – as a separate entity from the racetracks, to one or several interested parties", says Pietro Nuvolini, a spokesman for the administrators.

● 100 MILLION SEEMS A BIT CHEAP...

It kind of is, considering how much the redevelopment cost in the first place. Officially, it was a €330 million project,

itself and claw back lost public money however it can. Ultimately these decisions rest with the authorities. "There are no criteria for exclusion," says Mr Nuvolini. Which sounds like a good excuse for an office whip-round, if you ask us.

● WHO'S MOST LIKELY TO BUY IT?

Over to Mr Nuvolini again. "So far, there have been approximately 30 expressions of interest. However, no concrete discussions or negotiations have taken place since the selling process, which will be accompanied by a reputable auditing company. This has not started yet." Rumours suggest interested parties are so far sheikh-less, which would mercifully rule out the prospect of the 'Ring becoming a playboy's country club.

● SO I'LL STILL BE ABLE TO DRIVE MY CAR THERE?

Ah yes, the Touristenfahrten. You turn up, pay your €26 and off you go. This is allowed because the Nordschleife is owned by the government, which operates public roads, of which the North Loop is one. The liquidators say they're keen to maintain this, but if it is in private hands that might be more difficult. Again, it's up to the politicians to push the right buttons.

"DID TOPGEAR KILL THE NÜRBURGRING? WELL, JAMES MAY'S MANY RANTS WERE PERHAPS UNHELPFUL..."

but the European Commission is, in fact, investigating a set of government aid measures worth a massive €524 million. As yet, there's no explanation for where the missing €194m may have gone.

● CAN I PUT IN A CHEEKY OFFER, THEN?

You can try. But whatever they might say, the liquidators will be after their cut. A higher price will net them more profit. And if you're thinking of taking a punt, you'd better act fast – the sale should begin at the end of April.

● CAN ANYONE BUY IT?

In theory, yes. But there are various arguments going on, and the terms of sale seem to be open to negotiation. Some say it must serve the public. Others say it must simply pay for

● DID TOPGEAR KILL IT?

James May's rants were perhaps unhelpful. But he was talking specifically about carmakers' obsession with testing new products there, which tended to ruin a car's behaviour on normal roads. Perhaps more damaging was the massive hike in prices for manufacturer testing, implemented when Richter and Lindner were in charge. This caused many carmakers to abandon the 'Ring and find new live laboratories elsewhere.

● WHAT ABOUT THE GP?

Currently, it's still on for 7 July 2013, after Bernie Ecclestone agreed a deal with the 'Ring's events people at the end of January 2013. But we know how a few months can change things in Formula One. "Ecclestone and NBG [the 'Ring business] agreed



• Left: the GP circuit. Below: Otto Flimm, the man who made it. Can he save the 'Ring again?



• Lauda throws his Ferrari around the 'Ring prior to his accident there in 1976



not to disclose contractual details of the transaction," says Prof Dr Dr Schmidt, who's also in charge of restructuring the business. In other words, watch this space...

● IS THERE ANYTHING WE CAN DO?

Local bloke Mike Frison has been running his Save the 'Ring movement since 2010. "We started to fight before any digger moved in," he says. "But nobody wanted to listen." Within a year of starting his campaign, his petition had 20,832 signatures – one for every metre of the Nordschleife. Supporters can still sign it, and glue his stickers to their rear bumper, but he's even keener for them to get behind a man called Otto Flimm...

● WHO'S HE?

Flimm saved this place before. In the early Eighties, he pushed for a new GP circuit to be built alongside the Nordschleife, which no longer held Formula One races after Lauda's crash in 1976. He's now lobbying the government to sell it to the right people, and his followers recently held a protest about 100 miles away from the 'Ring in the town of Mainz, on the doorstep of regional politicians, reminding them that this little corner of the forest is worth fighting for.

● WHAT ELSE?

Frison reckons it's now all about putting pressure on the politicians. And that the protesters need some influential backing. "Racing drivers talk of their steel balls," says Mike. "But where are these balls now? It's time to use them. We need the big names. Michael Schumacher. People need to put strong messages into small minds."

• A Save the 'Ring protest rally in February. Must have got a group rate on placards

JEZZA VS. SABINE



VS.



TEN-MINUTE QUICKIE

Having spent many hours learning the circuit on his PlayStation, Jeremy set off in a diesel Jaguar S-Type with the aim of going around the Nordschleife in under 10 minutes. On his first four goes he's miles off the time. The next day, after a spin and some swearing, he finally set a time of 9 minutes, 59 seconds. On a wet track, too. But his celebrations were shortened when legendary 'Ring maiden Sabine Schmitz, who – having tutored him – then mocked his time and claimed she could go quicker. In a van. But first she had a go in the S-Type. Her time: 9 minutes and 12 seconds... some 47 seconds faster than Clarksons. In the next series, she took up her own challenge and set off in a diesel Transit van with Richard Hammond on board. He was later thrown out for reasons to do with weight saving. The van was taped up to improve airflow. A Dodge Viper was driven in front to create a slipstream. And Sabine set her fastest time: 10 minutes, eight seconds. She's good, that girl...

