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# **SANDSTONE:** THE STARS COME OUT TO PLAY

**MIX OF MISTS:** "Kalahari" No. NG17 greets the dawn during an early photo shoot on a frosty Free State morning, above; the farm's resident herd of Afrikander oxen reluctantly give way to the Sherman tank, below left; and an enthusiast gets his steam traction engine on the move, below right PAUL ASH

Trains and tractors and tanks — and teams of oxen — will be the big retro drawcards at this fine Free State festival, writes **Paul Ash**

FOR the first week of April, the sounds of locomotive whistles and steam engines working hard will echo off the cliffs of a towering sandstone buttress near Ficksburg in the Free State. Adding to the rumble of steel wheels and panting locomotives will be the bellows of oxen and the growl of military vehicles and classic tractors prowling the sprawling reaches of Sandstone Estates — in other times a proper working farm with thousands of hectares of maize and wheat under cultivation along the banks of the Caledon River.

## THE VIEW

If you climbed the buttress, you would be able to see all the way to Lesotho and the hulking blue Maluti Mountains beyond, but your attention would probably be drawn to the scene below your feet instead — whisps of smoke from steam trains picking their way across the fields, amid scurrying vehicles and people, a World War 2 Sherman tank rumbling through the mealies and even a couple of vintage aircraft touching down on a long, green strip of close-cropped meadow.

## THE PLACE

There are no other farms like Sandstone, not here and probably nowhere else in the world. It has its own railway — 26km of two-foot gauge track — which reaches from one side of the farm to the other. The railway becomes the focal point of the week's action when the farm opens up to show off its vast collection of historic vehicles which, along with the engines and armoured cars, include classic tractors, old buses, venerable lorries saved from platteland scrapyards, and ox-wagons pulled by the farm's own teams of trained Afrikander oxen.

## THE OCCASION

The event — Stars of Sandstone — takes place every two years and draws people from all over the world. Think of it as a rock festival, where the bands are steam engines — which include a pair of 100-year-old survivors (Rolling Stones, anyone?) from the long-lost Beira & Mashonaland Railway in Mozambique — and tractors and classic cars playing live sets.

The SA Armour Museum in Bloemfontein brings a few restored armoured vehicles, such as a Russian T-72 main battle tank, whose engine makes a sound that will make the hairs on your neck stand to attention. Once a day, you can join the military convoy that tours the farm and also see the world from the lofty perch of the Sherman's turret.

## HOW TO SEE IT

The festival takes place from March 30 to April 9. Most visitors camp in the well-appointed campground. This year there will also be two open days for day visitors.

## COST

Rates start at R912 per day (R399 per day for accompanying spouse; R228 for kids 12-18; R85.50 for under 12s). Open-day entrance is R228 per person, R114 for under 18s and R57 for children under 12.

## WHERE TO STAY

Accommodation on the farm is limited to camping (R285 per stand per day). Nearby Clarens has plenty of accommodation where the excellent Protea Hotel by Marriott® Clarens is offering a 20% discount with rates from R916 per person sharing per night. For bookings, call 0861 11 9000 or visit **proteahotels.com**.

## HOW TO BOOK

Call Dave Richardson 082 447 9167, Leigh Sanders on 051 933 2235 or 079 327 7649, e-mail leighs@sandstone.co.za or see **sandstone-estates.com**.

## For these staff, their living is also about loving

SEUN Koen is the sort of person who could make ear wax seem fascinating if he were interested in it. Start him on his love for trains, Ratels and automobiles, not to mention ox wagons, Sherman tanks and buses, and he sweeps you up with his enthusiasm.

He's one of 45 employees at Sandstone Estates and one who seems to know the story of every machine stored in the giant sheds.

Look out, for example, for the Ratel-90 with the scratch on the front, underneath its gun barrel. This is the farm's Land Rover, often used to knock down derelict buildings (but certainly not heritage houses) on the property.

At Sandstone, the staff spend their time maintaining and starting up everything — which includes yoking up a different team of oxen every day to make sure the beasts know what they're doing — before starting the rotation again.

Trucks and containers keep arriving containing a new purchase, while locomotives which need rebuilding are sent to Bloemfontein, where fitter Lukas Nel sometimes spends years restoring them. — *MA Farquharson*

**HIS BABY:** Sandstone's living heritage guru Seun Koen with one of his charges in the locomotive shed JOHN HOGG

## DID YOU KNOW?

**The Garratt locomotive, number 52 — making its first outing after a lengthy restoration — is one of the engines that whistle so hauntingly at the start of Alan Paton's "Cry, the Beloved Country"**

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