

1). THURSDAY - LOCOMOTIVE PREPARATION :



FP01 – The Class 12AR No.1535 'Susan' is still cold as she faces out of the old boiler house into an opalescent and colourless mid-morning. Senior Driver Attie de Necker is already doing the humble job of brass work and paint cleaning – which he regularly does as a matter of pride.

Conventionally it takes several days to do the final work to load and prepare a train for a long distance trip although many of the arrangements have to be made several weeks before. Traditionally, many of us take a work day off before the train departs to do the final preparation work. This section of the report covers that period of time.

The weather was dull, rainy and chilly, as it would be for most of the trip. However, it didn't dampen our spirits or the special camaraderie that goes with people of different backgrounds, languages and cultures all working together on the massive, characterful machines that they enjoy. Any long distance trip, such as the Cherry Festival 2009 trip under review, actually starts several days before the train leaves.



PR01 – A journey of nearly a thousand kilometres starts with a little polishing. Guest driver Philip Maurer, fresh from battling 5 foot high snow drifts on the mountainous railways of Switzerland, enjoys a little shirt-sleeve work without the assistance of erratic Swiss OBB cab heaters.

He's polishing the steam chest cover inspection plate on the Class 25NC – with a rather effective brand of polish that he brings over from Switzerland. The polish works chemically, rather than with abrasives. He now owes me a genuine Swiss Loco oil can for the free publicity.

Although he lives overseas, Philipp is one of the longest serving members of Reefsteamers, having joined our group in 1993, a year after Reefsteamers was started. He has visited South Africa 52 times, at his own cost to service and drive ex-SAR steam locomotives.



PR02 – One of the firelighters had been a bit too quick with the 25NC's boiler on a previous hippo-soup session and these firebox side-stays got stretched with the expansion. Each one of these weeping rivet-like stay heads had to have their outer edges tapped back to form a tight seal against the side plate.

The firebox stays separate the inner and outer walls of the firebox, the space between being full of water. Those flat flank plates have to withstand a bursting pressure of up to 14 tons per square centimetre at operating pressure on this locomotive.

This tedious and rather noisy process is misleadingly known as 'caulking' – but there isn't a silicone or caulking gun in sight. Our normal fire lighting schedules allow for 6 hours to light up an engine. Sometimes, the engine is accidentally over-fired in a hurry, especially after a delay such as fusible plug repairs.



PR03 – As Shaun Ackerman inspects his 'caulking' work with his ears ringing, Luca Lategan gives me a playfully disgusted nose wrinkle from with the firebox.

Notice the unique T-shaped siphonic arch tubes of the Class 25NC firebox, as well as the modular nature of the fire arch itself. The fire arch deflects the hot combustion gasses backwards towards the firing hole, before they move up and then forward again through the boiler tubes, thus giving a longer dwell time and a greater chance to transfer heat energy into the water.

When the arch is incandescent, like the fire clay panels behind a domestic gas heater's elements, it assists in instigating and maintaining secondary combustion above the fire bed.

The firewood upon which Luca is sitting had been laid by the labourers the previous afternoon. Normally the loco-lighter inspects the firebox before loading the kindling fuel. But the fires had been laid by the labourers rather than the service staff. It made an uncomfortable job even more uncomfortable.



PR05 – A quiet moment in amongst loading the power van's generator room, which also acts as a workshop and store. We have to pack everything we might need, from 20 ton jacks and the acetylene trolley, to spare brake pipes and re-railing frogs.

When you're 460km from home, you can't just quickly send a bakkie back to pick up what you've forgotten. I'm pleased to say that none of the emergency equipment was required.

The Power van is actually a converted Staff and Baggage van. Those steps under the doors are useless because there are no hand rails – this opening is designed to be used from station platform height. We have to use ladders to get up from the ground.

Visible just inside the door is the work bench that was relocated to be able to fit the larger generator required to run the heavier electrical load of electric powered geysers.



PR04 – The best shower in the house – and we crew members deserve it! Unlike the showers in the sleeper coaches, this one is a gas powered semi-flash heater and it works really well with a minimal dead leg of cold water in the piping. The shower itself is roomy with a fully enclosed domestic shower stall, a porcelain pedestal sink and all the fittings. I

This set-up is a far cry from the 2008 Cherry festival Run when we discovered that the crews had no showers. All the shower-equipped sleeper coaches had been converted to private ensuite bathrooms which meant no showers were accessible from the corridors.

We had to use the communal showers of the silver (standard) class coaches instead, which lead to some awkward moments and lots of traipsing through the train in casual pee-jays, holding damp-ish towels and soaps, hoping to find a shower free to be used!

The incidentally pictured hand brake, release valve and the vacuum gauge are fully functional.



PR06 – Passengers seem to find the yellow five-digit SAR numbers on the coaches confusing. I made up a full set of laminated labels for the coach door windows and mounted them on the outside with Shaun Ackerman's trick of using silicone sealer as an adhesive. It doesn't deteriorate and doesn't lift the paint when removed from a wall. He knows his stuff, does young 'Smudge', and we didn't lose a single one of the more than 48 signs that were mounted in spite of the windy, rainy weather.

I later discovered that although the silicone blobs peel off easily from the paint and laminates inside the coaches, it REALLY sticks to the glass. I spent almost two days scraping the glass clean to prepare the train for the New Year's trip and I wished 'Smudge' Ackerman the joy of half a dozen spiky kidney stones while I hung on those steps in the sun, scraping and scrubbing.



PR07 – Here's the distinctive signage for the official crew toilet. We were going to call it 'Elize se putty palies' (Elize's putty palace) but she would have probably objected most strenuously.

Luckily for Diana Sanderson's continued survival, she'd forgotten to make the 'putty palies' label. Although the gas mask sign was Andrew King's joke it served the purpose of keeping nosey passengers out of the Power Van and it's two four-man compartments. This door is the first thing you'd see when crossing the gangway into the Power Van.



PR08 – The man in the mask, or behind the mask in Coenraad's (Coenie's) case. These are cramped, poorly ventilated quarters and he's kneeling on the patella right in front of the thunder-pot. He's recently returned from 6 months in America and launched himself into the coach work with a will.

Here he is finishing off the painting of the top coat in the crew toilet and would later lay a brand new vinyl tile floor in the shower of a Silver Class coach. 'Coenie' worked on coach repairs, as an electrician and served as a DJ on the train.



PR09 – A subtle Luca detail. Most (but not all) of our coaches still have functioning destination markers. Luca got hold of a coach key and reset them all to 'Bethlehem' – which would be our changeover point from electrical haulage to living steam.

With the recent name changes in the country as the government is trying to create an African Culture that existed before the European settlers, many of the Afrikaans, Colonial English and Boer-War Era names on those roller blonds have themselves passed into history.



PR10 – We took along 60 tons of kibble, 50 tons of which are visible in one grab wagon bunker and within a 40 ton DZ gondola. There is another 10 tons in an identical grab-wagon bunker behind me.

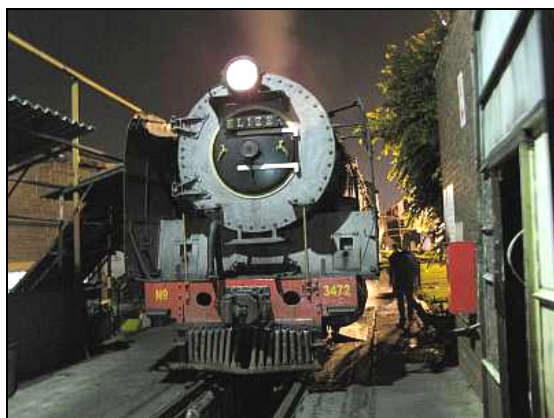
To our surprise, we came back without even a kibble-nibble of the 40 tons in the DZ – this year's coal was of very good quality! In fact, at no point did we even have to hand-shovel scrape the bottom of those two bunkers in the grab wagon ... just taking easy loads with the clam-shell grab.



PR11 – The waiting train stands in the drizzly late afternoon – with two auxiliary water tankers of 31 000 liters each at the ready. Notice that the wheel rims have been freshly painted in white enamel. The tanker further in the background is the fire pump tanker and would always run with our leading locomotive, which would be the Class 12AR No.1535 'Susan.'



PR12 – Our shunting yard isn't as flat as it seems and a 'scotch block' like this one pictured under a tanker wheel is a necessary safety device. The use of a wooden block seems anachronistic in the modern railway context, but steel blocks and ramps don't grip the rail – they just tend to slide along uselessly along the rail head should the train begin to roll.



PR13 – Oh look! A choo choo! Just in case you're getting bored with static scenes, I threw in a bonus locomotive picture from the extreme other end of the story. This is Class 25NC No. 3472 'Elize' having just arrived home from the journey. Her fires have just been dropped and she is running on residual pressure and trundling over the last few meters of her journey into the comfort of the locomotive shed for a well deserved sleep.



PR14 – A strategic move on any train journey – laying claim to your bunk. Ryan 'Piston Legs' Fincham (Rear), Luca 'Lukey' Lategan (Center) and 'Swiss Tease' Maurer (Front) discuss their bunks in the recently repainted corridor of the power van. Ryan would be on duty with me the following morning to light up the Class 25NC. But Luca and Philip would light up the Class 12AR at midnight instead of the morning, to have her ready to do a brake vacuum test on the waiting train in advance. It would give us ample time to rectify any braking problems found on the train.



PR15 – Ryan Fincham is about to grab a Kaisler Rump as Mr. Maurer gets busy hopefully feeling for any form of padding within his bed. All the bottom bunks had extra foam mattresses added but the top bunks in the staff coaches were all bare skimpily padded SAR bunks and were definitely unpopular!



PR16 – Sometimes the tangled neurons under the dome need a gentle tap to separate the short circuits caused by the fraying myelin on the neural tendrils. Andrew King just wouldn't relax after a full check of both generators – knowing there was something he'd forgotten but it was still eluding him.



PR17 – A Luk-ey Strike. Luca got the privilege of lighting the first fire of the trip. Conventionally, the fire is actually pre-lit in a coal shovel full of paraffin-soaked cotton waste, which is then tipped in through the firing hole. Still, this pose looks impressive and you can just see the match and the fact that Luca still has both of his eyebrows!
(As they say in steam locomotive circles, blow-back's a bitch!)



PR18 – The 12AR's fire arch, carefully built from individual refractory bricks on a wooden semi-circular former, has fused together beautifully although you can still see the colouration of the brick joints on the end face. The stalactites of molten refractory liner are starting to form at the end. I went to bed after this shot, leaving Shaun and Philipp to potter around the locomotive all night, while she raised steam at a leisurely pace.



PR19 – From the flickery embryonic warmth of the engine cab to the cold, drizzly weather – not the usual walk to get to bed. Not the place for fluffy bunny-slippers! We had rain threatening all day and it finally came down at night in a relentless, fine drizzle. Being a Brit in exile, I thrive in the rain like a river-bank toad, but it did depress the sun-loving South Africans ... poor things.

The halo-blipped coach in the foreground is the 'Sandstone Sleeper.' It used to be the Dormitory Coach of the Lilliputian Restaurant in Weenen. One of the original proprietors, Sid Cunha, has given me a ton of material on this coach and it will be the subject of an article one day, if I find the time.



FR01 – It is 5:40am Friday morning and my fire lighter trainee, Ryan Fincham, is happily stuffing paraffin-soaked waste into the intercostals of kindling wood on his favourite loco, the 25NC. The kindling wood was sparsely laid all over the grate and I first had him rake it all together into a pile with the pricker iron. That's Luca sneaking a pic of me in the lower right. The can on the driver's seat is paraffin, which is always in short supply at the depot. I brought 10 litres of the stuff and hid the leftovers.



FR03 – Filling up the lubricator's oil tank, Ryan is still smiling as he is dispensing the first of four green cans of delicious valve oil and is only just beginning to realise what horror lies ahead. This viscous green tallow-enhanced lubricant literally flows like chilled treacle when the ambient temperature is flirting in the lower teens. Blop Blop Blop Blop....stre-e-e-e-a-m.



PR20 – Did I say I was going to bed? Then what was I doing standing on the top of a 50 ton water tanker, in the rain, taking pictures of a standing train at nearly 2 o'clock in the morning? You don't have to be crazy to like steam trains ... but it sure helps! And I'm one of the saner of the Reefsteamers...

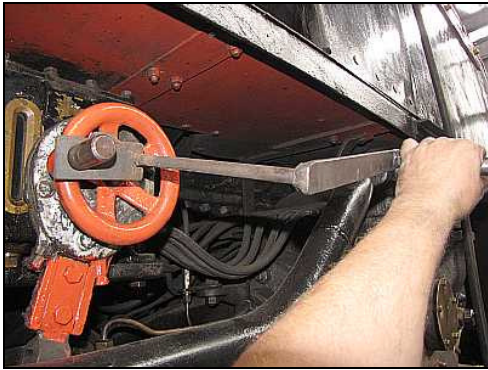
The two water tankers were coupled at the rear of the train as they would be taken out first, as a pair, by the tender-first Class 25NC and only then would the remaining 15 vehicles be moved out by the tender-first Class 12AR, currently being fired up. Our head shunt on the west end of the yard isn't long enough to take 17 vehicles and two locomotives.



FR02 – Tri-athlete Ryan discovers the joy of having to uncover the sliding covers of the mechanical stoker's trough, to reset them. 'Reset' means to push them towards the back so the stoker's Archimedean screw feeds coal from the half-slide wide hole left at the front of the receding slide. The kibble pile kept collapsing – we would have to wait to scoop some out with the grab. As you can see – it's warm work even though it was a cold, drizzly dawn!



FR04 – I was busy with the 25NC and didn't get out much. Here, the Class 12AR is just ambling back over the cross over to couple up to the train to do a brake vacuum test about 5 hours in advance to allow time for rectification of any faults. Andrew King stays 'put' in the foreground as he uses his cell phone and dates the photo to the 20th century. (It's an old cell !)

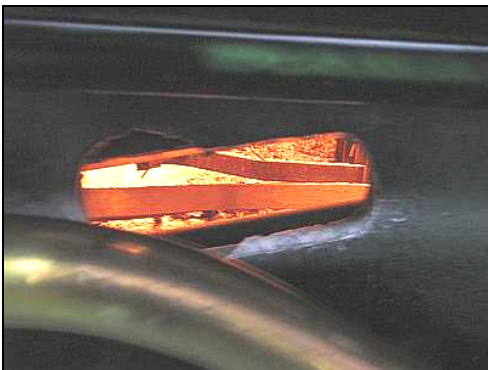


FR05 – I also took part in the lubrication schlep – hand cranking the stiff, cold oil-feed pump. The extra leverage afforded by the clip-on crank handle helps somewhat but it doesn't alleviate the tediousness of 300 or so turns. The mechanical lubricator is a ratchet driven multi-cylinder device – each pump cylinder supplying oil to a single drip-feed point via one of the flexible woven fabric sheathed pipes you can see in the background. Uncle Wilfred's GMAM Garratt has got TWO of these devices to prime – divine!



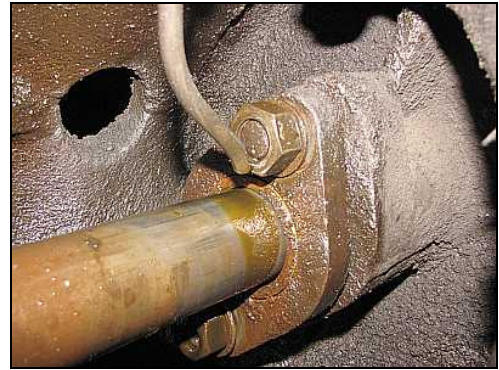
FR07 – Here's the other loose nut. Johann Breydenbach got kicked out of home. Excited about the trip, he had packed early and was restless - pacing like a caged tiger when his wife told him to just get lost, get on with it and have some fun.

We didn't have much draft on the plant blower and a very stiff valve. We changed it over to another and the second option didn't work too well either. You can see the fresh, soft soot on the firebox doors and the butterfly gearing caused by the tendency for the fire to blow back. Johann deliberately opened the fire early to improve the drafting. (Thinner fire.)



FR09 – With her fire burning bright after a little shunting, Class 12AR 'Susan's' ridiculously small ash pan raking holes are brightly illuminated. You can just about get the ash rake in through these and you can see some frustrated person in the past has torched out a crude notch on the left to follow the ash rake to be tilted over the boiler delivery pipe in the foreground.

Visible within are the two pull bars for the drop grates.



FR06 – This is what the primster looks for – oil drips at the piston rods, valve spindles and slide bars. The 'prime' objective is to fill up all the pipes, ensuring minimal delay in lubrication when the locomotive starts to move and drives her own pumps.

Pictured here is the stuffing cover for the RHS valve spindle – the closest point to the lubricator and ironically, the last point to feed oil on this session. Notice that the bottom nut has worked itself loose – a classic running repair job that needs to be done.



FR08 – After a successful brake test, and shunting the two water tankers out to the west end of the yard, the 12AR 'Susan' backs in for a comprehensive greasing and some gland packing adjustments on the turret manifold.

Ryan, with 25NC-scented mutton cloth draped over a shoulder, had come out of his hole, and shows the service crew's advantage – unobstructed access to great shots. The fellow on the right is Fred Sewell who had been under a lot of pressure repairing and upgrading coach electrics. He wasn't to come with us on the trip either.



FR10 – A steam-powered termite queen is faithfully attended by her blindly loyal workers. Andries and Shorty are on their haunches, cleaning the motion, while Luca, in the orange shirt, is polishing the boiler cladding. Shaun, on the cab roof, is inspecting the packing for the blower valve and Philipp (white hard hat) has just climbed up on the right side to pass on some tools and unsolicited advice.

No problems were found with the coach brakes.



FR11 – Classic running repairs. Dr 'Smudge' Ackerman is struggling with a hot, blowing packing nut on the blower valve. The blower is the second most frequently used valve when on the road – the most frequent valve being the steam valve for the fireman's injector.

Notice the whistle – SAR whistles are mounted horizontally to clear the loading gauge.



FR13 – Cotton pickin'. Andries discovers how sticky freshly applied hard-grease can be and the amazing affinity it has for loose strands of cotton waste. Cotton strands on the motion joints, such as this knuckle joint on the left intermediate driver, don't do any harm apart from looking untidy.

However, they are a constant risk around hydrostatic lubricators as loose cotton strands can get into the works via the filler port and cause blockages.



FR15 – The attractive number-plate style labels created by 'Coenie' Gildenhuys in Corel Draw. Coenie does our ticket work as well. Piet Molentz hadn't yet won his campaign to get his surname spelt correctly – it is Mollentze. However and hence forth he will be known as 'Rag Top'; for his SAR Hankie.



FR12 – Luca is hopefully polishing the boiler cladding. Although the shine got a bit spoilt after a weekend of rain, the locomotive never really lost her 'glint' – the wax helping to shed the water.

The safety valves in the foreground are properly clear of feathers of steam. If they're feathering and the steam pressure is climbing – it's dangerous to work in this area due to the risk of noise damage to the ears should the safety valves lift.



FR14 – Cleaner and dryer work, all very proper and civilized ... even with an adjoining cup of tea (with a SAUCER ☺) Chairman Elize Lubbe gets going with arts and crafts. (And stays out of trouble.)

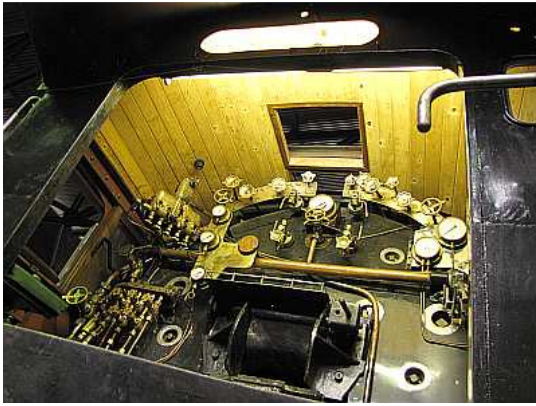
She is cutting out SAR oval number plate-styled compartment labels. I'm glad I wasn't involved in cutting out repetitive dozens of oval shapes – it would have nudged the cheese off my cracker long ago!

That saucer-equipped tea is Rooibos, so Elize loses points for civility – what person in their right mind would drink that foul stuff? I wouldn't even use in bulk for boiler washout although it would probably kill the rats in the gutters and the inspection pits.



FR16 – It is close to 11am and time for a late morning tea break while the stupid locomotives can jolly well look after themselves for 10 minutes. Shaun (next to the door) and Philipp (center), worked right through the night on waking up the Class 12AR but also spent time catching up on their long distance friendship.

63



FR17 – While not a part of the trip, here is the almost complete boiler backhead for the Class 15F No.3046 'No name as yet.' You wouldn't normally get this shot with the tender in the way. Of the operating parts, only the water column glasses are missing. The blank wooden round backing plate above the firing door is where the steam heating pressure gauge would have gone for passenger train heating. None of our locomotives still have functioning heater lines although many of the coaches still have their steam heating radiators. (Disused)



FR18 – The tool kits also had to be prepared and cleaned. Andre van Dyk (Left) and 'Oom' Attie de Necker (Right) are working on Philip's toolkit. Philip had just brought a new grease gun and it didn't fit in the standard box. He had just ground away two of the built in tool compartments to make room.

Andre is busy repairing the hasp and the lock ring on the somewhat battered box while Attie busies himself cleaning one of the older grease guns. (This one, unusually, had white grease in it – for the 25NC's roller bearings.)



PR09 – James Thomson concentrates as he is drifting in a hinge pin for a turbine dynamo governor. James would be riding with us as a guest on the trip. On this day of preparations, he was keeping himself busy assembling a completely overhauled dynamo for the Class 15F No.3046 behind him to the right.



PR20 – All smudged-out and nowhere to sleep. Not everyone is working at the moment. Being up all through the previous night finally catches up with Shaun 'Smudge' Ackerman, who loosens his weary joints on the tea-green.

However, his snatched moment of rest is soon to be rudely interrupted, as Philip Maurer is just about to insert the business end of a loaded grease gun right into Shaun's fruit cluster!

2). PREPARING THE TRAIN :



TU01 – The Class 12AR had already been turned and coaled in the early daylight hours before being used to test the vacuum brakes on the waiting coaches and service vehicles.

Now it's the 25NC's turn (pun intended) and while she is still grinding and squealing her way around the turning balloon, Dr. Smudge sits ready and waiting on the powered up coal grab.

Our current coal dock area was once the loading area for the workshop stores building, hence the surviving platform. In the days of full steam operation, there was actually no road access to the Germiston Loco depot and all stores were delivered by train or hand cart.



TU03 – Backing up into the coal dock track, the cleaned and detail-painted Class 25NC 'Elize' looks absolutely fantastic, an unreal, amazingly long time machine from another age. Ryan Fincham was quite happy to be riding along with them!

Yup, the safeties have popped – the steam raising fire having both been a bit shaken and definitely drawn by the draft.

With the careful movements of the locomotive and backing up through the two sets of adjacent points, I had enough time to get out the gate and position myself for a clear shot – even with my usual awkward stiff-kneed bow-legged gait that passes for a run for me.



TU02 – Coming off the loop with Attie de Necker at the regulator and Johann Breydenbach at the shovel, Class 25NC 'Elize' approaches the two sets of points opposite the old Forge House. The track in the foreground is the coal dock track and the track in the middle ground is the run around track for access to the 15M shops.

Johann isn't actually firing at the moment – that lovely plume above the stack is almost pure steam.

Notice that Attie still has the cylinder cocks open even after a full trip around the balloon – thoroughly warming up the cylinders on this chilly day.

I'm taking this photo with my camera lens barrel poking through two wires on the electric fence. Judging by the tangled mass of short-circuited conductor wires on the gates, I figured it would be safe. ☺



TU04 – Steady as she goes – aiming for the center and the front face of the coal pile.

You also see the locomotive minder's curse here ... see the iron rod protruding into the picture on the RHS? That is the handle of the slice iron. This and the other irons often get buried under the edges of the coal pile. After coaling, the first person to have to use the fire irons faces a challenge to get them out the pile, without tangling them up with each other or the hooks. Usually a fair amount of coal falls over the side as well and also needs to be cleaned up.



TU04 – Dr. Smudge Ackerman concentrates with the face that has gotten him into some trouble over the years - for he looks really grumpy sometimes when in fact, he is just trying to do the job well and with maximum cleanliness and efficiency.

This move is tricky as the boom is going to be lowered and almost fully extended to get the coal down the front of the pile. If he goes too far, we'll have a messy cascade of coal right with us in the locomotive cab! Something similar actually happened a few weeks previously when the access doors to the tender hadn't been latched fully on the 12AR – they burst open and buried the loco crew up to their knees in an avalanche of coal.



TU05 – Two ends of the enthusiast age gap. 'Oom' Attie is chatting to Johann B. while sitting quite comfortably with the locomotive's brakes held on via the ejector. (Lever is down.) An introverted looking Ryan is still having fun but maybe the early morning and all the activity is taking its toll

Or maybe he's thinking of the fact that he hasn't heard from the girl of his dreams (PRISCILLA !) within the last fifteen minutes – he was MXT'ing with her throughout the entire weekend.

We don't require crews to wear hard hats while in the cab – he's probably forgotten that he still has it on.



TU06 – Seeing as one load of coal looks pretty much like the next, I thought that I would slope-off and take a few pics of the standing coaches. Here is the new vinyl floor of the single 'Diamond Class' coach coming along with us. The entire wall on the right hand side and the two vestibules were repainted in the attractive semi-gloss artic green finish to match the dining car – covering up the shoddy salmon-pink PVA paint that had been applied by the now-failed Setimela Tours company.



TU07 – A standard class compartment lies ready – with the beds all crisply laid out, courtesy of the Shongololo Express housekeeping staff. The carpet looks dirty but actually they are still drying off from a thorough cleaning the previous day.

The deep cross beam on the transverse bunk is not popular with the occupants of the lower bunk as large people find it difficult to turn over. Unfortunately, this layout restricts easy viewing of trackside scenery from within the compartments.



TU08 – I'll take the high road, thanks. As the Class 25NC backs carefully into the yard trackage, the different track heights and the optics of my camera seems to really exaggerate the difference in size between the two locomotives. There is 18 tons between them.



TU09 – One of the most dangerous points in the yard for pedestrians – the transverse walkway passes right by the corner of the old boiler house and straight over the cross-over track. As you can see – a careless person can step into harm's way long before the crew have time to react.