

FREE STATE

On a visit to Ficksburg, **Myrtle Ryan** found the cherry on top chugging along the Sandstone Railway

‘H AVE you ever ridden the Sandstone Railway?’ asked the couple sharing a table with me at a guest farm near Fouriesburg. This sounded fun and clearly further investigation was necessary.

It turns out, the Sandstone Railway – a narrow-gauge railway which runs for 26km through the evocative scenery of the Eastern Free State – is perhaps the main attraction of the ‘Stars of Sandstone’, an annual event in the Ficksburg area. This year it will run from April 12-21.

Steam train buffs – and we are told this attracts international visitors who have been known to return each year to revel in this trip down the railway track of time – are not the only ones who are catered to. Traction engines, old tractors, steam lorries, locomotives, buses and cars will also vie for attention.

Not to be outshone by all this steam and motor-driven memorabilia, teams of sturdy, Afrikaner trek oxen will also show their prowess in ploughing. Many of these animals have been bred and trained on Sandstone Estates, located on the farm Hoekfontein, which is home to this heritage event, a short distance outside Ficksburg.

The estate apparently has the largest collection of 2-foot narrow gauge locomotives in the world – focuses on railway history.

Add to this the fact that all this takes place against the backdrop of the Maluti Mountains on the Lesotho border in autumn, when rich colours flush the veld, and one begins to see why it is a steam enthusiast’s dream destination.

It all began when the Mole family acquired Sandstone Estates in 1994, with the intention of using it for recreational purposes and as a place to keep Wilfred Mole’s vintage tractor collection.

Today it is an organised and established agricultural business with livestock and arable crops. Mole clearly has a love for the tools and workhorses used by our ancestors. So began the custom of heritage events, the first being in 1999.

“The end of an era of steam-driven transportation should not end with us and our forefathers,” says Mole. “We should instil a love of yesteryear in our children and grandchildren so they have a deeper understanding of the history of the high-tech transportation we utilise today.

“How could we possibly appreciate what we have, when we don’t understand the history of how it all began?” he asks.

Looking for something a bit more modern? A large collection of specialised South African military vehicles, some of which date back to World War II, including a Mk IV Sherman tank, will also be on display.

This collection has been built up over many years in a joint venture with the SANDF Armour Museum in Bloemfontein.

Dads and sons will no doubt gravitate towards these steel stallions, where they will be able



The Sandstone Railway outside Ficksburg draws international visitors with the world’s largest collection of narrow gauge locomotives.

Dream of steam



Three modes of transport: oxen, antique tractors and steam trains.



Trek oxen hard at work amid the magnificent Maluti countryside.

to chat to members of the army who will be in attendance throughout the event. Military convoys and demonstrations will also be the order of the day.

Those who enjoy planes will enjoy watching the Harvard Club puts some of its planes through their paces. It is not just the Harvards, though. Other aircraft operators and other vintage aircraft will also be on display.

Nearly everybody loves those old steam engines, which once huffed and chuffed their way between cities all over South Africa.

So, for a nostalgic trip down memory lane, 23 gleaming locomotives will be getting up a head of steam. Train spotters and lovers of the old iron horses will be in their element.

Numerous special trains will operate at first light as well as the late afternoon to ensure the best light conditions for photographers, while David Benn, one of South Africa’s leading railway photographers, has been asked to co-ordinate these outings.

Contact: Stars of Sandstone steam train trips david@shrinks.co.za or joannewest@btinternet.com

Ficksburg: a country town for all seasons

THERE is something for everyone in this part of the world.

Fancy some organic cheese? Head to Green Goose Organic Farm on the Ficksburg/Rosendal Road (R70).

Green Goose’s range of delicious cheeses are produced from the milk of Ayrshire/Jersey-cross cows. While Anneke and Reuter Sorour used to grow organic vegetables, they switched to dairy and began making cheeses in 2007.

Geese, strolling contentedly, are the source of down duvets and pillows. “We bought the farm in 1996, complete with geese. It seemed a waste to have them just walking around, so I started plucking them,” said Anneke.

Not only geese and cows roam freely. Some unusual-looking spotted pigs forage happily. According to Anneke these are feral descendants of pigs from a Spanish shipwreck off the West Coast of South Africa.

The farm started producing



Playing with goslings at Green Goose Farm near Ficksburg.

ham and bacon and eventually they plan to specialise in charcuterie.

During the Cherry Festival and Stars of Sandstone, the farm offers cheese tasting and demonstrations of goose plucking. Throughout the year, visitors can tuck into cheese lunches under the trees by prior arrangement.

Those with a sweet tooth will relish a visit to McKinley Chocolates, specialising in chocolates made by a chocolatier who hails from Alaska.

Fancy yourself as a military buff? Try a visit to Charles

Barrett’s Pinedene Small Arms Museum on the farm Kromdraai. Both of these are by appointment.

The little ones might enjoy a visit to Tempelhof Guest and Game Farm.

Nothing beats a visit to one of our national game reserves, but here they can spot lion, cheetah and wild dogs during a day outing. As there is overnight accommodation, the family might hear the thrilling roar of a lion at night.

There are also many guest farms to choose from in the area.

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