

Rail tour operator steams over closed line

STEPHEN COAN

WHILE South Africa is busy selling its wares at the Tourism Indaba, which ends today in Durban, 23 international tourists have had their holiday plans frustrated by Transnet's closure of the railway line from Creighton to Pietermaritzburg.

"It's a serious and devastating situation," said tour organiser Geoff Cooke of UK-based Geoff's Trains Limited, who first learnt of the closure on Saturday.

"We received a quote from our operator here, we paid the operator, he paid Transnet and only when we landed on the ground here did we learn that the line was closed," he said.

Geoff's Trains is a British specialist tour operator offering heritage steam train tours in Britain and other parts of the world.

"This is high-value tourism," said Cooke. "People have paid a lot of money."

It is estimated that the tourists — who come from Germany, Britain, Canada, Australia and Japan — will have paid an average of £2 500 (about R32 000) each to come to South Africa, including their flights.

"I travelled all the way from Can-

According to local operator Julian Pereira, who runs Paton's Express Adventures in Ixopo, he requested a quotation from Transnet to run a train on the line in early March. "We got a quotation in April, we accepted it and paid the invoice on April 29."

Pereira paid the R111 893,60 invoiced and the bookings by the tourists were confirmed.

"We had to pay that amount to use the line from Creighton to Pietermaritzburg with our own trains, our own coaches and our own staff."

After paying the invoiced amount, he said, he received no further communication from Transnet.

Last Thursday, May 9, he contacted Transnet because he hadn't received certification to run a train. "I was told we could not run trains as the line had been closed."

An e-mail from Transnet, dated May 7, was then forwarded to him confirming this.

"On the day we were supposed to travel to Pietermaritzburg, all we could do was run the train 200 metres up and down the line at Creighton."

Pereira said the reason given for the closure was that the line was unsafe. He said this was not the case.

However, Transnet disagrees. "The line has been closed since July last year," Transnet spokesperson Mike Asefovitz said.

"Pereira is well aware that there has to be a safety inspection before a line can be used. There is no way we can allow people to operate a tourist train on an unsafe section of our network. Imagine the public outcry if, God forbid, something happened on the trip."

Asefovitz said that after Pereira had asked for a quotation in March, the Transnet operations section checked the line and found it to be unsafe. He said Pereira was informed in writing by e-mail to this effect on Tuesday, May 7.

Asefovitz said the sleepers "were found wanting", adding that the line was not used and consequently not maintained.

He said Transnet apologises to the tourists for not being notified in time. "But here the possible consequences outweighed any other consideration."

According to Dudley Smith, economic development manager of Ingwe Municipality, headquartered in Creighton, no one had inspected the line.

It was "an absolute disaster" for the group of international tourists, said Smith.

He said the line's closure would also affect rail-based tourism in the area, including the Aloe Festival and the German mission station tours.

Ironically, Cooke was presented with a lifetime achievement award by the Heritage Railway Association of Southern Africa (HRASA) — "for his contribution and commitment to showcasing the heritage legacy of Southern Africa to international visitors through his photographic and enthusiast tours" — at a function at Ixopo station on Saturday.

Comment was sought from Mike Mabuyakhulu, MEC for Economic Development and Tourism, but no response was received at the time of going to press.

Nerina Sky, chairperson of HRASA, yesterday made representations to Transnet and Tourism Minister Martinus van Schalkwyk to try to rectify the situation.

Meanwhile, Cooke is faced with an unenviable situation.

"We have managed to organise a day with Umgeni Steam Railway, but other than that I have nothing to offer my tour group."

"If this isn't sorted out, both I and Tanago will not come back to South Africa."

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Geoff Cooke who runs Geoff's Trains Limited based in the UK.



Julian Perreira of Paton's Express Adventures in Ixopo.



International tourists photographing steam trains operating on the old line at Ixopo

PHOTOS: STEPHEN COAN