

REGULAR BITS

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME: FICKSBURG WELCOMES YOU



Transport heritage worldwide is a particular passion of mine and I was able to tick another box after a visit to the stunning Sandstone Estates near Ficksburg in the Eastern Free State recently. This is a treasure trove for anybody interested in steam trains, agricultural equipment, military vehicles and classic cars.

The opportunity was the 10-day annual Stars of Sandstone festival celebrating transport through the ages, with the accent on steam trains running on a narrow gauge (2ft – 610mm) railway network on the farm totalling 26km. This beautifully manicured estate is home to one of the largest collections in the world of working narrow gauge steam locomotives and rolling stock.

Many steam locomotive drivers and steam enthusiasts from the UK make the trek to Sandstone every year, as do a host of local enthusiasts and volunteers.

The Sandstone Stars has rapidly built up a proud reputation among steam lovers all over the world and it also attracts many photographers – many of them from overseas – as the Eastern Free State is ideal for photographic shoots at this time of the year, with autumn colours, fields full of colourful cosmos, sunflowers and soya bean plants. Some of the photographers even used remote drones to get unique overhead shots.

This is an exclusive event and one has to book in advance as the number of daily visitors is strictly limited. (A family ticket for a day costs R740, which includes lunch). I went there as a member of the Lotus Register, although none of us ventured there over the potholed roads in our Lotus cars or replicas.

The driving force between this amazing collection of historic vehicles – most of them in working condition – set in the rolling countryside adjoining Lesotho is Wilfred Mole, who brought the Nokia cellphone brand to South Africa. What he has achieved is nothing short of amazing.

Being a journey into the past I chose the latest arrival in South Africa from Peugeot, the 2008 compact cross-over, as the ideal way to get to Sandstone Estates. Not only was it a practical choice but Peugeot is a company with a very long history, stretching back more than 200 years.

The original company was founded by the Peugeot family in 1810 to make coffee mills and bicycles. The first vehicle was a tricycle with a steam engine that took to the roads of France in 1889, to be followed by a car with an internal combustion engine in 1990.

The Peugeot 2008 Allure was a revelation, being spacious for a vehicle in this category, with plenty of luggage space, a very comfortable ride, a willing 1.6-litre petrol engine that is also economical and a small, chunky steering wheel for a most enjoyable driving experience. Priced at R269 900 it is in a very competitive segment of the cross-over market but it is very well equipped with a host of convenience and luxury features so that it can take the fight to the opposition.

The 2008 is Peugeot's first foray into the compact urban cross-over market, but it comes off a solid foundation in that the underpinnings are shared with the highly-rated 208 hatch. Initially it has come to SA only with the comprehensive Allure specification and a 1.6-litre petrol engine, so there is the possibility of the local

Peugeot subsidiary adding more variants if demand requires a wider range.

The willing Peugeot 2008 whisked my son, grandson and myself to Sandstone far quicker than we expected, although avoiding potholes between Bethlehem and Fouriesburg proved nerve-racking. However we survived unscathed; unlike the current breed of small cars which have runflat tyres or just a repair kit and compressor and no spare wheel, while the 2008 at least has a Marie biscuit spare to keep one mobile.

Driving down the gravel road to Sandstone one is immediately impressed by the neatness of the farm. However, the real eye-opener comes when you arrive at the railway station with its adjoining restaurant that is the hub of activities during this festival.

Our first experience was a shortish trip on a train pulled by two Lawley locomotives that are more than 120 years old. The rest of the morning was spent walking about and studying a host of vehicles from steam tractors to a wide variety of military vehicles from Olifant, Sherman and Russian Tiger tanks to Saracens and Ferret scout cars with a host of others in between.

We also walked through several of the sheds, which are actually huge, high quality aircraft hangars. The one housing the collection of more than 200 tractors was most impressive, but so was the one with the old combine harvesters and threshers – some of them made of wood!

We were also able to see a couple of volunteers fitting a brand new, four-cylinder Rolls-Royce engine into a Ferret scout car.

One can even go for a ride in a genuine ox wagon pulled by huge Afrikaander trek oxen, but we decided the pace would be too slow with so much to see and do.

A highlight was the display by the tanks and other wheeled war machines in the afternoon which was then followed by the offer to "go for a ride". There was no second bidding as we first "rode" on the Russian tank as its powerful V12 engine roared us around the test drive area. We also went on an Olifant tank as well as in a Ratel and on a Rooikat. What an experience, particularly for my eight-year-old grandson.

A further walkabout amid the military vehicles and equipment – including looking at a 25 pounder cannon which I was involved with in my military training days – and the steam tractors revealed an amazing coincidence.

The day before we went to Sandstone I had been chatting to Toyota's president and CEO, Dr Johan van Zyl, at a Hino function at the Toyota HQ and mentioned I was going to Sandstone. He then reminisced and told me how there had been steam trucks doing the rubbish removal in Springs when he was growing up there. Low and behold at Sandstone there was not only a working Sentinel steam truck, but it carried a "TS" number plate, which stood for Transvaal Springs!

A two-hour train trip with two big Garratt locomotives up front provided a fitting end to a wonderful day.

After spending the night at the Fouriesburg Country Inn the next day saw us make an early start for a pleasant drive home in the Peugeot 2008, once again avoiding the potholes.