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*The Most Luxurious Train in the World*



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## ROHAN VOS

Rohan Vos is a self-made businessman who established himself in the motor-spares industry in Witbank. He is married to Anthea and they have four children: Shaun, Brenda, Bianca and Tiffany. With no previous experience in train travel or tourism, today he and Anthea own and run the four most luxurious trains in the world. They live in Cape Town and commute to Pretoria.

### **As a person with no previous interest in trains, how did you come to start Rovos Rail?**

IN 1986 a member of my staff, Phil Acutt, approached me to assist in the formation of a steam-preservation group in Witbank, where I had my motor-spares and related businesses. He, sadly, has subsequently passed away. After agreeing to help I went to a few railway rolling stock auctions and thought it might be fun to have a family caravan consisting of two or three old style carriages. I approached the railways with this proposal in mind and they gave me permission later that year, but the permutations were such that it would have proved far too extravagant for me to run this as a home on wheels for my family. I went back to the railways and asked them to reconsider. They held firm to their pricing structure but did give me permission to sell tickets. And that was how the idea of this commercial vintage train was born. Rebuilding the carriages is a practical matter, and having been in the motor-spares business, it wasn't too difficult for me to overcome the mechanical side. The building of the carriages is perhaps the most fun.

Establishing myself in the tourism industry was not easy. If I have lost any money due to my inexperience in this operation, it has been due to my lack of knowledge in the tourism arena.

However, when I started I was told that it would take three to five years for the product to mature. Hotels talk longer term - some five to eight years before they become profitable. We broke out of the red after six years and hopefully will remain in the black from now on.

### **Have you had experience with similar trains such as the Orient Express?**

Thinking back, I am pleased we had no experience of any other trains when we designed and built The Pride of Africa, as, if we had, we might have compromised our original ideas and design.

The caravan or private saloon idea was the initial impetus and with my being tall we made everything roomy. I enjoy my bathroom so made sure they were large, and by doing so, set a precedent for the rest of the train. Anthea handles all the interiors and "softs" on the trains. Our aim was to present the train as a gracious and comfortable home. The design of the train has given us suites considerably larger than any of the world's famous trains while the generous lounges and dining facilities make for unfettered relaxation.

### **How do you rate Rovos Rail against similar trains?**

That's quite a difficult question. We call ourselves "the "Most Luxurious Trains in the World" and the rationale behind this is that we have much larger suites than other trains. The train has a maximum of three suites per carriage, and some have only two, which is extravagant by other train standards. There is a '21 reason' document supporting the claim included in our sales information.

Then we provide superb comfort, a very good table, and an excellent wine list. But we are nowhere near the technical level of the undercarriage of either the Blue Train or the Orient Express trains. The average vintage of our rolling stock is 1950, so with 60 years behind the running gear, which is all original, it's impossible for us to compete in this department.

The coaches are mostly built of wood, which is a beautiful material to work with, and this enhances the warmth we've tried so hard to achieve. It doesn't, however lend itself to low maintenance costs.

### **Where did you find the locomotives and coaches?**

The sourcing of the coaches was probably the most interesting part of the project for me. Luckily I found a book called *Railway Dining Cars of South Africa* written by Les Pivnic who was working for the Railway's museum at the time. This book helped me tremendously in finding out what had happened to the Dining Cars.

My initial plan for the train - with my family caravan in mind - was to have a dining car, lounge car and sleeping accommodation. I thus developed an interest in dining cars, and once I started studying this book it really got me going. Les Pivnic gives the names of people that had bought various dining cars, and with his help I managed to trace most of the carriages I was specifically looking for.

Then people would tell me about carriages in the back yards of various homes or on farms. I found a couple of carriages this way, including Coach 749 - a balcony carriage that now houses two royal suites on the Edwardian train. This coach was originally a holiday home in the mountains of Machadodorp in Mpumalanga. When it was put into place about 20 years ago it was placed on a concrete base. With trees having been planted round it in the interim, getting the coach down to the nearest railway line proved to be a huge logistical problem.

First of all we had to create a road, then the vehicle that collected the 22-metre carriage had a low bed and was obviously very long, which meant it couldn't take corners on the farm roads. So we had a very interesting time bringing it 500 metres down to the nearest railway line.

Another balcony carriage, Coach 1601, was a monument in front of Clifford Harris's premises in Wetton in Cape Town. Fortunately this one was very near the railway line. It has since been completely restored and now houses the other two Royal Suites in the Edwardian Train. These are the only two balcony coaches we have in amongst our 90 odd carriages. A balcony coach is a carriage with a very small veranda at each end. This makes for wonderful viewing, getting your hair blown around and soot in your eyes.

Then there is a club in Sandton from which I purchased three of the dining saloons. Others have been bought from the railways and various museum supporters.

One of the Observation Cars was originally a restaurant at the same club. To create an observation car we've enlarged the windows to improve the view, and have an open balcony at end of the carriage, a unique aspect in South Africa.

By 2000 our workshops had rebuilt 60 carriages – for three years we were producing a carriage per month from scrap condition. Not bad for novices! By 2010 the fleet had grown to 90 coaches.

Then we have seven locomotives, the oldest of which, a Class 6 Locomotive, dates back to 1893. I heard about it through the railways when it was a monument at Winburg Station in the Free State. I brought it to Witbank and overhauled it entirely, which meant replacing all the tubes and the end plates of the boiler. Being 120 years old, it has a firebox - where you feed in the coal - of copper, and a boiler of steel. With the different expansion qualities of these metals you have to be very careful to warm up the water when starting the fire, because you can easily warp plates and have water all over the place in no time. This has happened to us a couple of times, but we've learnt our lesson.

This locomotive is probably the oldest commercially operating locomotive in the world.

Four of the locomotives are named after our children: The smallest, and the oldest, the Class 6 Locomotive is named after Tiffany – our youngest daughter. Three of them are 1938 19D-Class locomotives.

Bianca Loco No 2701 - named after our second youngest daughter - was bought from a scrap metal dealer in Johannesburg. The other two were also purchased from scrap metal dealers. Locomotive 2702 Brenda and Locomotive 3360 Shaun are named after our two eldest children.

The fifth locomotive we eventually restored and launched at our 10-year anniversary party in 1999 is a Class 25NC Locomotive. We did a coal to oil conversion on this loco – she is named after my mother Marjorie. Since then two more 25NC locos have been rebuilt, named after my wife Anthea and Zog our dearly departed Dalmatian.

An interesting co-incidence is that one locomotive which we bought in Johannesburg and another in Volksrust ended up having consecutive numbers - 2701 and 2702.

### **What are the logistics involved in running a train such as this? For example, aren't spare parts difficult to obtain?**

The logistics cover quite a wide field, but regarding spares specifically, most are not obtainable and we have to manufacture accordingly.

When I made the initial decision whether to go for wooden carriages or the more modern steel ones, I decided on wood because it was a material that was relatively easy to work with. As for the undercarriage and bogeys, which are made of steel, spares are still available.

But the electricians are a problem. We definitely ran out of odds and ends, and had to have quite a lot of fittings made, but parts such as regulators are not easy to come by. We eventually had to opt for something more modern in this case. But, generally speaking, it's not too difficult to keep the train on the road. We have of late opted for a 220V system throughout the train, power for which is supplied by diesel generators at the end of the consist.

The locomotives use approximately 300 litres of water and 75 kilograms of coal per kilometre. On a 100-kilometre stretch that's about 30 000 litres of water and seven and a half tons of coal.

The demise of steam travel in this country became the biggest drawback as the facilities for loading water and coal were systematically removed from most stations.

This meant that water had to be loaded from fire hydrants and tanks, which was a very laborious process. It could take up to three or four hours to ready a locomotive for the next 100 kilometres. The railways regrettably cancelled all steam operation on our main routes in 2006 thus putting an end to our local steam trips.

We do, however, endeavour to start and finish all our journeys in and out of Capital Park with our steam locos.

In 1994 I made the decision to go the steel carriage route for the sleeping cars on the train. The old Edwardian coaches had done us proud but, with the advent of the Victoria Falls route in January 1994, the Edwardian train was doing on average 15 000kms per month. It was too much to ask of the grand old lady! We now use the Edwardian train for charters.

I purchased 80 odd steel second-hand carriages from the Railways and converted and refurbished them over the fifteen year period. Thus Classic 1 and Classic 11 took up the regular routes between Pretoria and Cape Town, Pretoria and Victoria Falls and Pretoria and Durban. Trains 111 and 1V mostly handle the long journeys to Dar es Salaam and Namibia as well as the 9 day Collage and Golf trips.

### **Tell us about Capital Park**

I secured a long-term lease over the Capital Park Loco Shed in Pretoria in November 1997. Capital Park Loco had a variety of locomotive classes stationed there since its opening in 1943, and maintained a relatively large fleet of steam locomotives at any given time. On average, 138 Steam engines were stabled in the loco sheds at the height of its active life. This, sadly, declined during the 1970's.

We utilised these sheds during 1998 even though Capital Park had essentially closed down. Our Class 6, the 19D's and the Class 25NC's continued to provide a steam presence in the deserted depot. The hustle and bustle of the 1950's has gone but due to our presence, steam is back with a vengeance at Capital Park Loco.

All our rolling stock consisting of 90 carriages and 16 operating locomotives including our administrative operations and workshops are now based at Capital Park. We could indeed not have wished for a better location which provides the perfect home for our trains. The site covers 60 acres and boasts 15 lines totalling a distance of 12kms, of which a one hundred metre section is under roof. The site also has a coal stage with 40 loading chutes.

It has been our aim not only to rebuild the site to a world beating standard, but also to transform it into a working railway museum. Our new headquarters will cater for steam enthusiasts, tourists and local visitors alike. With daily guided tours we aim to interest and educate the public, especially those who have had no previous exposure to the world of trains.

### **How do you manage to run a privately owned train on state-owned railway lines?**

I have found that this is probably the most difficult part of running the business. It's not that the railway employees have made a conscious effort to obstruct us, but rather that they were initially unaware of our requirements. We run a private train on their network and we've now learnt to accommodate their *modus operandi*, which has eradicated most of the trouble. Of serious concern though is the slow downhill slide of the railway business. This does not bode well for future maintenance and operational availability. Unreliability of infrastructure is a big concern.

We realise that in any large organisation things move very slowly and the railways is no exception. But they run a reasonably efficient operation as long as they're given a minimum of two weeks lead-time.

For example, on the run to Cape Town we go through six driver crews, changing at Klerksdorp, Kimberley, De Aar Beaufort West and Worcester. All these people have to be informed of the trains' time of arrival and time of departure. At the same time the Station Master at every station has to be informed that we're coming through so that he can make sure there are no trains in our way. He also has to be told when we're stopping at his station and at which platform we wish to be parked. There are many other operational people to be informed of the impending journey.

If I made any error in the beginning, it was presuming that you could just pick up the telephone and order the railway line to be available on a specific date in a week's time and expect things to run smoothly. In the early days we also had a great deal of trouble because the drivers didn't know at what speeds we needed to travel.

Now we're better prepared and provide at least a month's notice for what we intend doing. Times are established and circulated to everybody and we also telephone people down the line and tell them verbally of our intended time of arrival so they can clear the way and make sure there are no impediments to our trip.

**What journeys do you offer?**

Our guests can choose from a series of journeys lasting from 48 hours to a fortnight linking some of Africa's greatest destinations.

We have our epic 14 day Dar Es Salaam sojourn, the three day trip between Cape Town and Pretoria, the 55 hour Game Safari from Pretoria to Durban, the 55 hour meander between Pretoria and the Victoria Falls, the nine day Namibian special, the nine day Collage and Golf tour between Pretoria, Kruger Park, Durban and Cape Town or the nine day Golf Safari.

The newly rebuilt Rovos Rail Events Train is an ideal venue for corporate clients to stage conferences, incentives or product launches. The train accommodates up to 200 guests but does not have sleeping facilities on board and is thus only suitable for journeys of up to 5 hours.

There are many alternative uses for this train, only limited by time and distance factors. These options could include a 3 hour circular trip around Pretoria or a one-way journey to any destination with rail access and within 5 hours rail travel time from Pretoria, where guests disembark and the train returns empty to Pretoria.

**We understand you also own an aircraft?**

We operate a 1944 DC-3 which has been rebuilt with 21 business class seats and a very plush interior. Called ' Delaney ' after a child who was born on board in October 1975 the aircraft has a fascinating history which can be found on our website.

The aircraft is used to conduct a 13 day Southern African Air Safari with highlights such as Phinda Game Reserve, the Garden Route, Cape Town, Wolwedans in Namibia, the Okavango Delta as well as the Victoria Falls, and is also available for charter anywhere in Southern Africa.

**How do you picture Rovos Rail fitting into the future of the Southern African tourist market?**

After twenty two years in the marketplace, Rovos Rail is very well established. Our style and reputation have come through strongly and I would go so far as to say that our reputation has been improving - each trip has been better than the last. That's from a mechanical, organisational and, specifically, a timing point of view.

Time should not be that important to our guests and hopefully they are not aware of us watching the clock very closely. We do not want them to feel hurried.

Guests should be able to enjoy a completely relaxed environment; hence there are no television sets, radios or telephones on board. It's an atmosphere of good food, good wine and good conversation that we are striving to create. From a position of good taste, we have already established the niche we were looking for.

Pleasingly we have over the last twenty two years increased our business consistently, and from modest beginnings with a seven coach train now have three twenty carriage and one fourteen carriage train running on a continuous basis.

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