



Where is the Sandstone Steam Railroad in the Eastern Free State of South Africa positioned within the context of the larger Southern African Rail Tourism and Steam Heritage environment?

One would assume that if one wishes to restore and operate Heritage Steam locomotives one would do so on the national rail network because that gives one, in theory, access to many different diversified lines and geographic destinations. However, the ability to bring that about depends entirely on the level of cooperation that exists between the private sector, who typically fund the development of Railway Heritage projects, and the National Railway Network (Transnet) which is a state owned enterprise (SOE).

Worldwide this has been a difficult issue because many railways consider Rail Tourism to be a nuisance and to be intrusive to the point of banning them completely. However, that is by no means the norm in many countries like Britain, France, Switzerland and other countries who realise the huge economic value that these attractive Heritage Railways bring to their country, particularly in terms of tourism and the local revenue generated from foreign visitors both local and foreign.

These issues are certainly valid within the context of South Africa's traditional national Rail Heritage capability.



In 1998 Sandstone ran a number of promotional trains for the proposed 3'6" operation but to no avail. Here we see Class 25NC number 3410 with the promotional train near Ficksburg. Ron Nell.

It is generally accepted worldwide that South Africa had the most attractive, largest and diverse Railway Heritage programme in the world. This would be the era (1990 to 2003) when the Union Limited steam hauled tourist train ruled the rails and the Transnet Heritage Foundation maintained a superb fleet of working locomotives with all the necessary support required to keep them in pristine condition. Unfortunately, there were numerous management changes at Transnet and the new approach was one of dismissal of the value of rail heritage which was further

complicated by the abandonment of branch lines which were part of, by their very nature, the most attractive lines for rail tourism. The reasons were that they were in very attractive geographic locations, they were not that busy and they had all the necessary infrastructure, i.e. railway stations etc. to support any tourism initiative. Sandstone Estates, as far back as 1995, were negotiating for a concession on the Free State line between Bethlehem and Bloemfontein which was regarded as an absolute gem in terms of global Railway Preservation potential. Unfortunately the approach adopted by the authorities was a militant one and they did not embrace the project with the enthusiasm that the preservation movement deserved. In addition, it coincided with their management decision to downgrade the importance or even abandon branch lines so while the negotiations were taking place during the 1990's, the line itself and most of the track side infrastructure like grain offloading facilities, railway stations etc. were abandoned and demolished.

This sparked a light bulb moment for the Sandstone Estates Management who realised that if they wished to pursue a viable course of action they needed to start from scratch, which meant essentially that we had to build our own railway. Because of the practical engineering difficulties of building a Cape Gauge 3ft 6 railway, it was decided to opt for 2ft Narrow Gauge. This in itself was visionary because about the time that Sandstone wished to pursue this course of action the 2ft Narrow Gauge railways in South Africa were busy collapsing. The reason they were in a very parlous state was the same as on the Cape Gauge where the railways didn't consider branch lines to be of interest and they did not consider them to be commercially viable so they opened up to private operators. Unfortunately, without exception, the private operators did not have the management skill or the financial resources to ensure the viability of these lines and as a result the Alfred County Railway from Port Shepstone to Harding fell into disrepair and the asset scrapping began. The even more impressive Avontuur line from Port Elizabeth to Avontuur suffered a similar fate.



In 2006 Sandstone ran their NG15 number 17 the full length of the Avontuur line with the "Avontuur Adventurer" tour train to promote the line, again to no avail. Chris Webster.

One of the saddest things about these developments was that the state effectively blocked the potential for inward investment by the private sector in order to protect the underfunded clubs who were nervous of the threat posed by Private Finance and Executive talent to their operations, which in many cases were no more than weekend social clubs.



The Sandstone Steam Railway at its best. Double headed NGG16 Garratts haul a mixed train for a photographic group up the fearsome Pandora Bank. Dennis Moore.

So today because of the macro economic circumstances that existed over the last 20 years, the Sandstone Heritage Trust is able to continue to offer a unique 2ft Narrow Gauge rail experience in a beautiful quiet part of Southern Africa. We are able to maintain the standards that are appropriate, particularly when it comes to serving the International Railway enthusiasts market. Sadly we have accumulated some fine Cape Gauge locomotives during the period of our negotiations with the National Railway Network in expectation that we may have been able to succeed in gaining access to those lines. These locomotives are stranded at the moment but are slowly being repatriated to Sandstone's 2ft Narrow Gauge operating base as static exhibits and as long term examples of the might that existed on many lines including the Eastern Free State which were powered mostly by the charismatic heavy 25NC and 15F locomotives of which Sandstone has a number of examples.

The realistic and practical appraisal of the entire scenario suggests that there will be no reversal of the above situation in our lifetimes.

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