

IT WAS about nostalgia, it was about beautiful scenery, about people with passion and dedication, and about two grand old ladies – Avril and Elize. And then it was also about cherries.

It added up to a whole lot of fun on the annual Reefsteamers Association trip to the Cherry Festival in Ficksburg in the eastern Free State.

The trip was about reliving a time when steam engines criss-crossed the country, pulling trainloads of passengers and goods. It was about an era when travel was conducted at a leisurely pace and one had time to gaze at the scenery, dream a little, and enjoy some good old-fashioned hospitality.

The annual Cherry Festival Steam Train trip takes place in November when the cherries are ripe and Ficksburg is festive.

We boarded the train on a Thursday at the old Boksburg East station in Ekurhuleni and watched the steam locos arrive. The huffing and puffing dragons chuffed in, spitting steam, puffing out clouds of smoke, “barking” and “grunting”, making a fittingly grand entrance.

Then we settled down to sleep ...



until 3am when the toot of the whistle announced our departure and there was a little tug and jerk and a lurch forward as we moved off on our journey to Ficksburg.

This trip was as much about the locos as it was about a visit to the little *dorp* which has become known for its cherry orchards and dramatic mountain scenery.

Reefsteamers Association is a non-profit organisation formed in 1995. Its members are volunteers, who are dedicated to keeping steam trains alive and on the rails. When

the South African Railways pulled the plug on steam in 1992, many old locos were consigned to the scrap heap. Now, many have been rescued and restored. And this is where Avril and Elize come in.

They are part of a collection of 24 grand old ladies which are either back on the rails, being restored, or in line for restoration, thanks to Reefsteamers.

Elize is on permanent loan to Reefsteamers by the Transnet Heritage Foundation, Avril belongs to David Shepard, wildlife artist, phil-

anthropist and steam loco collector, who lives in England. Avril is on loan to the Sandstone Heritage Trust near Ficksburg and the trust has loaned the locomotive to Reefsteamers to maintain and operate on its behalf.

Long before we reached Kroonstad and the first grease stop, the early-morning risers had congregated in the lounge car where coffee and steam talk were on tap.

There were old timers who had worked on the railways all their lives, there were middle-aged professionals, grannies and grandpas who remembered holidays, trips to school and the varsity run. There were also youngsters for whom this was a new and exciting experience.

We all piled on to the platform at Kroonstad to get a close-up of the locos. The youngsters clambered up on to the footplate and checked out the polished brass fittings and gauges and peered into the huge, red-hot maw of the grate where the coal fire blazed.

We were able to really experience the emotions, the smells and sounds and the excitement of a journey under steam power.

It was also an eye-opener to see the amount of effort put in by the crew to ensure a safe journey.

The carriages and compartments have been modernised, but retain much of their old charm. Besides the regular compartments there are Gold Class and Diamond Class compartments.

Gold glass offers a suite with two bunks. There is cupboard space and an en suite shower, basin and loo. Diamond Class offers a double bed, cupboard space, a comfortable lounge area, private shower, basin and loo. The regular compartments have been revamped and refurbished. The old six-sleepers now sleep four and the old bedding has been replaced with duvets. There is a shower and two toilets in each carriage.

The lounge car is the focal area. Here travellers meet early in the morning for coffee and later when the bar beckons.

Festival goers were free to explore the town and head for the cherry farms on Saturday. Sunday morning saw the train depart on the return journey and a chance to dig into our boxes of cherries.