



Sandstone Estates

Introducing Geoff's Trains

In 1986 Geoff Cooke visited the National Railways of Zimbabwe head office in Bulawayo with a proposal to make to the general manager. He must have been persuasive because three months later the first safari train in Africa left Bulawayo for Victoria Falls. On that day Geoff's interest in railways, until then a hobby, turned into fulltime employment. The train grew until, in 1999, it was sold to South Africa's Shongololo Express. Later, it was sold to Rovos Rail. Geoff continued to work in railway tourism, moving to the United Kingdom in 2002 to start Geoff's Trains Limited, a business specialising in international rail themed tourism.

Geoff's Trains has offered bespoke rail tours for both railway enthusiasts and tourists who enjoy train travel. He has hosted tours to many European countries, all corners of the United Kingdom and the USA, but Africa and its railways continue to draw him back.

It is not surprising that Geoff is considered one of the world's leading authorities in African railway tourism. Not only has he built and run his own successful luxury tourist train, but he has overseen successful railway tours to Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia and Kenya.

Geoff Cooke has enjoyed a long association with Sandstone. In 2005 he collaborated with international bookings for the Avontuur Adventurer, a Sandstone tour from Port Elizabeth to Avontuur and back, at that time the longest two-foot gauge railway in the world. That year, he also undertook a survey of heritage assets in Zimbabwe for Sandstone that culminated in the acquisition of a valuable spares resource for the refurbishment of their English Electric Cape gauge ex Zimbabwean class DE2 locomotive.

A series of tours followed, with some specifically planned for narrow gauge enthusiasts that were called South African Narrow Gauge tours, or SANG for short, these tours established annual three day charters on the Sandstone railway that continued until they were replaced by the Stars of Sandstone Festivals that could easily be integrated into SANG tours. Since then, Geoff has promoted visits to nearly every Stars festival, culminating in an agreement where Geoff's Trains acted as the exclusive international sales agent for the 2019 event.

When news that the Stars Festivals would no longer take place, Sandstone received a steady flow of queries asking how the heritage collection could be accessed by enthusiasts. Sandstone have always been happy to welcome visitors, but clearly a viable alternative was needed to replace the festivals. It was decided that group visits would be offered to the railway as well as other parts of the heritage collection.

The Sandstone management are businessmen and farmers, they do not work in the international tourism environment and so it was decided that someone was needed who understood Sandstone and African railway and heritage tourism, but who was also a successful tour operator. Geoff was the obvious choice.

As the official link between international tourism and Sandstone, Geoff is ideally placed to work with any group tour operator to discuss their interests and develop the best charter package for them. He will also develop a budget to suit their needs and is well placed to discuss such peripheral matters as transport, hotel accommodation and pre or post Sandstone touring options in southern African. His insight will help the tour operator to optimise their visit whilst at the same time ensuring that Sandstone can satisfactorily provide the services requested of them.

Our Agreement with Geoff's Trains ensures that every query will be dealt with confidentially. Geoff's Trains are no longer running their own tours to Africa. They are not a competitor to other tour operators, but a valuable part of the Sandstone team. Once a charter has been planned and accepted by Sandstone and their client, Geoff will step aside. He will still be available to offer advice, but the tour operator will finalise contracts directly with Sandstone. If it is desired that Geoff accompany a tour, or provide any further services, that would be for Geoff and the Tour Operator to separately agree.

Sandstone have invested extensively not only in the heritage collection, but also in the infrastructure needed to host charter groups with good accommodation, catering and meeting facilities. These facilities combine to create an excellent environment for railway and other heritage assets, incentive groups, film and television locations and much more. With Geoff's Trains support, the years ahead should see a growing number of group visits to one of the world's special places.

A group visit can be for as few as four guests, or for hundreds. Sandstone can cater for them all and Geoff is waiting to discuss your plans and work with you to turn them into reality. His input will cost you nothing, give him a call or send him an email, he is waiting to hear from you.

For more information, please contact:

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