

Sleeper theft derails steam train

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Pretoria - A steam engine pulling carriages with hundreds of passengers on board derailed just outside Pretoria on Sunday, probably because sleepers were stolen from under the train track near the Cullinan station.

The carriages did not derail, and none of the 627 passengers were injured. There were no tourists on board.

"Thank God my dad's okay," Dominique Smith, 25, from Pretoria-East said on Sunday with a huge smile, shortly after the locomotive of the Friends of the Rail steam train derailed and landed on its side after a "loud crash".

Her 55-year-old father, Steve, was the stoker.

According to police spokesperson Johannes Jaftha, the accident happened at about 10:55. The passengers were on a Father's Day trip on the 190 ton train.

A preliminary investigation shows that thieves stole a few sleepers from the track near Cullinan, and that seems to be the cause of the accident," said Jaftha.

Loud crash

The steam locomotive, coal tender and the train's water tank derailed and overturned.

A relieved Dominique told of how she and her sister, Bernadine, 24, had been on the train as their father had to work on Father's Day and they wanted to spend the day with him.

The train was about 800m from the Cullinan station, which would have been its final stop before returning to Pretoria, when the accident happened.

"I heard an incredibly loud crash and the first thought that crossed my mind was whether my dad was okay.

"I knew he was at the front in the locomotive, and when we stopped I jumped out immediately and ran as fast as I could to get to him."



The derailed train lying on the tracks near Cullinan.

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According to her father, he did the same and immediately ran to find his two daughters, who were in one of the carriages at the back.

"I couldn't find them immediately, so I phoned Dominique (on her cellphone) and was incredibly relieved when I heard neither of them was hurt.

"We can celebrate today that all three of us are still alive and that we can spend Father's Day together again next year," he said.

Too late

He said everything happened very quickly.

"A train can't come to a stop immediately, and by the time we realised what was going on, it was already too late.

"I grabbed onto anything I could hold onto so I wouldn't end up underneath the falling train," he said.

According to Nathan Berelowitz, chair of the Friends of the Rail club, this is the second time in 25 years that something like this has happened to one of their trains.

"If it hadn't been for the driver who was going almost as slow as walking pace, this accident could have turned into a terrible tragedy. Luckily he had slowed down because he was quite close to the Cullinan station," said Berelowitz.

Henry Lazenby, who was in charge of the train on Sunday, said he's grateful that nobody was hurt, but sad that the engine was badly damaged.

"We'll only be able to say what the exact scope of the damage is at a later stage, but the thieves certainly caused a huge amount of damage," he said.

He was in the bar area with some of the passengers when they heard the loud crash.

"When I heard that terrible bang, I knew there was only one thing which could have caused it. The passengers were scared but nobody was screaming or panicking too badly," he said.

Sleepers used to make furniture

According to him, the thieves use the stolen sleepers to make furniture.

Friends of the Rail is a non-profit organisation. The money they make with trips like the one on Father's Day is used to restore old steam engines.

The Rail Safety Regulator said in a statement on Sunday that they are investigating the incident.

Anyone with information about the theft of the sleepers can contact the Cullinan police station.

- Beeld