

Last chance to ride this train

The Choo Tjoe, the last stream train in Africa, has become a tourist icon, but its days are numbered, writes SIMON BROOKE

LOVERS of steam trains will have to be quick if they want to enjoy a journey in a genuine steam locomotive through spectacular scenery. Unless a rescue plan can be agreed on, one of the Cape's tourist icons, the Outeniqua Choo Tjoe, will cease operating at the end of this month.

When devastating floods hit the Garden Route a few years ago they destroyed roads and infrastructure and also swept away one of the area's most popular tourist attractions, the Outeniqua Choo Tjoe railway line along which a steam locomotive hauled a train through the forests, beside the sea and between lakes.

Made famous by the popular calendar picture of the train crossing the Kaaimas River bridge, mountain gorge on one side, sea on the other and the river way below, and even more well known from an international television advert for Stella Artois beer, the train attracted visitors from across the world — 70% of the passengers are foreigners — eager to experience a journey in a steam train through some of the country's most spectacular scenery.

Although the old railway line between George and Knysna proved too costly to rebuild, Transnet rerouted the Choo Tjoe between George and Mossel Bay, a line originally opened in 1907, much to the delight of the vast number of steam buffs.

Steam trains survived the onslaught of electricity longer in this country than elsewhere due to the abundance of cheap coal and labour, and operated well into the 1990s. Although high diesel costs have prompted initiatives to revive steam travel, there has been little progress and steam-drawn trains remain a tourist curiosity.

The Choo Tjoe is said to be the last continually operated passenger steam train in Africa, yet it appears destined to become a memory as Transnet is losing

money on the new route. Garth Strachan, the former Western Cape MEC for finance, economic development and tourism, says, "The Outeniqua Choo Tjoe is a tourist icon in the province and we would like to save it," and has approached the provincial government for at least of stay of execution while a plan to rescue the train is considered.

We are fortunate to be among the last passengers to enjoy the adventure a steam train offers. We board at George station and after a cheerful whistle we lurch forwards and are soon gently swaying to the rhythm of the clackety-clack of the wheels. I lean out of the window to get a better view of the old railway houses and get soot in my eye, forgetting that we are behind a real steam train.

Hot smuts fly in the window and my once white shirt is soon decorated with black and grey spots. I raise the window with its tiny springbok head etched into the glass above the letters SAR representing the now almost forgotten South African Railways and Suid Afrikaanse Spoorweg.

From my blue plastic seat in the spotlessly clean, gracious old coach — no graffiti to be seen — I watch as we leave George's industrial area behind and children run beside us unable to keep up as the train picks up speed. Soon we are in the suburbs and both adults and children wave from the old house stoeps and streets.

Soon we are in the country, gently rolling fields with cows grazing, and in the distance the Outeniqua mountains camouflaged in a blue haze. We slow down as we cross the Malgate River bridge, precariously high above the water level we look down into the deep gorge where large holes in the rock can be seen, formed by the flood waters washing rocks down the river over generations.

Quickly through a dark tunnel and we begin our descent to the sea. In the distance the ocean



INTO THE SUNSET: Above, the Choo Tjoe treats tourists to a scenic, yet sometimes scary trip; below, Ben van Jaarsveld, the driver. Pictures: MOSSEL BAY TOURISM and SIMON BROOKE



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blends with the horizon and the train follows the twisting track as we wind our way down tortuous gradients, through cuttings and around horseshoe bends until we are almost at sea level, the waves breaking on endless kilometres of pristine and deserted beaches.

We chug slowly through Great Brak River where the original corrugated iron station building now houses a restaurant. Crossing the river the remains of the supports of the original railway bridge are still visible. It was here, according to local legend, in 1906 that a temporary wooden bridge collapsed and a passing locomotive fell into

the river. We hold our breaths hoping to avoid the same fate.

From here we pass through a reserve of coastal fynbos. In winter the aloes create a blaze of bright red flowers which turn the area into a bird lovers' delight as Sugarbirds flock here seeking sweet food; the more adventurous come to see the cobras and puff adders also attracted by the vegetation.

After an hour-and-a-half of train travel we stop at the nondescript Hartenbos station to stretch our legs and permit the enthusiasts to take treasured photographs while the locomotive takes on water. We gather next to the

magnificent locomotive to admire its engineering excellence as driver Ben van Jaarsveld leans proudly from his cab.

He comes from a railway family; his father was a shunter from 16 until 60. Ben loves working for Transnet and tells us proudly the train is a 19D loco built in Glasgow in 1948, although the shiny brass controls look as if they were installed yesterday. Ben cannot contemplate life without the 19D.

With a shrill whistle we are off again on the last leg of our 52km journey to Mossel Bay, passing through the almost deserted, largest steam maintenance workshops in the country, home to rusting locomotives and their abandoned coaches. How sad if the 19D joins these ghosts.

Once again we are beside the sea, looking out for whales and dolphins as we approach the outskirts of Mossel Bay with its camp sites and resorts. Slowly we pull into the Dias Museum Station where we have two hours to kill, giving us just enough time to wander around some of the town's historic streets or to linger at one of the local restaurants.

The route has offered spectacular seascapes and pretty country scenes but it lacks the dramatic vistas of forests, lakes and gorges beside the sea that the original route to Knysna boasted.

Nevertheless the experience of travelling in a genuine steam train more than makes up for that and we decide against returning to George by taxi, which is a much more expensive option, in favour of another taste of train travel just as a true steam train buff should.

■ *Outeniqua Choo Tjoe departs every day except Sunday at 10am from George station, R140 return per person, (044) 801-8288, www.onlinesources.co.za/chootjoe*

TRAVEL NEWS

'High five' for Etihad at world travel awards

ETIHAD Airways, the national airline of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has become the first airline in the world to win five world travel awards in a single ceremony.

The Abu Dhabi-based airline scooped leading airline, leading first class, leading airline lounge, leading airline website and leading international marketing campaign at this year's World Travel Awards Middle East ceremony, which took place at the Monarch hotel in Dubai.


Votes for the world travel awards were cast by nearly 170 000 travel industry professionals around the world, including more than 110 000 travel agents.

James Hogan, Etihad Airways' CE, says: "To be awarded the title of Middle East's leading airline for the second year in a row is an outstanding achievement for Etihad. And to be voted the best in no less than five categories is unprecedented and testament to the quality and consistency of our product and services." Etihad has now won 17 world travel awards since it took to the skies in November 2003.

Graham Cooke, chairman and founder of the World Travel Awards, said: "Congratulations to Etihad Airways on this outstanding achievement. In claiming the title of Middle East's leading airline, Etihad Airways has clearly demonstrated its commitment to excellence across all aspects of its business."

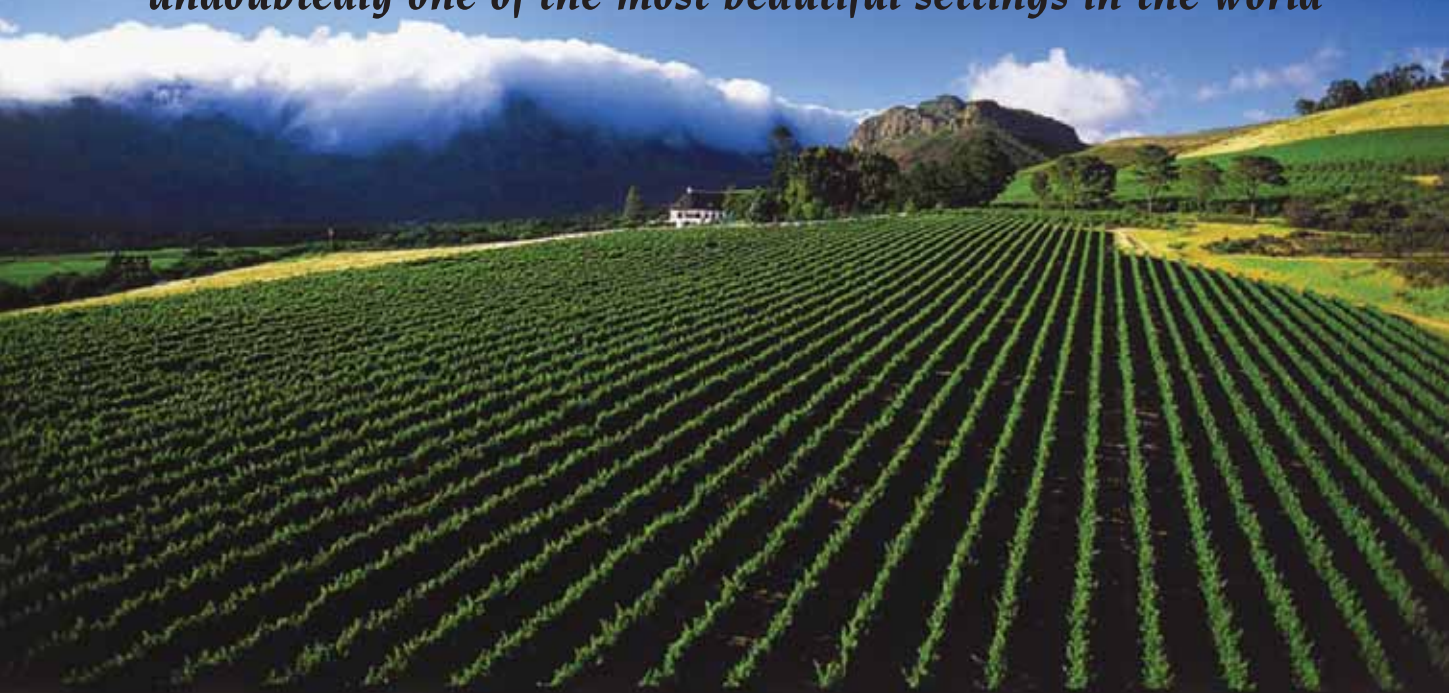
The award for leading first class coincides with the unveiling of Etihad's new first-class cabin at Arabian Travel Market. The airline is investing \$70m in a major revamp of its first-class cabin, including longer and wider beds, housed in their own private suites, and a large new changing room.

■ www.etihadairways.com



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