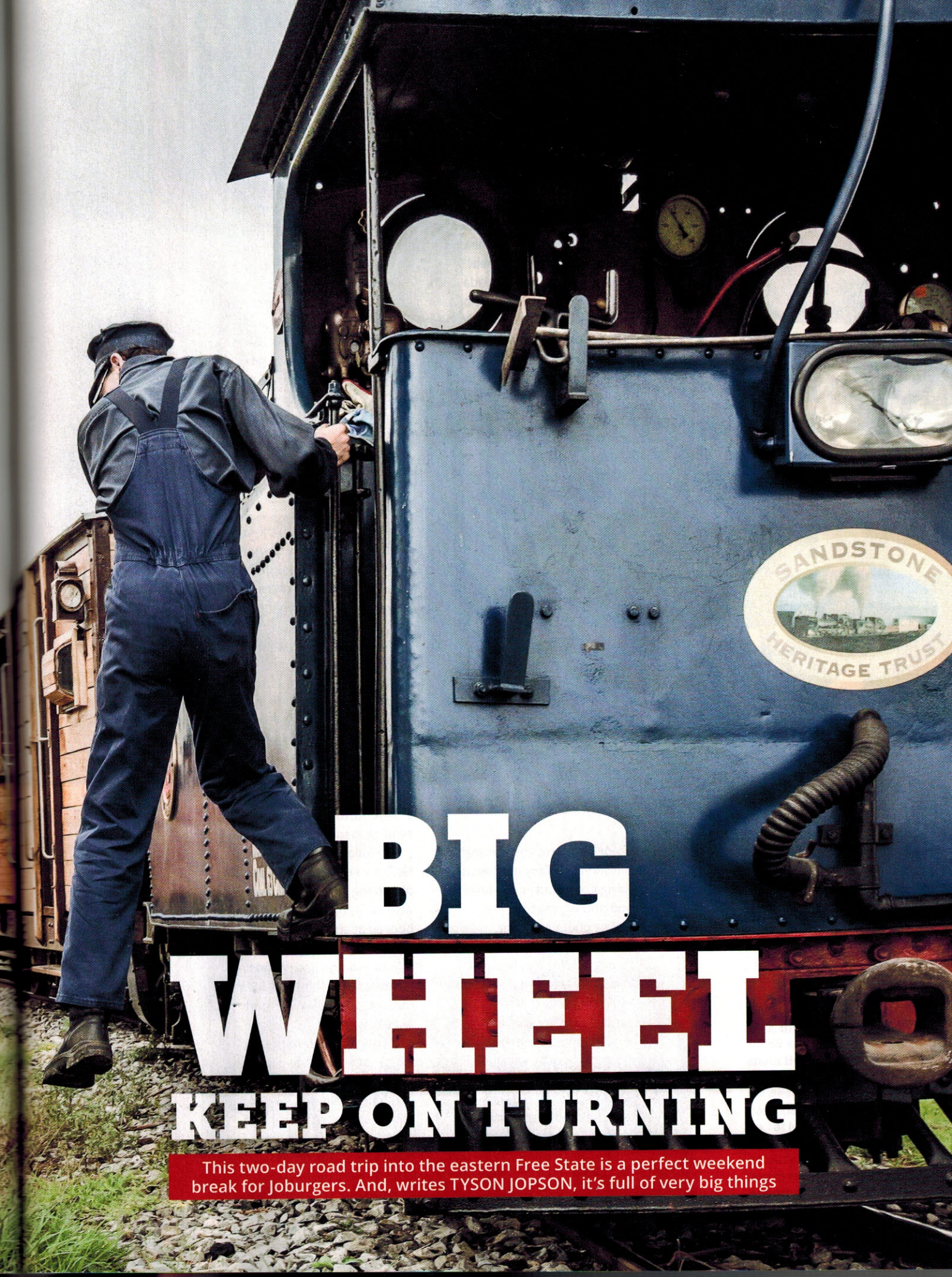


ROAD TRIP

SOUTHERN AFRICAN ROUTES WORTH TAKING



Ever wanted to ride on an old narrow-gauge locomotive? You'll find more than one on this farm in the Free State.

A man in dark blue overalls and a cap is working on the side of a large blue steam locomotive. The locomotive has a large headlight, a circular gauge, and a logo that reads "SANDSTONE HERITAGE TRUST". The man is standing on a small platform or step, reaching into the side of the locomotive. The background shows a wooden building and some greenery.

BIG WHEEL

KEEP ON TURNING

This two-day road trip into the eastern Free State is a perfect weekend break for Joburgers. And, writes TYSON JOPSON, it's full of very big things

The only thing small about the Free State is what people know about it. Determined to change that, I took the N3 out of Joburg on a late Friday morning to explore a part of it that I hadn't ever visited before. The Eastern Highlands extend along the lower reaches of the Maloti Mountains and three of its towns – Clarens, Fouriesburg and Ficksburg – had been on my radar for some time.



A de Havilland Tiger Moth prepares for take-off during the biannual festival of vintage machines at Sandstone Estates.

For company, I had wrangled the services of my mother as navigator, deputy note-taker and primary stand-there-please photo assistant.

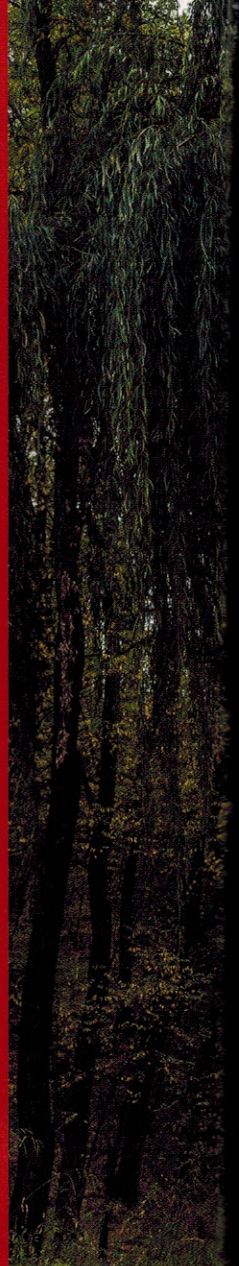
We round Gilloolys, noodle through traffic and head for Villiers, a place that, regrettably, I still know only for its Engen garage and cluster of grain silos visible from the highway. We load up on padkos at Die Padstal and head for Harrismith where we get off the N3 and take the road east toward the Maloti. We pass a few more farms, their houses surrounded by copses of trees providing respite from the Free State sun.

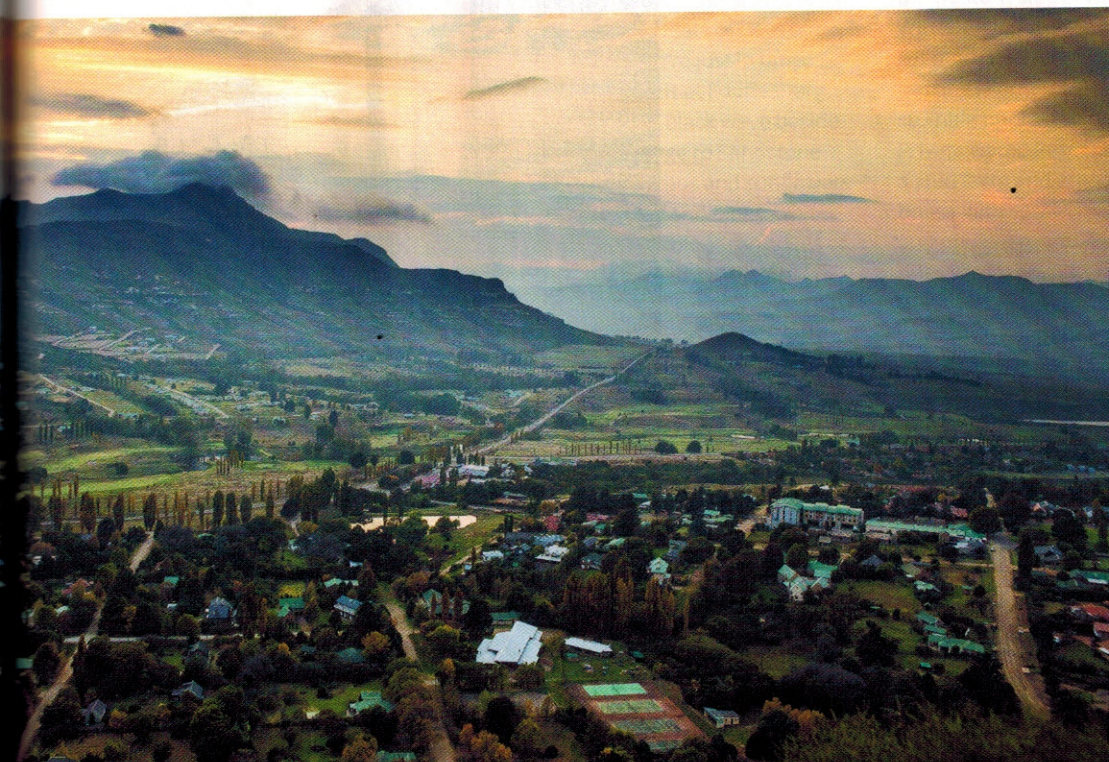
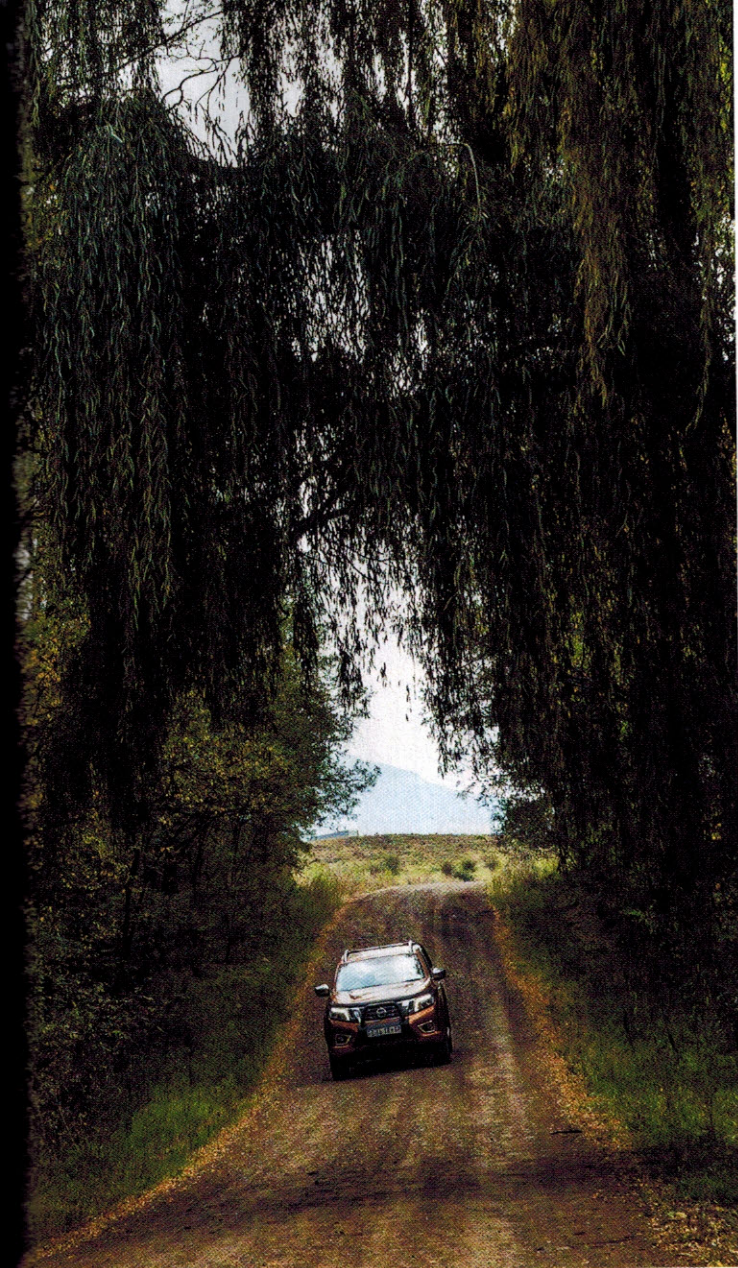
They're mostly willows, as far as we can see from the road, and Mom points out that they would have been planted many years ago with the intention of providing shade for generations to come. There's just enough time to debate the paucity of altruism in 'today's generation' before the road curves and sweeps towards Golden Gate National Park, where large sandstone cliffs stand sentinel on the Lesotho border. We wind our way along Lichens Pass, named because of the lichens that grow on these mountains, and stop at a viewpoint to watch the sun illuminate their ochre chests.

We reach Clarens in the late afternoon, check in at Aspen Guesthouse and then head into the Clarens Village Conservancy for a short walk. From the top of a ridge, I look down at Clarens below. It's boomed, I'm told, now home to a profusion of artisanal restaurants, a craft brewery, boutiques and adventure centres that whisk visitors over the border to ski or ride mountain bikes. But the gravel roads and grassy town square still make it feel like a village. So, too, we discover that evening in town, do the people.

The following morning we head for Fouriesburg, in search of nothing in particular and with no accommodation booked at all. It's risky, but it's early April, we're between school holidays and I'm feeling whimsical. So whimsical, in fact, that we take the wrong road out of Clarens...

It's not long before the navigator notices the blip on the radar is moving towards Bethlehem. We look for a place to turn around. A sign ahead comes into focus: 'Lesotho Highlands Water Project Ash River Outfall'. We take the exit and are soon standing inside >





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT
Clarens was established in 1912, the same year the *Titanic* sunk – ask a local about that; willows hang over parts of the gravel road between Ficksburg and Rosendal; hop onto a walking trail at Moolmanshoek and watch the sun rise; Jenlee's Country Shop and Bistro is awash with trinkets, fowl and other farm animals



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE The SA Armour Museum brings big guns to the Stars of Sandstone Festival; this trail in Clarens tracks around a small lake; rail fan Alexander McCook drives the 1913 SAR NG4 no. 16 locomotive; this is the diameter of a 37km-long tunnel that channels water beneath the Maloti Mountains.





the cross-section of a gigantic pipeline. 'This,' says deputy note-taker reading a plaque, 'looks like the place where water from Lesotho flows underneath the Malotis and into South Africa.'

'That's a big pipe,' I say. 'It could swallow our car.'

We head back through Clarens, musing on the bigness of things out here in the Free State. Little do we know, we're about to stumble onto the biggest of them all...

In Fouriesburg we stop at Jenlee's Country Shop and Bistro for a snack and get chatting to one of its owners while a plucky Angora goat tries to steal confectionery from a potjie pot.

'Are you here for the Stars of Sandstone Festival?' asks owner Jen Lee. If I didn't know any better, I'd have guessed it was a talent show held atop one of the surrounding cliffs with contestants earning a 300-style Spartan kick off the edge if they failed to amuse the judges.

Rather, Stars of Sandstone is a gathering of the colossal – a place where trains, planes, army tanks and cranks gather every two years to celebrate engineering feats of days of yore. And we're just in time.

We turn left at Fouriesburg and surf the black wave beside the Witteberge to Sandstone Estates. Cosmos and sunflowers are in bloom and pinks, whites and yellows colour the edges of the gravel road into the estate. It's an irony, I suppose, that such beauty should line the path to machines that were once used for a thing so ugly as war. Still, the vehicles are impressive and firepower makes up just one part of this historical hurrah.

By far the most impressive are the trains. Over the festival period, Sandstone is home to the largest collection of working

two-foot, narrow-gauge locomotives in the world.

'We have 25 on site, all running on a railway through the estate to the Lesotho border. There's more than 25 kilometres of it,' says the estate's owner, Michael Myers. And so, with that and a shrill whistle, we take the No. 16 train to the border, departing from Hoekfontein Station in a cloud of soot. Overhead, a button-yellow de Havilland Tiger Moth wings its way over the Malotis and in the distance a VW Kübelwagen bumbles alongside a maize field.

Back in the present day, we continue towards Ficksburg in search of cherries and get the lowdown on the best place to go when it's harvest time, before doubling back onto an alluring dirt road I'd seen along the way. We head north along

'And so, with that and a shrill whistle, we take the No. 16 train to the border'

the western side of the Witteberge this time, which get more beautiful with each passing kilometre. And then stumble upon Moolmanshoek Private Game Reserve. It's a stud farm and grand country house with sprawling lawns and opulent rooms that open onto Serengeti-like plains where hulking eland, wildebeest and oryx move in the shadow of the mountains. It's magnificent.

So we stay the night and, over dinner, share our thoughts. 'They don't do small out here, hey,' Mom says.

She's right. Whether it's mountains or manufacture, the Free State does it big. And that makes this part of the world no small wonder. 

Free State loop

Day 1: Joburg to Clarens

Distance 375km **Allow** 4 hours

Take the N3 out of Joburg. After about 90 minutes you'll get to the Engen at Villiers and Die Padstal (1). Continue to Harrismith and take the N5 west out of town and then immediately right onto the R74. This road becomes the R712 through Golden Gate Highlands National Park to Clarens. You'll find the Clarens Village Conservancy (2) directly behind Aspen Guesthouse (3) at the end of Van Zyl Street and the Clarens Brewery (4) in town on Market Street East.



GOLDEN GATE

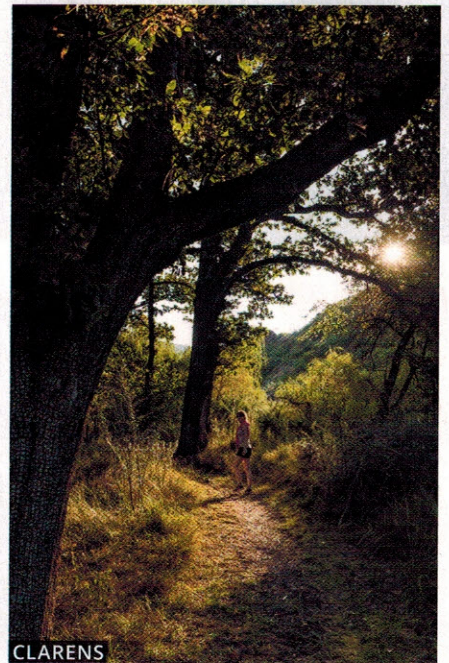
Day 2: Clarens to Moolmanshoek Private Game Reserve

Distances 80km **Allow** 5 hours

Take the R712 to Bethlehem for about 10km and turn left at the sign that reads 'Ash River Outfall' (5). Double back through Clarens and out on the R711 to Fouriesburg. Jenlee's Country Shop (6) is at the turn-off for Fouriesburg town. A short stretch further down the R711, take a left at the T-junction onto the R26 to Ficksburg. About 35km down this road, you'll find Ionia Cherry Farm and, a little way further, Sandstone Estates. From there you can either head towards Ficksburg and take the next gravel road right, or double back and take the gravel S385 left at Generaalsnek. Both will take you to the same junction. Follow the signs north for Moolmanshoek Private Nature Reserve (9).



MOOLMANSHOEK



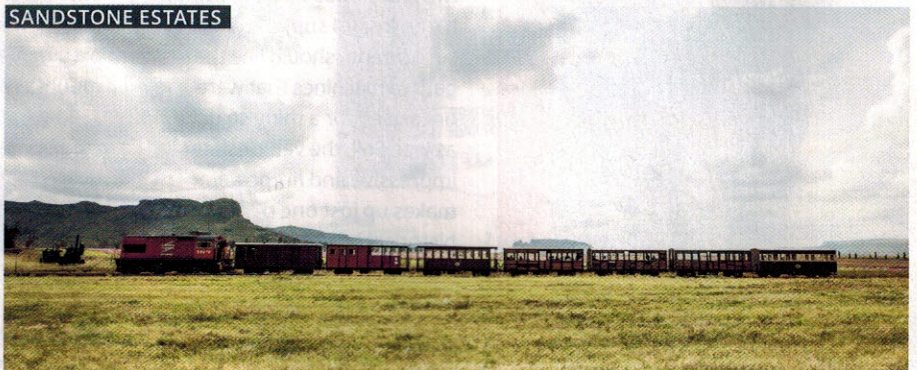
CLARENS

Day 3: Moolmanshoek Private Nature Reserve to Joburg

Distances 80km **Allow** 5 hours

Take the gravel road north from Moolmanshoek until you get to the tar R70. Turn right onto it, drive past Rosendal and into Senekal. Take the R70 out of Senekal and then turn right onto the R720 towards Steynsrus. At Steynsrus take the R76 to Kroonstad, where you can hop onto the N1 and shoot back to Joburg.

SANDSTONE ESTATES



Directory

1 Die Padstal This shop behind the N3 Engen outside Villiers is worth a stop for the biltong alone. It's still a long way to Clarens and you'll want some high-quality padkos to see you through. R290 per kg. 082-859-3117

2 Clarens Village Conservancy Stroll beside a babbling brook or head up the sandstone formation for a view of Clarens below. Permits for mountain biking and fishing are R40 pp and available from the Protea Hotel in town. 060-307-1489

3 Clarens Brewery Order the free tasting tray (six beers, two ciders and a gin), then pick a pint of your favourite, sit outside and watch the town go by. Lunch from R40. 082-901-4700

4 Aspen Guesthouse This magic find is on the edge of the Conservancy and an easy stroll from town. Rooms are beautifully themed and there's a self-catering family cottage. From R450 pp sharing B&B. Cottage from R350 pp sharing (sleeps three). 058-256-1192

5 Ash River Outfall A short detour gets you to the spot where water gushes into SA from Lesotho via the epic Trans Caledon Tunnel.

6 Jenlee's Country Shop and Bistro There's probably more *goeters* crammed into this farmstead than in the rest of the Free State's combined. There's also a petting zoo (free). 084-512-5030

7 Ionia Cherry Farm We were out of season but if you visit in October and November you can take a cherry tour (R185, booking essential). We contented ourselves with tasting cherry jams and liqueurs. Don't miss Ionia's Crop Celebration Festival (16 – 19 November 2017). 072-585-3684

8 Sandstone Estates You'll want to earmark the next Stars of Sandstone Festival (April 2019, info on sandstone-estates.com) to see the classic cars, armoured vehicles and narrow-gauge

locomotives rumble around the estate. Until then, its heritage site is open to the public and boasts a stellar collection of bygone machinery, albeit stationary. A tour is from R228 pp for four people or more (bookings essential). 071-658-6970

9 Moolmanshoek Private Game Reserve Surely the jewel of the Witteberge; we fell in love with everything about this reserve. There's a spectacular 4x4 trail through game-rich foothills (self-drive on request only), mountain biking, horse riding, hiking and meals to die for. The setting, big-stone architecture, farm-style hospitality and umpteen distractions (billiards, anyone?) complete a standout experience. From R1018 pp sharing DBB. 051-933-2220

Eastern Free State

