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10th April 📅 Thurs 📅 Electric Haul to Bethlehem :



FP03 📷 Class 15F No.3052 📷 Avril 📷 gets a good stiff greasing before taking over the train for the final section from Bethlehem to Ficksburg.

The Free State Explorer started first thing in the morning with most of the people on board still sleeping off the rigours of road or air travel. Lee Gates stayed on duty with the starting loco crew, Mike Thiel (off-duty Trainee fireman) and Attie de Necker (Train Manager) also came out to help get thing going. The locomotive didn't need to be piping hot and in steam as we'd be electrically hauled 📷 so Driver Chris Saayman and Fireman Johann Breydenbach had an easy time of it. The night's water intake had to be topped up in the tanker \ tender combo as soon as possible, and then the fire hoses had to be packed up and stowed away. The electric locomotives came arrived at the arranged time of about 3am. They were unable to couple up to our train though, as our goods shed siding had been de-electrified and the overhead wires long since taken down. So Class 15F No.3052 📷 Avril 📷 had to be moved before coupling. I have no photos of this action as I was busy, and then took off for a shower and then off to imitate a fabric covered speed bump in the compartment. Being deaf has its advantages as I couldn't hear if any of my three bunk mates (Rob McGregor, Andy Anderson and Brendon Anderson) from Umgeni Steam Railway were snoring and grunting through the night. And no one had 📷stepped on a duck 📷 either, unlike some other compartments that I 📷ve smelt on other trips.

The morning haul was uneventful. The two 📷Transnet orange 📷 Draad Karre 📷 (Wire Cars) No.E1219 and No.E1165 were running well within their hauling capabilities and we were trundled smoothly through the Johannesburg metro region and beyond. I missed the exiting urgent steam-beat throbbing through the draft gear of a steam haul, especially as our crew coach was at the locomotive end of the train and we would have really felt that insistent beat. Unlike the insane early morning hours of a photo tour, the crew members were able to wake up and wander into the communal coaches at our leisure 📷 good news for someone who 📷s worked a late night shift. We were already bowling through the gently undulant countryside by the time breakfast was being served. (Pic T01 below.) There's nothing quite like eating on board a moving train, especially when a crisp new day is waking up right outside your windows 📷 it impressed even me, who is one of those non-morning persons who 📷s cerebral turbines take about 2 hours to spool up to running speed.



T01 📷 Some gentle countryside scenery to go with our first country style breakfast on-route to Kroonstad.



T02 📷 The first breakfast table looks inviting in the mellow morning light. 📷d like to speak to the so called 📷engineer 📷 who designed those cereal dispensers though.



T03 📷 Attention to detail 📷 a fresh bunch of COSMOS blommetjies (Little Flowers) on top of a matching pink menu. None of the Reefsteamers got hungry enough to eat their flowers.

Every day's breakfast was a variance on the English Breakfast theme 📷 with an open buffet table (Pic T02 above) of bread and toast equipment, yoghurt, two fruit juices, three cereals and various bread spreads. The man courses were served fresh and hot from the kitchen. Tea and coffee were available from the water urn in the adjoining bar car and for anyone uncivilized enough to want some booze or a fizzy drink during an English breakfast, the cash bar was always open in the adjoining bar car.

I include some general pictures of the communal coaches as they give you an idea of the atmosphere within our Train. You don't get space like this on an airliner or our nearest competitors, the luxury road coach. (Pic T04 below) The bar car (Pic T05 below) was the social center of the train, never empty and always productive to drop into to listen to or to join in a new conversation. .





T04 ☞ The first breakfast on board the Free State Explorer Train. Oom Attie de Necker assembled each one of those chairs from kits and not one of them failed during this trip.



T05 ☞ The bar car with a mixture of Reefsteamers footplate crew, train staff and guests just naturally mixing it up. The common love of steam trains is a great social ice breaker.



T06 ☞ The only goods train that we passed in four days on these extremely busy core lines. Every train or light unit lash-up gave us a friendly salutary toot from their horns.

Our morning train stopped briefly at Vereeniging, where Avril's knuckles and knee caps were greased. There wasn't much to see concerning track work and rolling stock. (Pic T06 above.) We did pass the site of a derailment (Pic T07 below), followed closely by an extensive road gang replacing the concrete sleepers. (Pic T08 below) Because of the presence of the right-of-way crew, we had to run under a speed restriction, which allowed us to check out the sleeper work from the coach windows. It was a little odd to see as these concrete sleepers seem to be ever lasting ☞ but the ones removed bore clear evidence of grooving and serious chipping on their ends. It looks as if that derailed train took some time to stop and the wheels dug into and damaged the concrete. There's going to be plenty of new recycled concrete sleeper fences going up in this area soon

We made a second service stop in Kroonstad (Crown's Town ☞ named after a horse!) . Even though Class 15F No.3052 ☞Avril☞ wasn't providing any tractive effort to the train, those myriad joints in the coupling rods and valve gear still needed greasing. The Pilot Crew changed over at Kroonstad too and Frans van Dyk (Driver) + Sakkie Kekana (Fireman) took over as the ☞Pilot Crew.☞ We made one more service stop at Arlington but the crew didn't get to bounce off the footplate. The arrival at Bethlehem was a bit of a shock, as the multiple track shunting yard has been stripped out and the overhead cantenary's conductors had been removed ☞ more evidence of a steadily contracting national railway system. It's always a jolt to see the stripped frames of overhead cantenary ☞ the most modern form of traction going the same way as the old steam locomotives did ☞ at least on the non serviced lines. What was a bit weird about the severely pruned Bethlehem goods yard was that all the sleepers were gone, and the ballast had been carefully raked smooth but the valuable rails (scrap metal) were still lying alongside their original courses. (Pic T09 below)



T07 ☞ A derailed grain wagon lies forlornly by the side of the tracks. Notice that two of the top hatches are open ☞ I wonder if the contents got raided?



T08 ☞ Just a part of the very extensive road gang replacing damaged concrete sleepers with new ones.



T09 ☞ The sad sight of continued rail system contraction as symbolized by the newly stripped goods yard alongside the Bethlehem Station.

The pair of orange toasters were immediately unhooked from our train and run out past the platform end and onto a siding, out of the way of the main. Meanwhile Class 15F No.3052 ☞Avril☞ was already ☞bursting with excitement☞ and the safety valves had inconveniently popped-off under the western footbridge. (Pic T10 below) The distant rear cab end of the parked trailing electric locomotive was clearly visible through the centenary and reminded me of a child sent to bed early during a very interesting conversation amongst the adults. The double-ended box cabs will never be as aesthetically as exiting to look at and to work on as a steam locomotive, but they do have their own kind of fascination and sounds. They did highlight one of the fundamental weak spots of the steam locomotive though ☞ the fluctuating power output and the hammer blow on the tracks. Many people commented on how smooth (if slightly lack-lustre) the ride was.

A bit of a quirk that I spotted at the change-over was that the trailing toaster, No.E1219 was clearly badged as a 6E1, but was running on older 6E bogies. As the characteristic diagonal links and the bolster equipment was missing, I wondered if this electric locomotive had been de-rated in terms of expected tractive effort.

As the Bean Boiler No.3052 was already in good steam, the Reefsteamers uncoupled her from the train and trundled off down the curved yard entry tracks to the Bethlehem Diesel Depot. This move caught your favourite photographer flat footed and I had to rapidly hoof it through to the diesel depot. I rarely run ☞ but that hobble-kneed canter was as close to a run as Reefsteamers will ever get out of me! It was a calculated risk, as I knew they'd be turning the locomotive around, but not how long the servicing would take. The risk was compounded by the fact that Transnet crew were on duty in the yard service tracks and so I blended right in with them as I was wearing my mandatory high-vis vest just as they were. With visions of the steamer coming blasting the opposite way on a totally wrong track and leaving me stranded in the bustling metropolis of Bethlehem, I took a diagonal path to see through the depot. I was reassured by the sight of the top third of a Class 15F boiler slowly moving through grass n ☞ weeds, like a steam-powered submarine running half submerged through an algae green sea. The locomotive was turned before servicing and I managed to walk up in a dignified fashion and catch Avril leaving the triangle in Pic T11 below. The depot was still quite green. The torched remains of the recently scrapped engines had been mainly cleared away. Even the cylinder castings, the tasteless hard toffees of steam locomotive scrap, had been taken away. What was remarkable was that the TRACKS upon which all those destroyed locomotives stood and were cut up in place, had been lifted too. Talk about thorough tidying up.



T10 ☞ Just before the handover from double-headed electric haulage to steam power. Notice that this orange can-o-sparks was a hybrid class 6E running on 6E bogies.

T11 ☞ A miraculously surviving Class 15F pootles out of the turning triangle and through the cleaned out slaughterhouse area of the old steam locomotive deadlines.

T12 ☞ A side view of the home-made transfer hose coupling the tender to its water canteen with nary a spilt drop. Note the fire fighting hose reel

What was a little unusual about the turning maneuver was that the coal wagon and the water tank were turned with the engine. The water tanker was connected through a depot-made coupler fabricated from two brake pipes and a pair of bell couplings. (Pic T12 above) It did the job great with hardly a drop of water spilt. The brass gate valve, as installed by Sandstone Heritage Trust didn't leak either. Andrew, Johann B and myself handled the water ☞ being another long stretch with the fire hoses. It's quite easy to tear a hole in a heavy rubberized canvas hose when dragging it across a yard with tracks and sharp edges, and the occasional protruding sharp edged torched off bolt where some fixture was removed. We did some damage to our hoses in the 2007 tour ☞ and were more careful this time. Dawie ☞ Swak-Hart ☞ Viljoen had a bit of a tough time cleaning the fire as the homogeneous copiously ashy waste packed up in the ash chute. Even though the fire hadn't run hot, it still took much finagling with the hooked fire iron to clear the chute. (Pic T13 below)

The engine was treated to a stiff Ackerman grease job in the warm bearings and a brief general inspection. Meanwhile, Piet Steenkamp, as the next fireman, was preparing the fire for the steam hauled section of the run, and running the injectors. (They had to be run anyway, to operate the ash pan coolers.) Reefsteamers could do with reconditioning the grease pumps as they tend to blow past their own plungers. You can see such a pump in action in Pic T14 below. Classic brown hard grease sticks was used, which we call ☞ skaap worsies ☞ (Sheep Sausage). It is a hard wearing grease that stays within the working surfaces, but requires much force to get it into the joint clearances. It has the advantage of being a clean feeding grease though ☞ not needing constant lubrication with warm water as the similar softer but stickier black grease sticks do.



T13 ☞ Dawie Viljoen literally hunkers down to an uncomfortable job ☞ he's trying to clear the exit aperture of the ash chute and getting a healthy steam facial cleansing treatment in the bargain.



T14 ☞ A somewhat baulky grease pump in use on the connecting rod big end. The feed for the grease sticks is hidden from view while the entire silver lower end of the pump is actually a bayonet sleeve. These are brown grease sticks, which are of hard grease.



T15 ☞ The first of two Class 25NC locomotives awaiting rescue. Because of an issue that arose concerning hauling two dead locos over a bridge ☞ Transnet took over the haulage job for a reasonable price.

Because we were all busy and running a tight schedule, none of us took the time to walk around and check out the two Class 25NC's that we were originally hoping to haul out on the following day. (Friday) (Pic T15 Above) Even I just gave them a casual glance when I walked in past those locomotives when returning from the turning triangle lead. It was with mixed emotions that we heard that the rescue steam haul was to be cancelled and Transnet would haul the locomotives, by diesel traction, at their leisure. It made the crews' life a little easier, and gave some of our staff an extra day at the Sandstone Estates - but the locomotive rescue was an adventure and a challenge to which most of us were looking forward.

After the greasing, and rolling fire hoses uphill, (with one man to do the rolling and the other to run ahead, lift the hose and get the weighty residual water out), we got our asses into gear and prepared to pull out the depot on time (about 3pm) after a short wait for Piet Terblanche, the Section Manager and pilot for the day. The rearmost brake pipe on the coal wagon wouldn't suck-up and clamp itself against its dummy when the brakes were taken off. (Pic T16 below) It required someone to jog to the back of the short train and manually push the pipe on before the brakes would come off. We eventually tied it down with some soft baling wire to get out the yard with the brake shoes out away from the wheels.

We only had to wait a few minutes for clearance, after our pilot had scrambled on board with two hands and a full coke can. (Pic T17 below). The service crew bailed out, with Andrew King and Johann Breydenbach riding on top of the coal pile. The train was coupled up without much incident ☞ and with a careful brake test and running inspection by Safety Officer Clifford Mathee. (Pic T18 below) He'd completed all his paper work of the crew and traction change. Oh that wired up brake pipe did have one last fling and held the brakes on ☞ but as soon as the train pipe was coupled on, that was one little gremlin that we could flick off the train with contemptuous ease. It wasn't hard to shepherd the passengers back on board as this would be the best part of the outbound trip ☞ a beautiful, powerful steam main-line locomotive hauling us through the increasingly more dramatic and beautiful eastern Free State scenery.



T16 ☞ Gotcha! The brake vacuum pipe at the rear of the coal wagon wouldn't suck-up against the dummy. We had to keep sending people back to manually seal that pipe before tying it on with wire.



T17 ☞ A whole new token system ☞ Piet passes a freshly opened coke can to Shaun with the engine moving and before jumping on board. It was a neat manoeuvre.



T18 ☞ A smiling Safety Officer is always good news on a long distance trip. Cliffie Mathee inspected the entire train before we took off.

The trip outbound was settling into a good rhythm, the scenery become ever more interesting and we were all enchanted by the steady vigorous beat of the magnificent machine up front. Suddenly there was some yelling, something you never want to hear on a train. FIRE! (Pic 20 below) Then Attie de Necker, as the Train Manager, backed the train up by radio instructions. Andre van Dyk had spotted a smudge of smoke ☞ we had caused a trackside fire. We take these incendiary events seriously, as not only did we not want to be the cause of the loss of the entire mielie (corn) field bordering the burn ; accidental line-side fires are one of the arguments leveled

for the banning of steam power on Transnet Lines. Mielie (Corn) field fires are disastrous and usually unstoppable, as the tassels and leaves that wrap around the head of corn ignite and separate, and then float up into the air, riding on the hot updraft. These act as burning parachutes, delicate wafting airborne fire bombs, and they spread the fire as they come down to ground again once they pass into cooler stable air.

The backing train overshot the fire which meant the Reefsteamers had some jogging to do. But it was a deliberate overshoot as the water tanker coupled up front, with the pump and fire hose, had to be lined up in easy reach. The footplate crew partially opened the left hand blow down valve too, to help block progress of the fire along the line. (Pic T21 below) The pump started like a champ and after some poor strategic hose positioning, it was later put onto the leading edge. Meanwhile about 9 crew members were attacking the flames with a mixture of purpose-made fire flappers, shovels and otherwise just stomping on the flames with their thick soled safety boots. (Pic T23 below) It gives a new definition to the traditional South African gum-boot dance. There was a short sharp dispute about pressure settings at the pump, which caused the pump's engine to stall several times but apart from human interference, the infrequently used (but frequently tested) fire fighting equipment worked as designed.



T19 Ackerman (R) and Armstrong (L) take a break from the mops n brooms and tuck into their pie and chips instead.



T20 Just what we don't want to see a lineside fire. We threw everything we had at this one to put it out.



T21 Avril takes part in the fire fighting, forming a steamy fire break along the line.



T22 Johan Breydenbach discovers a new meaning to the job description of Fireman. He's actually damping down the hot foliage and cinders at the leading edge after the flames have been put out.



T23 Fire beaters stand victorious over the ash. That's Mike Thiel on the left with a flame flapper, and Andrew King to the right with a standard coal shovel. Dawie Viljoen is the dude skulking around at the back.



T24 The fire hose is carefully and neatly rolled back into its reel, right behind the purpose fitted fire pump.

It seems like I've broken my own rule about talking about negative things with so many photos of the one line-side fire incident. But I've tried to give an indication of how Reefsteamers are well aware of the built-in steam locomotive risk of causing lineside fires and are equipped to deal with them. The entire burnt area was wetted down once again once the visible flames were put out. (Pic T22 above.) The smoking tussocks were either beaten or buried in sand.

We relaxed with much relief after that smoky drama (Pic T25 below) with most of the passengers not really understanding what was at stake. The weather was beginning to turn a little chilly and overcast, but the scenery was as beautiful as ever for the final run into Ficksburg. It was lunchtime on the train by the time we headed out into the scenery. It was pie n chips with salad. I caught these two gentlemen killing their pies after the main munch-hour. (Pic T19 below) They deserve mention as they were assigned the thankless and unglamorous task of mopping and sweeping out the entire train of coaches. The coaches were done (cheerfully) at least twice a day one of those jobs that you don't notice it until it ISN'T done, and every footstep in the coaches has a gritty feel to it, and the cinders and smuts get everywhere.



T25 Try doing this on a luxury road coach! This little girl had no female playmates on the train but seemed to thoroughly enjoy the adventure of the steam train ride.



T26 Aiden Mc. Carthy paces the train in his funny looking sober-roo. Some of his excellent lineside photos made it into the official Steam and Cosmos Montage and onto the Sandstone Website.



T27 Attention! We roll in alongside the Sandstone Military Train.

We could tell we were getting close as we were starting to attract the flies again. (Pic T26 above) Well, actually, the lineside train chasers or foamers as they are often called. We halted briefly at the Vailima Station, which is where the Sandstone Estates 2ft narrow gauge line interchanges with the Cape Gauge 3ft6 irons. (Pic T27 above) The military train was standing at parade rest under the water column. Many people took the opportunity to take pictures of the Cape Gauge and Narrow Gauge trains sitting side-by-side, but we didn't stay for too long.

We arrived at Ficksburg at about 4:45pm and immediately began some shunting while the engine was still hot. The first move was to get the coal wagon safely out of the way along the full height goods platform, to be accessible by front end loader on the following day.

(Pic T28 below) The wonky brake pipe behaved itself this time. The Ficksburg yard has no head shunt at this end, and with one or two vehicles behind the engine, a shunting train encroaches upon the road level crossing at that end. So, there was much melodious whistling, with equally melodious echoes from the rocky kranse (cliffs) all around. Sweet music



T28 📷 The first shunting move at Ficksburg 📷 getting the coal wagon alongside the goods platform. Those wheels visible to the left mark a track where a derelict locomotive is hidden behind those bushes. Notice that those points have no handle.



T29 📷 A twice daily chore, filling up the underfloor water tanks of all ten coaches.



T30 📷 Coen Pretorius does the evening greasing by the traditional light of a driver's flare lamp. (Which is an oil can set up with a wick and burns like a roman oil lamp.)

The water tanker was pushed backwards alongside the train and parked under the still functional two-track overhead water gantry. The locomotive was then uncoupled and run out and back alongside the platform for fire cleaning and service. Meanwhile, the nose bags were fitted and wired onto the toilet drop pipes as not to have piles of poo building up alongside the platform. (This humble job entrusted to Shorty and Johann Blou Bull van Vuuren.) The assigned water tank person hadn't filled up the coach tanks, so Train Manager Attie de Necker got onto the job (Pic T29 above), which would have to be done every morning and evening.

Coen Pretorius, as the appointed Shed Man, did the greasing, with a traditional twist. An old oil can, with a twisted length of trimming fed through the spout, makes a roman style oil lamp which is what we call a Flare Lamp. (Pic T30 above) Fireman Andre van Dyk busied himself with cleaning the fire and getting it banked ready for this evening's locomotive minder. (Sakkie Sakana Kekana)



T31 📷 Shaun Smudge Ackerman (L) and a steadily wetter Dawie Swak-Hart Viljoen (R) are fast becoming mere silhouettes against the darkling sky, as they sociably wait for the water tanker to fill up.



T32 📷 JW alert! We really interfered with their Bible Study with our shunting, steam train noises, whistling for the crossing and load conversation not to mention the constantly running power van generator.



T33 📷 Shaun switches the points over and locks them to guard the occupied sidings. Note the train's tail marker which would be put up in passing as we walk back

While Coen Pretorius was communing with the grease gun, Dawie Swak Hart Viljoen got up on top of the tanker and opened the gantry water valve. Unfortunately, the jet of water comes out skew and so it was missing most of the tanker's water hatch, even though the tanker was properly positioned. The locomotive was already being serviced so the fellows were stuck with a valve that they could only partially open. The stars had come out by the time the tanker was full (Pic T31 above) and after Dawie's lower trouser legs were sopping wet with water spray. Then the locomotive was ready to be moved, and after bunting the tanker out the way, she was lined up to take in water through the tender's water hopper the classic and proper way for a steam locomotive to take on water. This time, the guys were able to compensate for the offset water flow and managed to turn the gantry's valve fully. Dawie still managed to flood and overflow the tender in classic Spoonnet style - but at least that helped to clean off my lovely polyurethane gray paint job on the tender deck.

The beautiful stone fronted Ficksburg station building is still intact although the signal room has been carefully stripped, and the track diagrams and signal frames removed. So that's a pity. But the removal work looks neat so it's likely the contents were taken away carefully and not just destroyed. The station is now occupied by Jehovah's Witnesses! (Pic T29 above) The poor slob's were trying to have a quiet Thursday Night bible study and suddenly a noisy steam train come rolling in out of no where, does some noisy shunting, with much radio chatter, several extended whistles for the crossing, the generator van running non-stop and the platform full of sociable, noisy people walking up and down.

they must have thought we'd been sent by the Devil to distract them. But as far as I know, our locomotives run on coal, not brimstone. (Although, with some coal we've had in the past, with high sulphur content, you wonder.)

While the passengers were relaxing after their curry and rice dinner, Shaun, Andrew and Lee took a pleasant night time walk up the yard to throw over and lock the points. (Pic T30 above) This was done obviously to protect our train and also to prevent meddling hands messing around with occupied tracks. On the way back they put the end marker on the train.

We were finally settled at Ficksburg, 460km away from home.

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