

AFRICAN DELIGHT

Rovos Rail, All Aboard the Zambezi Queen, and Zanzibar

Fancy a super spa in Africa? Take the train. Not any train, mind you. The one you want is Rovos Rail, where embarkation begins at Cape Town in South Africa – the fairest cape, said Drake – and ends 15 days later after a thrilling adventure in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. It is an indulgence of luxury and elegance on wheels, involving bush gear by day and Hermes ties at night. Ladies will likely be wearing Shimansky diamonds they bought in Cape Town.

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This is new wave travel as practised on expedition voyages to faraway places like Antarctica, where you rough it, gently, by day and dine in state in the evening.

Two nights in Tau Lodge on the border of Botswana are en route. The first day we lunched by a waterhole with two white rhinos and the next day in the company of a statuesque giraffe, while nearby, zebras fought off a pack of hyenas. On game drives we encountered huge lions and had sundowner cocktails, while our cosy cottage (with outdoor shower) overlooked a waterhole thronged with elephants and a malicious-looking crocodile.

And equally enjoyable was the spa, where Dina administered the best pedicure ever, then followed up with a massage that left me begging for more.

But Rovos Rail was waiting and so was the track

through Gaborone, capital of thriving Botswana, where a branch of Barclays Bank appeared to have survived an onslaught of gleaming, Chinese-built office towers. We were to see more of the long reach of China in our odyssey across a huge stretch of Africa; clearly the new imperialists.

Our first stop had been Matjiesfontein, on the lofty and dry Karoo plateau settled in 1890 by the pioneering Jimmy Logan, a Scot who founded the Lord Milner Hotel here – and a sausage factory. Some will remember a Glasgow comedian with the same name whose catchphrase was “sausages is the boys.” The Karoo bangers would likely have been made from mutton as sheep thrive here.

Kimberley was a great stop. Here is the story of diamonds galore, Cecil Rhodes’ riches, the dream of the Cape to Cairo railway, and we were there.



What started as a small hill in 1871 became the Big Hole as the legend of diamonds was reborn. Up until then, diamonds came from India and Ceylon, the congealed tears, it was said, of a Hindu goddess.

We then skirted Johannesburg, where a huge gold reef was discovered in 1886 (what amazing times these were) and stopped for lunch in Pretoria, where Rohan Vos grew his hobby railway into what is now the largest passenger railway in Africa.

Here he has his own station and workshops employing scores of engineers maintaining steam engines built in Glasgow and restoring handsome carriages such as the 17-wagon train we were on. On many trips the train set has 21.

We left here for Botswana, then crossed the border into Zimbabwe, land of a brave people who somehow survived the appalling Mugabe years, now looking forward to a recovering economy with tourism already doing well, judging by the full house at the bougainvillea-fringed Victoria Falls Hotel, a colonial-style treasure reminiscent of the Raffles of old.

At sundown, there are few places to match the sweeping terrace bar overlooking the graceful bridge built on the orders of Cecil Rhodes (the same engineers later erected the Sydney Harbour bridge). Old Africa hands and millennial tourists swapped stories about travel here that was and is an adventure. Such as the woman in a tented camp who phones the ranger at midnight, “there’s a lion here!” To which the ranger replies, “Madame, is it outside your tent or inside your tent?”

Then the Victoria Falls experience, which began with a fine statue of David Livingstone, the first European to come here in 1855. Even today, when colonial-era monuments are being toppled from the Cape to Cairo, Livingstone is a

revered figure and known to all school children in southern Africa.

Words cannot describe the sight, sound and spray that awaits the visitor, other than to convey the feeling that when you have been here, you have felt the spirit of Africa.

And so the train carried on, stopping briefly on the falls bridge for an American bungee jumping to within a heartbeat of the crocodile-infested Zambezi. Rovos Rail trundled across Zambia and Tanzania, through the luxuriant Rift Valley with baobab trees and the huge Selous game reserve where a final game drive was offered.

Armchair travellers enjoyed comfortable lounges, including an open observation car, where the engaging young staff served drinks in crystal glasses.

Meals brought everyone together - on our trip just a happy band of 35 - in the elegant dining room, whose teak pillars and wall lights delivered a clubby atmosphere which bubbled along on a tide of connoisseur-class Cape wines such as Bouchard Finlayson chardonnay and Diemersfontein pinotage.

Cabins were equally well fitted out. There are three sizes - Pullman, Deluxe and Royal. All have good size bathrooms with showers. For a trip this long you want the Deluxe. Laundry is done daily free of charge and the service is excellent. Rovos claims to be the most luxurious train in the world and I would not argue.

Finally, after 3568 miles, we reached Dar-es-Salaam. Tantalisingly close were Zanzibar, Kilimanjaro (Africa’s highest mountain, 19,341 ft) and the Serengeti. Going home was hard to do.

✦ Fares for the 15-day journey start at £8,860pp. Rovos Rail is about to start a new service to Angola. www.rovos.com



Everyone had a stopover in Cape Town before or afterwards, and not just because of jet lag.

Cape Town is a fabulous city, nestled around Table Mountain, skirting beautiful beaches and lush winelands.

A good place to start is the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, basically a compound comprising a marina open to the ocean, with hotels, restaurants and shops. It is close to the city centre and five minutes from the railway station.

Rovos has its own hotels, and the Waterfront has a superb selection as well. I thought the Cape Grace was a bit tired while the One&Only is spacious and has a buzzing Nobu restaurant. The Table Bay has a fine location, particularly for the big shopping area, while next door the striking new Silo hotel has the wow factor, but at a price. Certainly it is the place to go for rooftop cocktails.

Daytime there is plenty to do around town, such as mooching around the bookshops and coffee bars in Long Street, or exploring the Company Gardens first laid out by the Dutch East India Company to provide vegetables for crews bound for the Spice Islands of Asia.

Table Mountain, Cape Point and the penguins at Simonstown can all be experienced via the ubiquitous hop on-hop off bus, while Robben Island is a special trip.

Waterfront has many good restaurants such as Karibu, well known for its African theme (oysters and ostrich), and Willoughby's for seafood.

Out of town lunches are popular, such as on Camps Bay beaches or wineries in Stellenbosch.

The famed Garden Route is worth a few days,

particularly if you stop at Franschhoek, which charms with a French accent. Accommodation is often cheaper in places like Somerset West, location of one of the Cape's best golf courses, Erinvale. Particularly good value is Cape Links guest house here, run by Frank McDonogh.

He also runs a shuttle service, which is worth using from the airport. After a 12-hour flight, all you need is a one-hour wait for a rental car and a drive when you are falling asleep.

Frank is the man for reasonably priced out of town drives, while the rest of the time, particularly at night, you can't beat Uber.



A romantic spot aboard the Rovos Rail



Relaxing aboard the Rovos Rail



ZANZIBAR

When you cross the world to make an epic journey such as Rovos Rail from Cape Town to Dar-es-Salaam, do you drive to the airport and go home? Not if you are aware of the charms of Zanzibar, just 20 minutes away on a wobbly little plane.

Zanzibar has beaches like nowhere else, soft white sand caressed by endless sunshine, hospitable people who greet you with "Jambo" in Swahili, lots of resorts offering diving, tasty food and a remarkable history.

But the first travellers here were not in a holiday mood.

They were Omani Arabs, who sailed the Monsoon winds down the east coast of Africa in their speedy dhows. They were the Vikings of the Indian Ocean, landing on what they called "The black Coast of Africa," or Zanzibar.

What followed were centuries of the brutal enslavement of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Africans who were sold to work on plantations, in factories and private homes. It was the slave capital of the world, with the slave market in Stone Town dealing with up to 75,000 men, women and children a year who stood in chains for auction.

And it was institutionalised. Slavery was a class like untouchables in India. A slave belonged to an owner until given freedom, which had to be done in writing.

At the slave market museum in Stone Town, perhaps the most meaningful building you will ever enter, is the story of a woman who complained she was wrongly accused of being an escaped slave. An authority investigated, and found she had been wronged, awarding her 20 rupees in compensation. Then, asked what she would do with the 20 rupees, she said she would buy a slave.

Like most museums, there is a gift shop. From here however are steps (with bricks made in Glasgow) to a dimly-lit cellar where slaves crouched under the low roof, their chains remaining as a painful reminder. Outside is a sunken monument, like China's terracotta warriors, showing chained slaves.

Then, next door, the Anglican Cathedral and an uplifting moment on discovering a memorial to David Livingstone, the Scottish explorer and missionary, who fought all his life against slavery. He is remembered by a small wooden cross made from a tree in Zambia where his heart was buried after his death in 1873. Livingstone received a hero's funeral in Westminster Abbey.

The palace of the sultans remains on the waterfront, not far from the former home of Tippu Tip, a rich trader of slaves and ivory, said to visit his

concubines twice a day.

Slavery came to an end here later than almost anywhere else, with the Royal Navy resorting to cannon fire on occasion.

Now tourism and spices are the mainstay of the economy. That and tingatinga painting, as I was to find out on my first stroll around Stone Town, where the narrow streets reminded me of the Marbella old town. This was home to Freddie Mercury of the Queen rock group.

Yet you'd struggle to find a Queen CD in the souvenir emporiums. The big thing is tingatinga, colourful paintings of African life that are hugely popular in Europe and America.

It began with Edward Saidi Tingatinga, born in 1937 to a poor farming family in Tanzania. He went to Dar-es-Salaam in search of work and noted how tourists snapped up local artists' work. He began with scavenged materials such as old ceiling boards and bicycle enamel, in the process discovering an appealing new artistic style.

His renderings of Maasai warriors, village life and wondrous animals were bursting with natural life and colour, and captured tourists' imagination of African life. Few travellers, it seems, leave Zanzibar without rolled up

tingatinga paintings.

Stone Town also has good coffee shops such as the Zanzibar Coffee House, which sells a spicy cup made from locally grown beans. You won't find pubs however – Zanzibar is 97 per cent Muslim.

Hotels abound however, such as a shiny new Park Hyatt, somewhat out of place in a town full of old world character. I preferred the Serena, right on the beach, also with a fine pool and good restaurants. Not to forget the cold Kilimanjaro lager and selection of South African wines. Tembo House is very good value, has a nice pool and popular beach. The prawn curry lunch is a bargain at six Euros.

Increasingly popular with European tourists are many beach resorts, including the all-inclusive Swiss-run but Italian owned Diamonds La Gemma Dell'Est.

This place has attractive rooms, good wifi and a magnificent beach with big thatched parasols, just the ticket as the equator is not far away. There's also a pier, looking like something built by Robinson Crusoe, with a seafood restaurant and a lounge with views across the Indian Ocean. I suppose if you stood on a chair you could see Australia. But only after a few more Kilimanjaros.

Smiles at the Zanzibar Coffee House



Tingatingas on sale in Zanzibar

