

Heritage rail tourism – does it

In an interview with John Batwell, HRASA Chairman, Chris Janisch, answers ten questions that spell out the reality, challenges and possibilities facing heritage rail and rail tourism.

1. Transnet indicated in the 1990s that heritage rail had a place in South Africa – how far has the heritage movement come nationally now in the year 2010?

The euphoria of the 1990s has unfortunately passed, and severe attrition has set into our movement. Whilst Transnet still sees a place for rail heritage, their active support for it has undeniably dwindled, to the point where clubs are holding on by the skin of their teeth.

HRASA has committed to reversing this trend by engaging with the various divisions of Transnet, and has established good working relationships with them. The main problem is lack of funding: it is obvious that Transnet do not want to throw any more money in our direction, and are in fact exiting heritage rail to a large extent. This will provide even bigger challenges in a country such as ours, where spare money does not float around. There are some signs of a new awareness developing, but it may be a case of "too little, too late".

2. How have the heritage rail organisations coped in terms of track availability, Transnet rules and the Steam Exit Plan?

We have coped very well with both rules and the SEP. Clubs have trained their own staff, and set up proper sets of rules in order to satisfy Transnet and the Rail Safety Regulator (RSR).

Where we have suffered is in the severe clampdown on route availability. This has caused major steam tour groups to lose interest, and has deprived clubs of revenue-earning destinations. There has also been a halt in the granting of access agreements, whereby no new agreements have been concluded with potential operators in the last few years. This will have the effect of causing new projects to be stillborn. Previous operators like Steamnet 2000 and Waterval Boven, who stopped operating some time ago, have lost their agreements – this is very worrying.

A severe test awaits the clubs now due to new pricing structures for track access, which came into force last year. Market rates are charged and an exorbitant pilot fee added, making many trains uneconomical.

HRASA has contested all these points, but with limited success. We have been able to moderate the access agreements and reduce the initial access fees announced, which is of assistance to our members. The situation however remains highly unsatisfactory.

3. In the last issue of SA Rail (47/4) your report referred to an internal Transnet committee. Has there been any indication to HRASA on how symbiotic a relationship one can expect in the future in terms of heritage policy?

Through their Foundation, with which HRASA enjoys a good relationship, a Heritage Committee has been formed. This represents most of the involved departments in Transnet, and is charged with dealing with the disposal of heritage assets. Transnet has taken the decision to release all of their heritage assets, and focus on business. They have undertaken to act responsibly in the course of this process, so nothing will be done without due consideration and communication. SA Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) will also have to approve their decisions. HRASA has already begun acting in an advisory capacity to this committee, and will be called on to do so as the process moves forward. We are committed to assisting the Committee as we have the ground knowledge of the status and significance of the assets, and it falls upon us to protect them to our best ability. In fact, neither Transnet nor HRASA can act in isolation – we need each other.

4. Why do you think that South Africa has only one international safari operator coming to this country this year of all years?

As stated previously, lack of routes, lack of sufficient variation of motive power, high costs, uncertainty of approval from authorities, and political problems in clubs. In short, there is a lack of critical mass, which makes rail tourists look elsewhere. South Africa is no longer a cheap railway destination: far more attractive and better value packages exist elsewhere in the world. This is sad, because for many years this was the leading heritage rail destination in the world. Without support from Transnet and Tourism authorities, the position will deteriorate further.

5. Whilst the railways did entrench apartheid, sadly, do you think this has impacted in any way the fact that rail heritage is not flying a bigger cultural flag?

Undoubtedly. Often we have been accused of being "fanatics" and "playing with White Man's toys." A steam enthusiast's idea of rail heritage is not what our current leaders have in mind. That said, there is also a sad neglect and ignorance of what can be an extremely positive development tool for the country.

HRASA's Chris Janisch expends energy and visible pain on Sandstone Estates' preserved GMAM 4-8-2 + 2-8-4 Garratt locomotive 4079.



still have a future in *South Africa?*

Why is the "political will" not there? It seems hard to understand. Whilst our apartheid legacy has acted against us, you only need to see the smiling cross-cultural faces aboard an average current-day steam operation in the country to know that this game appeals to everyone.

6. What do you feel rail heritage has achieved since the demise of everyday steam traction in the Northern Cape nearly two decades ago?

A positive beginning in the first decade, where Transnet was a big role-player in tourist railways, followed by the emergence of steam clubs, able to take over all functions including staffing, training, marketing and overhauling and repairs of rolling stock. The situation looked promising.

The next decade saw a sad about-turn, where most of the good work done in the 1990s was thrown away. Priceless assets have rotted, diversity has shrunk, and the movement has contracted to the point where the face of heritage rail has changed dramatically. Without a new course of action this trend will continue. The focus will have to switch to community development and job creation – now – if we wish to survive. If we can adapt to this challenge, then we will have achieved a remarkable turnaround.

7. Government has stated in the media it wants tourism to contribute more to the growth in GDP? What is a body like HRASA looking to do to make Government realise its rail heritage is a tourism trump card?

This is a crucial question, since HRASA has identified the Tourism route as the best attacking field in our quest to revitalise heritage rail in South Africa. It is obvious that Transnet are focused on business and see little reason to come out in full support of our activities.

To this end, we have submitted numerous requests for a meeting with the Minister of Tourism. Thus far our attempts have been unsuccessful. It seems as if Tourism will support local initiatives, which come with a built-in plan, but unfortunately have thus far not grasped the bigger picture. There have been some relationships built with Tourism authorities on a provincial level, eg the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. We will continue to agitate in this field, and hope that local success stories like the *Sisonke Stimela* will open eyes.

One of the most important impacts of heritage rail on the tourism industry is that it can once again open our country in its entirety to the world. History records the tourism income and numbers we generated in the past, as well as South Africa's world status as a steam rail destination of choice.

Heritage rail tourism will impact on and contribute to job creation, community-based projects and poverty alleviation programmes because it is the means by which our rural communities can be reconnected to main centres to create a symbiotic relationship.

8. Crime in South Africa is a major concern by the international community – has heritage rail been a victim and how is this being addressed nationally by yourselves and Transnet?

There is crime in every country, the evidence is out there, and I don't think that South Africa or heritage rail (for that matter rail *per se*) should be singled out. However, that said, the government, Transnet and heritage rail have all taken steps towards ensuring the safety of our passengers.

The government is paying special attention to improving security measures within the rail environment. The Department of Transport will, in co-operation with the South African Police Service, be building the security-related infrastructure for the dedicated Rail Police unit.

Construction of rail police stations in Cape Town, Retreat, Bellville and Phillipi in the Western Cape has been completed, while almost 2 000 rail police officers are actively patrolling stations and trains. Construction of rail police stations in Durban, Reunion, Cavendish and KwaMashu in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as in Tshwane (Pretoria), Denneboom, Mabopane, Germiston, New Canada and Johannesburg in Gauteng province have either been or are in the final stages of being completed.

Late last year it was reported that the Cape Town network had seen a 32% reduction in crime-related incidents, with fare evasion reduced by half. The benefits of the initiative are clear and it reportedly will be rolled out in all nine provinces.

In specifically addressing visitors to the country, I believe the onus is upon our national tourism authorities to drive such a policy and its roll out, backed by its provincial, regional and local bodies, and supported by the Department of Transport, Transnet and HRASA. Take for example, the National Road Safety Campaign, championed by the Department of Transport and cascaded through the system to the local level – its success is based on the level of commitment from within the government and supporting role of a wide spectrum of stakeholders.

Heritage rail operators each have their own safety and security policy and/or programme, depending on their local conditions and circumstances, but working closely with their local Railway Police and SA Police Services. They have also individually taken the initiative to keep their passengers informed about high risk practices.

One of the most tragic consequences of crime in SA is the theft of valuable parts from rolling stock. Many locomotives have been rendered inoperable as a result of this scourge. This forces clubs to take out expensive security measures to safeguard their assets, which has had a very negative effect on the bottom line. Despite security, the theft of brass, copper and bearings continues. Just recently Sandstone Heritage Trust in Ficksburg and Steamnet 2000 in Kimberley suffered major thefts. Transnet is concerned but does not have the funding to protect their assets, some of which are on loan to the clubs. Thus the onus falls on the cash-strapped and pressured clubs to do it all.

9. What will the heritage movement do to acknowledge the 150 years of railways and the century of the South African Railways?

HRASA has been agitating with Transnet for over a year now with regard to celebration projects. It seems as if, without our input, these milestones would have passed unnoticed. Through the kind intervention of the new TF head, Cynthia Mjijima, we have suggested the following projects:

- A commemorative 150 year calendar and an all-inclusive heritage railway map of South Africa have been completed by HRASA. These publications have been sponsored by Transnet Foundation and we are most grateful to them. Thanks are due to Nerina Skuy who has driven these projects.
- A special train from Jo'burg to Durban, partially steam-hauled, conveying VIPs and raising awareness of rail travel and preservation. Plans are being made through Transnet for this occasion.
- The support for a project in Durban to commemorate the 150th anniversary by creating a heritage rail route from Durban to Point. The locomotive "Natal" is to be moved and mounted in a special casing. Umgeni Steam Railway would like to run a train to the Point on the special day, 26 June. Transnet Rail Engineering has shown interest in supporting this venture.

Steam Clubs are encouraged to hold their own celebrations. *Friends of the Rail*, in Pretoria, will operate a special train to Cullinan in conjunction with the Railway Society of SA. *PE Apple Express* is planning a community occasion on the day.

It is hoped that this celebration, as well as the strong emergence of rail tourism in rural KwaZulu-Natal, will result in concrete support for our activities from the authorities.

10. Will rail heritage come to survive the passage of time in South Africa in the light of most national heritage in reality being, thus far, rather politically-connected to "the nation's freedom"?

Steam clubs as they currently stand will inevitably cease to exist. This will happen when human resource runs out. The reality is that the enthusiast and technical body, vital to the operation of a club, is generally getting on in age.

Financial constraints may also well cripple some ventures prematurely. The only hope for survival is the strong support of Tourist authorities and Transnet. Clubs must shift their focus from heritage rail operations to rail tourism *per se*, which by definition means the involvement and upliftment of local communities. Once the said communities are dependent, to some extent, on the operation of their local train – through businesses, jobs and tourist Euros, Pounds, Dollars and Yen – the government will take the lead in ensuring that these operations survive.

Once again, I would like to emphasise that the Rail Tourism ventures operating in the Southern Natal Midlands, i.e. Sisonke Stimela Creighton Express and Paton's Country Railway, have grabbed the initiative and shown what can be done to create a sustainable and all-inclusive operation. We all need to take the baton from them and run with it.

In conclusion, we remain positive that despite the obvious difficulties in existence, there is enough willpower from all involved stakeholders to turn heritage rail in South Africa around. It is happening all over the world, and whilst we are a little behind most developed countries in this regard, we can learn from their experience and make it work. The timing is however crucial as skills and assets are in a state of attrition, so it will take a big effort from the authorities as well as our members to see the process through. HRASA's job is to assist and liaise and advise, but please realise that we are not going to be the saviour of the movement. It will be a team effort co-ordinated by ourselves which will have the best chance of success.