

A Steamy Love Affair

Even before the journey began I was once again hopelessly in love.

It was all rekindled by an e-mail: *Reef Steamers are running a never-to-be-repeated special on the 9th of January 2008. Class 15F 'Janine' of Reef Steamers will be hauling a Premier Classe set from Pretoria to Cape Town via Bloemfontein. BOOK NOW.*

Within minutes of the announcement, I'd managed to reserve compartment 1A, the first one behind the 15F.

After what seemed like an eternity, the day finally arrived.

Totally enchanted, I stood next to that beautiful creature until the very last moment before hastily scrambling aboard, spurred on by a blast from the whistle that acknowledged the green signal. Moments later an almost imperceptible creak emanated from the carriage as the world slowly began to move outside the window.

Right away, I was catapulted back into memory

I don't know when I first fell in love with a 15F. Perhaps I first saw one from the vantage point of my Old man's shoulders and that must have been very soon after their introduction on the South African Railways (SAR).

Just off the end of platform 1, at Cradock station, a 15F would stand waiting for the down passenger to Port Elizabeth. We would walk off the platform and stand next to this beautiful creature breathing her steam all over the place. Her low chimney and blinkers (smoke deflectors) let her stand out from the older locomotives - she was so streamlined.

We used to watch the driver as he greased the engine. A long thin cigar-like piece of grease would get shorter and shorter as he pumped the grease into the engine's grease nipples.

Sometimes the down passenger would be a little late and then the engine would blow off excess steam with a deafening sound while shooting a white plume skywards.

When the train arrived, its 15F would stop just off the end of the platform. Then came the engine change. The down engine was uncoupled and

chuffed off down the track. The new one slowly turned onto the main line and backed onto the train. Watching it couple up was a joy. The drivers prided themselves on not disturbing the passengers in the coaches. Not even the people in the first coach knew that a new engine had been coupled up to their coach.

Departure time was signalled by a short, sharp blast from the whistle, also sending a jet of steam skywards. Then the driver eased the regulator open and slowly, imperceptibly, each coach began moving, gingerly taking up the slack in the couplings between the coaches.

At home, seven o'clock was my bedtime and I was allowed to read until eight. Just before eight o'clock, I would hear the familiar tune preceding Frank Braithwaite's Racing Report on Lourenco Marques Radio. This would be followed by the time check and Donna Amelia saying, 'Radio Club du Mozambique.'

Warmly tucked up in my bed on a cold, crisp, clear Karoo night I would then listen for the sounds of the station for, on most nights, there was a scheduled up goods train which left just after eight. I would hear the whistle and then the chuff, chuff, chuff, chuff, chuff . . . as it started up the long incline that led to the interior. Some nights the load would be heavy and the sound would be chuff, chuff, chuff, chuff, chuff, chuchuchuchuchuchu . . . as the wheels slipped on the rails. Occasionally, to my delight, there would be two whistles - a double header. The engines would begin chuffing out of sync but soon the drivers were on the same wavelength and the two were pulling in unison.

Most nights I fell asleep to the distant choo-choo, choo-choo, choo-choo . . . as they hauled up the incline towards Fish Hoek halt.

Once a year we would leave for Pretoria on holiday and I would sit at the window and watch the 15F as it rounded the numerous curves on the line. I became adroit at keeping the coal soot out of my eyes.

The steaming early morning coffee, served in the compartment, was a treat - almost a greater treat than the trips to the dining car for lunch, dinner, and breakfast the next morning. The railways cream of leek soup seems to take pride of place in my dining car memories.

There is, of course, nothing like sleeping on a train pulled by a steam engine. While we were having dinner in the dining car, the bedding boy would come around and lay out the four beds. Two lower bunks and two top ones. The old man and I had the top ones, naturally. The warm, snugness of the SAR bedding in those days is still unsurpassed by anything I have encountered since. The warm, white sheets covered by the warmest, thickest, softest, deep blue blankets that you could imagine. This was heaven. After lights out, my Old man would lower the shutter and I would fall asleep watching the moonlit land gliding past the window while listening to the distant choochoochoo . . . of the engine, the gentle swaying of the coach, and the tiktik-tiktik - tiktik-tiktik of the wheels as they passed over the joins in the rails. There is no better sound and feeling to lull you to sleep.

One night, just before sundown, the train began slowing down in the middle of nowhere. I was all agog at the window as we were pulled off the main line, into a passing loop, with nothing but veld all around us. Wow. The passenger train was pulling off to let something else through.

Suddenly the quiet of the veld was broken by a distant sound - it was a steam engine going hammer and tongs. Slowly the noise came closer and closer and then - the Blue Train came flashing past, its 15F's driving wheels a blur. The conductor explained that there had been a wash away the other side Kimberley and so they rerouted the Blue Train via Bloemfontein and Colesberg to Cape Town. What an experience - I can still see, feel, and smell it today.

On the last trip I did from Cradock to Pretoria, in 1962, the train was pulled by two General Motors diesel electric units. They hold a charm of their own but they can never replace the 15F's in my memory.

For years I had longed for one last experience of the shee-shoo, shee-shoo as the pistons begin to drive the wheels, soon to be followed by the choo choo choo choo as the train picks up speed before settling into the glorious tik tik-tik tik of the wheels. And the smell of coal smoke; of the leather upholstery in the compartments; of that early morning railway coffee; and the smell, sight, feel, warmth and comfort of the newly laundered, thick, soft, blue SAR bedding on a cold, crisp Karoo night - and now that day has arrived and an almost forgotten romance had been rekindled.

. . . then the coach lurched and I was once again in the present – and hopelessly in love

Ray Hattingh