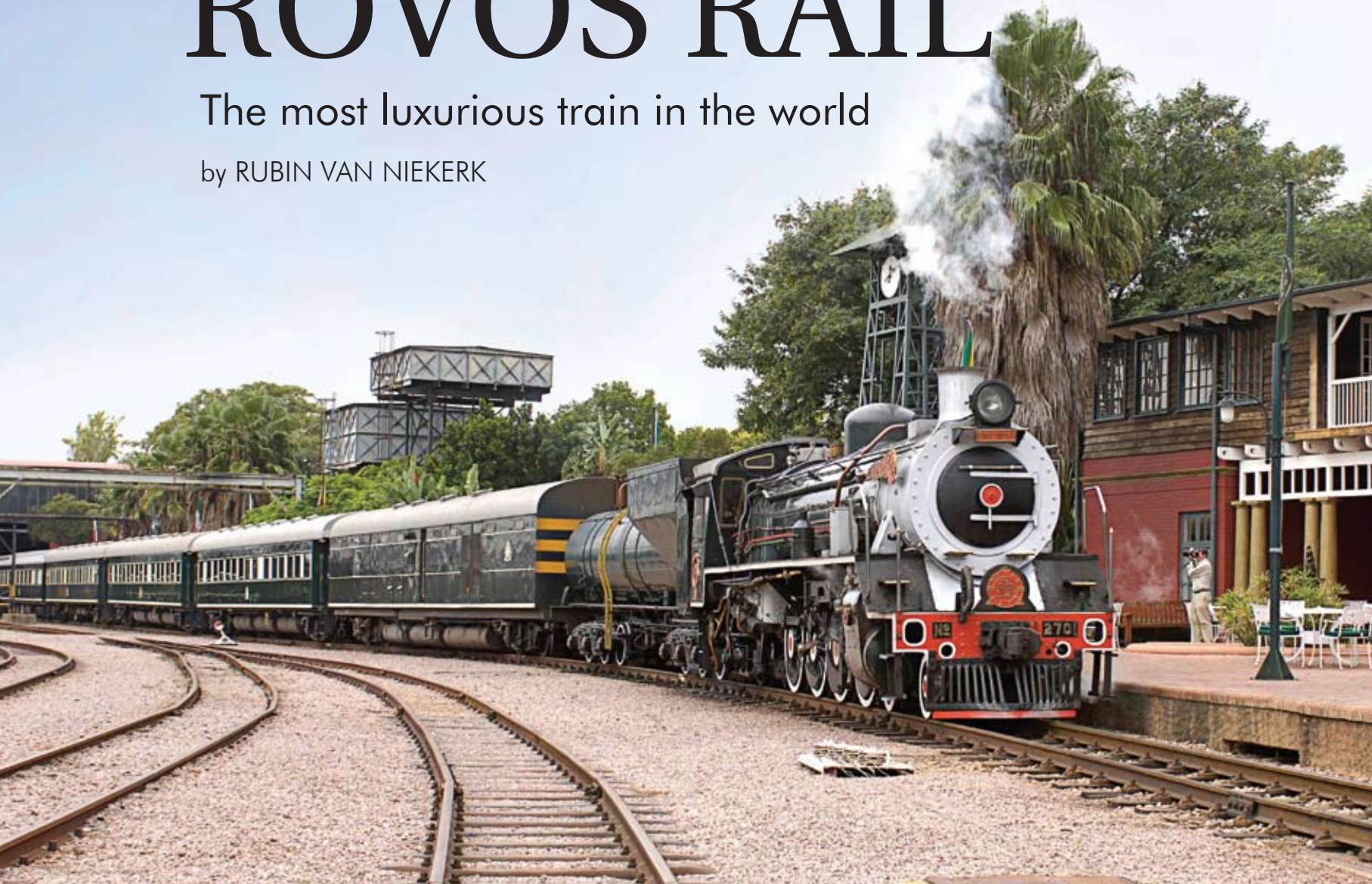


ROVOS RAIL

The most luxurious train in the world

by RUBIN VAN NIEKERK



As a little boy my sense of adventure was born by observing my father going to work in the early hours of the morning when it would still be dark outside for many hours. He was a train driver who loved trains and his job passionately.

Prior to setting off on one of his nightly adventures, my mother would prepare a picnic basket to be packed with his 30 centimetre-tall and wide metal trunk that served as a sturdy type of suitcase. A remarkable number of exotic items, like biltong, fruit, sandwiches, tea, coffee and a shiny stainless steel mug and teapot disappeared in this magician's trunk of tricks. I used to beg to be woken up to see my father and mother prepare for this regular journey that he did for thirty-one years for the South African Railways.

My dad was not exactly a fashionista with his pipe and numerous khaki suits of similar shades that became his work uniforms. We adored him and loved his sense of humour and stable temperament. On the rare occasions that I was allowed to experience the midnight ritual, I would accompany him to his old white-and-blue Triumph, say my sometimes teary farewells and watch the small taillights of the Triumph disappear around the corner. At these times I desperately wanted to go with to help him drive the trains. It was awesome to finally be sneaked into the massive trains that even dwarfed cement mixers. I was hooked and almost all the best highlights of my childhood involved train journeys with my family and picnic baskets with sandwiches and cold chicken. Later, I was allowed to undertake train journeys by myself, all over South Africa from the tender age of fourteen.

When I turned sixteen, I would personally load my

motorcycle with great care into the freight section. Arriving in places far away with my own wheels became the stuff dreams were made of. Now as I'm approaching the age my father was when we said our last farewells to him, these memories came flooding back with blinding intensity. To relive some of this nostalgia, my mother accompanied me on this trip that started at the beautifully restored Capital Park Station in Pretoria. The 1920s feel gave the welcoming party in the lounge a magnificent start to a great journey on the most luxurious train in the world.

Having travelled on the Blue Train, Namibia's Desert express and many trains in Europe, I assure you the old fashioned Rovos experience is beyond compare. It succeeds in animating a 1920s time travel experience, where time slows down and attention to detail and service fit for royalty overwhelms the smartly dressed passengers. Travelling from Pretoria to Cape Town takes three days, with off-train excursions in Kimberley and Matjiesfontein. Capital Park, the headquarters of Rovos Rail is considered the most outstanding private station in the world today and this new 56-acre facility provides a magnificent home to these beautifully restored trains.

Opulent air-conditioned pre-war coaches with subtle modern innovations ensure unmatched levels of luxury accommodation on a train. The suites range in size from seven





Mart Marais and Louis Kay

to sixteen square metres and have en-suite bathrooms with hairdryers and shaving points. A brass gong announces single-sitting meal times in the opulently restored dining cars dating back to 1924. The dining cars take you back to Edwardian times, with fluted teak pillars and arches, mahogany tables and tassel tied draperies in the more formal 1924 carriage. The 1935 dining car, a former Johannesburg restaurant, has plush booths with mahogany panelling and square Art Deco chrome fitted ceiling lights. Stylish silverware, Rovos Rail china and fresh flowers on the white-clothed tables complement the dining cars beautifully. Multi course lunches and dinners are accompanied by some of South Africa's best wines at no extra charge. All beverages and a limited laundry facility are also complimentary.

At the end of the train is the observation car where there

is also a balcony from where you can experience the magic of the clackety-clack of the track that disappears over the horizon. A smoker's lounge next to it is the only place where cigars and cigarettes may be smoked. No televisions or radios maintain the spirit of travel in a bygone era and thankfully cellular telephones and laptops are confined to the privacy of the suites.

Rohan Vos got involved in a steam-preservation group in Witbank in 1986 and thought it might be fun to restore and operate an old-fashioned train with two or three carriages. South African Railways gave permission, but the steep pricing structure encouraged the commercialisation of the operation which has been successful financially. Rohan loves renovating the coaches that are about sixty years old and built mostly from wood, which enhances the warmth, but costs more to





maintain. Finding the dining cars and coaches proved to be a fascinating exercise, with many coaches found in backyards and on farms all over the country. Two balcony coaches, coach 749 and coach 1601, house two royal suites each with a small veranda at the end, making it wonderful for viewing and getting soot in your eyes!

Today the fleet consists of ninety coaches and seven locomotives that are named after Rohan's children, his wife Anthea, his mother Marjorie and their dearly departed Dalmatian called Zog. The oldest locomotive, a class 6 locomotive, dates back to 1893 and is named after their youngest daughter Tiffany. Three 1938 19 D-class locomotives were bought from scrap metal dealers in Johannesburg and are named after the older children Brenda, Shaun and Bianca.

The 120-year-old steam locomotive is probably the oldest commercially operated locomotive in the world. It has a firebox made of copper, where you feed the coal and a steel boiler. Due to the different expansion qualities of these metals you have to be very careful to warm up the water when starting the fire, because plates can be easily warped causing water to leak all over. Parts are difficult to source and many have to be specially made, but it has not been too hard to keep the trains running. A steam locomotive uses 300 litres of water and 75 kilograms of coal per kilometre, but due to the removal of coal and water loading facilities at stations it means that since 2006 all journeys start and finish at Capital Park with steam locos. For the rest of the trips diesel and electric locomotives are used. Since 1994 steel carriages have been used and the Edwardian train reserved only for charter trips, as 15 000 kilometres per month was too steep for the grand dame.

At the height of steam travel in South Africa in the fifties and early sixties, 138 steam engines were stabled at Capital Park. Today Capital Park is a working railway museum with daily guided tours, 15 lines and a 100 metre roofed section. The state-owned railway lines have gradually deteriorated, which could hamper future operational viability, due to the increasingly unreliable infrastructure.

After arriving in Cape Town after three glorious days where time stood still we departed with slightly heavy hearts to the opulent St James Manor where the timeless, elegant theme fitted perfectly with the Pride of Africa. ©

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