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Steam dreams

A Free State farm offers fans of heavy metal machinery rides on (and the chance to photograph) steam trains and army tanks. **Allan Seccombe** found it just the ticket.

YOU quickly learn two important lessons at the gorgeous Sandstone Estates in the southeastern Free State. One: do not, and I emphasise the "not", step in front of a line of train enthusiasts trying to take the world's best photograph of a locomotive. Second: tanks have no soft edges.

While the latter might seem blindingly obvious, it's not until you've sat atop a snarling tank bouncing over a freshly churned-up field that you realise just how true the aphorism is, and why Sandstone insists on a signed indemnity form before you come through the gates.

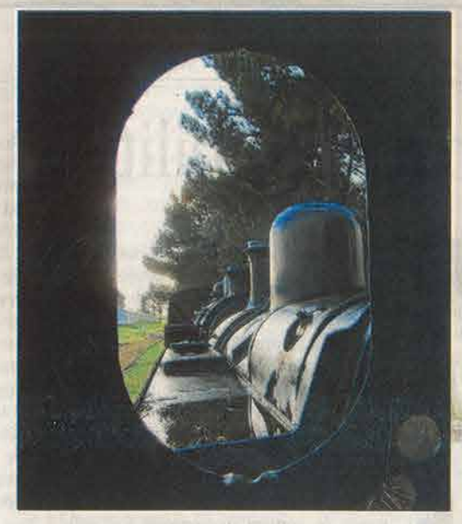
Where else in the word could you fulfil a childhood fantasy of riding a tank like a conquering hero? I got to do it on a Russian T-72, a real, low-profile menace with an engine that gives instant goosebumps and a delicious shiver down the spine. Also on an Olifant, a Rooikat — not a tank, with a much smoother, quieter ride, but close enough — and a Sherman.

Sandstone, a large farm between Ficksburg and Fouriesburg, is host to a two-week event once a year that lures train enthusiasts and lovers of things mechanical. The farm is set on the Lesotho border and its large sandstone outcrops mark it out as one of the most beautiful parts of SA.

The farm subsidises the heritage side, which includes 26km of narrow-gauge railway, steam and diesel locomotives, a bewildering array of rolling stock, military vehicles, buses and agricultural kit that should be safely in a museum instead of working their guts out.

Train enthusiasts roll in from around the world, with Australians, Britons, Americans and Czechs rubbing shoulders with their South African cousins in sharing the passion that lies in watching a locomotive under steam, shrilly whistling a welcome or a warning.

"I like coming here to be with like-minded people, ferro-equinologists who love steam engines, the smell, the sound, the heat, the whole package," says Gary Barnes, a Sandstone regular. "There's not a lot of narrow-gauge rail left. It's nearly all been pulled up, so this is a bit special."





ALL ABOARD: **(Top) Sandstone Estates has the imposing sandstone bluffs that characterise this part of the Free State, along with 26km of narrow-gauge railway line.** Picture: PAUL ASH
STEAM ON: **(Right) A large shed on the estate shelters these steam age relics. (Above) A driver's view during shunting.** Pictures: ALLAN SECCOMBE

> **There's not a lot of narrow-gauge rail left. It's nearly all been pulled up, so this is a bit special**

Three types of people can be found visiting Sandstone, says Murray Kyle from Durban, one of a surprisingly large number of people from the coastal city.

"You get photographers who are looking to catch a special moment. There is the general oke who wants to take a look at what they've got here and take a ride on a steam train. Then there are the steam enthusiasts," he says over a pint outside a little pub where a large, well-maintained diesel National generator with an enormous flywheel carves out a beat strongly reminiscent of that in Cecilia, the song by Simon and Garfunkel.

"You won't see the steam enthusiasts riding the train. They're standing on the side of the tracks looking for that one picture," says Kyle.

"I have a very stressful job and I come here where I can completely unwind."

It's the steam enthusiasts who will give you a swift verbal kick up the backside if you happen to break the line in search of your own picture of a steam engine moving through astonishingly pretty landscapes at sunrise.

Train nut Paul, a good friend and a walking encyclopaedia about all things moving on rail, needed to twist my arm only gently to come to Sandstone. He had regaled me with tales during the four-hour drive from Johannesburg about his own run-ins with steam enthusiasts for blocking someone's view.

So it was with circumspection that I joined a group of about 30 enthusiasts before sunrise on our final morning to photograph a narrow-gauge Garratt and a Karoo steam engine jointly hauling goods wagons around the farm.

The line formed quickly wherever we stopped, impatient for the group leader to radio the locomotive drivers to get moving so they could catch the best light from the rapidly rising sun.

I was using a 35mm Pentax camera I had last used with intent a decade ago. I had found some black and white film, little knowing it would be at sunrise, when the world was a deep, rich gold colour, with the black and brass of the locomotives gleaming, and the cosmos lying thick and colourful along the silver tracks.

The distant Maluti mountains were wreathed in grey and white clouds and the farm's crops shone a vibrant green.

Yes. Black and white film. I nearly cried.

Some hardened enthusiasts couldn't hide grins when they first saw the battered old Pentax — to a man they had tremendously expensive digital cameras with lenses powerful enough to photograph footprints on the moon — and then broad, pitying smiles when they heard the film in the Pentax wasn't colour. It's not a mistake you make twice.

We were ferried from place to lovely place in an antique bus, with young and mostly old men jammed into seats far too cramped for all our gear, and thick jackets to keep out the Free State cold.

It was the best of fun, which surprised me. I had expected to be bored stiff, but once you've seen a huge, hot steel beast breathing steam and smelled burnt coal as the monster pounds past, you'll be hooked.

I've dabbled in the mainline-gauge steam locomotives run out of Johannesburg to Magaliesburg and back by Reefsteamers, but there's something special about a 60-tonne engine pounding along on rails just two feet apart.

There are not only the working engines, which include machines that served in the First World War, but a host of derelict locomotives waiting their turn for rescue and restoration. There are wooden-sided passenger carriages in a vast, gloomy shed. The interiors of the coaches bring to mind Miss Havisham's decaying mansion at the end of Great Expectations; sad, lonely and unloved. And just a little spooky.

Poking around alone and silent in dusty history is a great way to spend an afternoon after the strictures of the rail enthusiasts' line.

Trains lure fans from all corners

DERELICT steam locomotives stand in the half light of an enormous shed at Sandstone Estates in the Free State. More are lined up under trees, open to the elements. They may look unloved and nothing more than scrap, but they are part of a remarkable project to save at least a part of SA's railway heritage.

Wilfred Mole, head of the estates, has taken it on himself to rescue as many of SA's rapidly disappearing steam engines as he can. Sandstone Estates operates a narrow gauge railway line that boasts a fine collection of restored locomotives steaming against a breathtaking landscape that lures visitors from around the world and locally to witness the beauty of steam traction.

Funds generated from the 7,000ha mixed-crop farm at Sandstone are used to subsidise the heritage business. Valued at R40m, it includes rolling stock, tractors, antique motor vehicles and military gear.

But it is the railway that has lured visitors to Sandstone for an annual two-week event around Easter. Trains are laid on in profusion and rail enthusiasts jump at the chance to take photographs, to talk to those operating locomotives aged 50 years or older, or to take a ride.

The importance of saving locomotives and keeping them in order cannot be overstated. Once these magnificent machines are reduced to scrap they are gone forever, unlikely ever to be rebuilt. Sandstone is home to 75 locomotives, half of which ran on 24-inch, narrow-gauge rail, and the rest on three-and-a-half foot rail. Of the narrow-gauge locos, 23 are in working order and just three of the mainline engines.

Sandstone has a workshop in Bloemfontein where a team of nine rebuilds locomotives. The New Reclamation Group co-operates with Sandstone when it wins tenders to scrap locomotives, giving the estate a chance to "cherry pick" what is to be cut up, Mole says.

Jiri Strecha, director of the Railway Museum in the Czech Republic, was part of a seven-member delegation looking for co-operation opportunities with Sandstone. The Czechs have little more than photographs to remember their awesome-looking 476-class steam locomotives, nicknamed Red Devils, cherry-coloured engines that dwarfed the men working on them. None of them has survived.

The French scrapped one of their best steam locomotives, the 242.A.1, in 1961. "Instead of heading for the museum, the most powerful European locomotive had disappeared, to leave behind just a few photographs and written memories. Maybe it is the fate of such outstanding inventions," says the Journal of the Railway Research Institute.