



Victoria Falls is one of Africa's most spectacular natural wonders. A South African rail trip could offer you the chance to witness this amazing sight. (Wikimedia Commons/Pavel Spindler)

## South African adventure

**Geoff Cooke** has been a leading figure in steam preservation and tour operations in Africa since 1986 and works alongside the Sandstone Heritage Trust in South Africa to facilitate tours to the Stars of Sandstone steam and heritage festival.

If you're not familiar with this event, you should be! It's the largest such gathering in the southern hemisphere and the only one that offers steam with an African flavour, featuring a diverse collection of heritage vehicles and narrow gauge steam in action.

The heritage collection goes back further than mechanisation, with traditional Afrikaner oxen that are bred, trained and still earn their keep by pulling wagons and ploughing the land. At Sandstone you can also find a magnificent cross-section of almost 300 items of agricultural equipment dating back to the late 1800s. Included are working steam traction engines and the earliest of early vintage tractors, ranging from the huge Emerson Brantingham Big 4-30 right down to the diminutive Massey Harris Pony. This working machinery acts as a stunning backdrop to the railway, creating realism and a myriad of opportunities for photographic re-enactments.

There's only one problem...it's

really far away! Geoff wanted to make sure British enthusiasts could get there as economically as possible and so he developed tour packages that will take you from Johannesburg or Tambo Airport to the event, accommodate you for visits ranging from three to 11 days and then return you to the airport. On this adventure expect to make the most of each and every day with sunrise photography workshops with experienced rail photographers, or staying up late and taking the Stargazer Express for the ultimate evening of stargazing.

Following Sandstone, it is possible to take a five-night main line steam train behind a historic South African 4-8-2 back to Johannesburg, with interesting railway locations and excellent photo run pasts. You can end your African holiday with a visit to Victoria Falls, including a steam train trip to the famous bridge over the Zambezi River and a three-night wildlife safari.

*How much? Tours that include return coach transfers from Johannesburg or Tambo Airport, accommodation near Sandstone, local transfers and Sandstone entry start at around £800 for five days.*

*When? From April 4, 2019.*

*More info: [www.geoffs-trains.com](http://www.geoffs-trains.com)*

## Daydreaming in Darjeeling

The **Darjeeling** Himalayan Railway is a favourite among rail fans, and one of the highlights of this tour is Shimla, a popular hill resort that is accessed on the famous 2ft 6in gauge line. Beginning in Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta) with a journey on a vintage tram, you'll be immersed in the rich colours and sounds of this lively Indian city that is home to the open air Baba Bhalku Rail Museum – a must visit.

At the foot of the DHR, you'll get to experience a feast of a three-course meal in the dining train and arrive in Darjeeling station by steam, ready to spend a couple of evenings at the iconic Windamere Hotel, the 19th century home for bachelor English and Scottish tea planters. It will be a welcome stop for a little calm and relaxation.

Boarding the 'Joy Train' from Darjeeling to Ghum, you'll be invited to share a cup of chai with the train crew. Photographers on this trip may also be blessed with good weather, allowing them to take stunning snaps of Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world. Needless to say, a trek up there does not form part of this holiday!

This magical tour ends with a trip to the Taj Mahal in Agra for yet more wonderful photo opportunities. Will friends be jealous of this trip? Yes. Take as many photos as you can – you'll need to, to fully appreciate all that you've seen. If you've ever wanted a 'holiday of a lifetime', this is it.

*How much? £3,575 (based on two people sharing).*

*When? February 13 – March 1, 2019.*

*More info: [www.darjeelingtours.co.uk](http://www.darjeelingtours.co.uk)*



DHR Locomotive 780 with an excursion train on the upper part of Batasia Loop on February 21, 2005. The Himalayan Mountains (including Kanchenjunga) can be seen behind. (Wikimedia Commons/A M Hurrell)