

Full steam ahead...

Chugging along the Sandstone Railway to Ficksburg is a nostalgic trip down the historic track of time

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countrybreaks

“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, which ran this month. Steam-train buffs – and the event 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 catered for:

~ Traction engines, old tractors, steam lorries, locomotives, buses and cars also vie for attention.

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Not to be outshone by all this steam and motor-driven memorabilia, teams of sturdy Afrikaner trek oxen showed 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 and 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



FOR STEAM-TRAIN BUFFS: The Sandstone Railway outside Ficksburg draws international visitors with the world’s largest collection of narrow-gauge locomotives.

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 hi-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?”

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, were 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 gravitated towards these steel stallions, where they chatted with members of the army at the event, where military convoys and demonstrations were also the order of the day.

Those who enjoy planes watched the Harvard Club put some of its planes through their paces. Other

aircraft operators and vintage aircraft were on display too.

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 were building up a head of steam. Train spotters and lovers of the old iron horses were in their element.

Numerous special trains operated at first light as well as in the late afternoon to ensure the best light conditions for photographers, while David Benn, one of South Africa’s leading railway photographers, co-ordinated these outings.