



Sandstone hosts an International Tour Group as South Africa returns to the international list of rail tour destinations.

After a gap of almost fifteen years, a major International Rail Tour visited South Africa in June and July 2023 for both a main line and narrow gauge experience. The tour was operated by FarRail, a German company, under the direction of Bernd Seiler. Local assistance was provided by Derick du Toit of the New Cape Central Railway. FarRail are well known for their meticulous attention to detail with their tours and recreating the past as close as possible. The major part of the tour was based in the Kimberley and Bloemfontein area for 3'6" gauge running with two Class 25NC locomotives after the group had visited Wonder Steam in Pretoria.

After five days of main line action, the tour arrived at Sandstone on Saturday July 1st for two days of 2ft narrow gauge operations culminating in a sunrise session on Monday July 3rd. Sandstone has a great deal to offer such tours as they have historically correct locomotives and rolling stock to mirror the halcyon days of the narrow gauge in South Africa. Such presentation is exactly what FarRail was looking for. Sandstone has the added advantage in being a self-contained network on private land with a heritage collection unrivalled in the world. Military vehicles, agricultural equipment, vintage buses, cars and trucks, traction engines and a span of oxen with original Ox wagons help recreate the past. Sandstone has been fortunate in that some International Tour Groups maintained their visits to South Africa via Sandstone's various annual gala events after main line tours ended in the mid-2000s. Sandstone also has an added bonus as a destination with onsite accommodation and catering. Numerous other guest houses can be found in close proximity in the surrounding area for additional accommodation.

For FarRail Sandstone steamed three different ex South African Railways narrow gauge Garratt locomotives for the photographic sessions ranging from NGG13 number 49 from 1928 to NGG16 153 and NGG16A 155 from 1968. As a bonus on the last morning, the German built NG15 "Kalahari", number 17, was added to the roster which was well received by the German members of the group! The overall feedback is that this first tour, for so many years, was a resounding success, some obstacles had to be overcome but these were professionally dealt with by the organisers and Sandstone was proud to play its part in this piece of rail tour history. We look forward to many more in the future, to start the process we will be hosting a UK group in May 2024.

Our photo gallery, courtesy of Mike Myers and Mark Ruddy shows the early morning of July 2 with NGG13 number 49 and some hardy photographers braving the well below zero temperatures. NGG13 number 49 is also shown on its train near to the Sandstone Airfield with Sandstone's 1954 Bristol bus providing a period backdrop under a piercing blue Free State sky. This is followed by NGG16 number 113 waiting on the load on Monday July 3rd with the night shots showing NGG16 113 and NG15 number 17 raising steam in the early hours of July 3rd.