

UNIQUE

AFRICA

GO ON **SAFARI** BY **RAIL**

HIPPOS AND COCKTAILS, OLD-FASHIONED TRAIN TRAVEL AND NEW-FOUND FRIENDS...
LINDA JAIVIN JOURNEYS FROM CAPE TOWN TO DAR ES SALAAM IN STYLE.

AT FIRST

sight, they look like hundreds of barrels bobbing in the lake. But barrels don't bellow. And they don't sound like a den of movie villains chuckling deep in their throats. I'm in the World Heritage-listed Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, which, at 48,000 square kilometres, is Africa's largest. And these "barrels" are hippos. From time to time, one lifts its head above the surface, unhinging its jaws in a near-180-degree yawn, showing off its massive canine teeth against the chalky-blue sky. Huge Nile crocodiles glide like silvery currents among them, searching for tender, unguarded calves. In the shallows, a white stork swings its yellow-billed head from side to side. On the shore nearby, I perform a similar movement, recalling that less than 200 metres from here, we'd spotted a pair of lions. If hippos run at speeds of up to 30 kilometres an hour, lions at 80 and crocs at 14... The calculations are making me thirsty.

Fortunately, I'm with Rovos Rail (rovos.com), travelling on what is billed as "the most luxurious train in the world". Before our jeeps even reach the lake, the train's staff have set up a table there, complete with a full bar. They pour me a healthy shot of Amarula, a South African liqueur. They also assure me that lions wouldn't attack such a large group and hippos stay in the water until sunset. I stick close by my fellow travellers and keep a casual eye on the sun tracking down the western sky. But there's another reason I wish the sun would linger: tomorrow, our 15-day, 5800-kilometre rail journey from Cape Town to Dar es Salaam, across five countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, will come to an end. As the shadows lengthen across the sand, we take fond group photos before piling back into the jeeps and forming a dust-raising convoy back to the train. Giraffes crane their freaky necks to watch us pass. A herd of impala skitters away. Baboons, unconcerned, go about their mischief. The bush palms, tamarinds and miombo trees become black silhouettes against a reddening sky.

And there it is up ahead, the *Pride of Africa*, stretching for almost half a kilometre from its vintage locomotive to remodelled observation car, its 19 carriages built in the first half of the 20th century and lovingly restored and updated with features like mahogany panelling and air conditioning. There's



no platform; we've simply stopped in the middle of the jungle. Standing by the tracks to welcome us back are more staff bearing trays of rolled facecloths and refreshments of sparkling wine and juices in crystal flutes. Rovos does keep you hydrated.

Back in the private bathroom of my compartment, I shower off the dust and wrap myself in the suite's comfy robe. The train is like a six-star hotel on wheels, albeit one where you sometimes need to grab on to the polished-brass handrails in the corridors for balance. My Deluxe Suite has picture windows that open, a double bed, two comfortable chairs and a small table-cabinet enclosing a bar fridge and kettle. At 10 square metres, it's smaller than a Royal Suite (which occupies half a carriage and has a freestanding bathtub) but I still feel like a queen.

Opening the wardrobe, I contemplate my choice of frocks. Lunch and dinner are both four-course affairs, though everyone is expected to wear "cocktail attire" to dinner (and they're hoping some of us will embrace the final night's Roaring Twenties party theme). Meals are served on fine china in two elegant dining cars, each with tables for two on one side and four on the other. Each dining car also has its own sommelier. I settle on a black shift dress and tasselled scarf. Anticipating that Craig, the onboard hairstylist, whose cuts and 'dos are just part of the service, would be especially busy tonight, I'd gone to him a few days earlier for a trim, his steady hand a small miracle on a moving train.

Rovos warns its passengers they might find it hard to sleep, especially on the first night. But the rhythmic *lunka-lunka-lunk* of the wheels and the vibrating, creaking and swaying of the carriage are like a lullaby to me. Each morning, I lower the metal shutters on my windows with undimmed excitement to see what's outside. Our journey takes us past the green farmland and vineyards of South Africa's Western Cape, across savanna and bushveld, through rainforest and jungle. On one night, we go to bed in Botswana and wake up in Zimbabwe.

The *Pride of Africa* in Tanzania's hills (above); one of the elegant dining cars



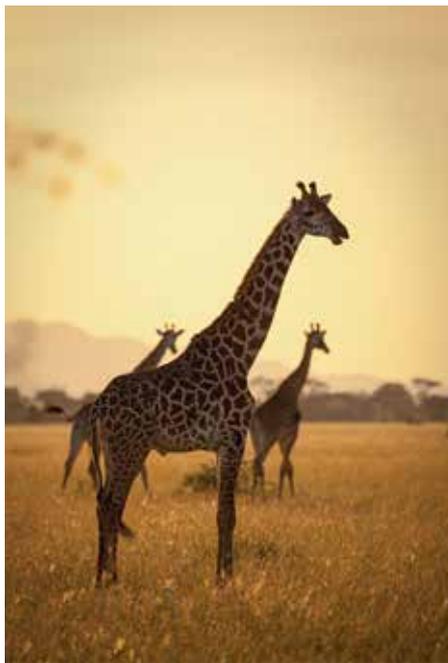
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We trundle through forests of baobab and candelabra trees, spotting zebras, springboks and the odd giraffe. We roll by whistlestop towns and isolated villages, some no more than a scattering of thatched-roof mudbrick buildings. Not many trains pass along extended sections of this single-track railway – and only one like the *Pride of Africa*. Children race towards the track to watch and wave. After we pass, they put their ears to the rails to listen to them sing. There are planned and unplanned stops, sometimes at tiny stations with little more than a hand-lettered sign, “Locomotive Parking Place”. We’re in no hurry; this is slow travel in both the fashionable and the literal sense.

There’s no wi-fi on any Rovos train; nor will there ever be, as the head of this family business, Rohan Vos, has made clear. If anyone cares to work on a laptop, speak on a phone or tap on a tablet, they must do so in their suite. “Please refrain from being distracted by these machines, as my dad calls them,” his daughter, Tiffany, said at our pre-boarding orientation in Cape Town. If this journey has a wellness component, it’s digital detox. It’s a revelation to share two weeks with 85 people (57 passengers, 28 staff) without once hearing a phone ring or seeing someone’s eyes flick away to scroll through social media.

We bond over unhurried conversations, leisurely meals, board games and, of course, our shared adventures off the train. These include visits to the Big Hole diamond mine in Kimberley and the giant statue of Mandela in Pretoria. There’s an esprit de corps between passengers and staff; when Sonja, the expedition doctor, bungee-jumps at Victoria Falls, everyone gathers on the bridge to cheer her on.

Maybe everyone’s first safari is their most memorable but my personal highlight is the two-night stay at Tau Game Lodge (taugamelodge.co.za) in Madikwe Game Reserve on South Africa’s border with Botswana. I’ll never forget watching a pair of male lions napping in turpentine grass, one with its paw on the other’s gently rising and falling belly, and the startlingly beautiful gem-blue underwings of a lilac-breasted roller taking to the sky. At one point, a bull elephant of uncertain intent approaches our jeep. It circles



Spot wildlife such as giraffes from the picture windows of your onboard suite

us from a distance of about half a metre, sniffing us out with its trunk, while we sit, frozen, in our seats. “Should we be worried?” I whisper to Ernie, our driver and Tau’s senior guide. “I’m not sure yet,” he whispers back. When the bull finally strolls away into the bush, Ernie thrusts his arms in the air in a rock ‘n’ roll salute.

My fellow passengers come from the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Cyprus, China and South Africa. They are a mix of retired professionals, youngish couples, families and solo travellers. Not surprisingly, there are a fair few train enthusiasts. One day, Hans, a retired signals engineer, delivers an impromptu lecture on railway signalling systems to a small but rapt group in the lounge. Some of

our number are alumni of other Rovos journeys – to Namibia, for example, or Pretoria to Cape Town. One, a Pretoria-based CEO, has ridden the Rovos rails no less than 26 times – it’s how he unwinds.

On our final night, the entire staff, from the chef and sommeliers to cabin attendants, mechanics and security guards, parades through the dining rooms to warm applause. Unlike at the journey’s start, the tables for two are nearly deserted. Everyone is seated in threes and fours and the dining carriages buzz with conversation and laughter. After dinner, we head to the observation lounge to find the bar strewn with rose petals and topped with an array of colourful cocktails. Black and white helium balloons dangle silver ribbons and a jazzy soundtrack completes the party atmosphere.

In the open section at the rear of the train, I lean on the handrail. Below, the track spools out into dark, dense jungle. Above, the sky glitters with stars. Gary, a physics teacher from Melbourne, joins me. He points to where the Milky Way paints an arc across the diamanté sky. “We’re in the middle of that,” he says. “The universe is constantly expanding.” My universe certainly has. ●



Stay

The Rovos Rail experience begins when you stay at one of the company’s three five-star St James Guesthouses (stjamesguesthouses.com) – The Manor, Homestead, Seaforth – on Millionaires’ Mile in Cape Town. I flew in to the city on a cold, stormy night but if the journey began like a bad novel, it turned into a splendid romance the moment I stepped inside the elegant century-old Manor. The fireplace, the sherry in a crystal decanter, the offer of smoked salmon on pumpernickel and my opulent suite saw me shelving plans to dine out in nearby Kalk Bay. Given the weather, I didn’t have a chance to enjoy the swimming pool or breakfast in the garden but it was wonderful just to wake up to a panoramic view of False Bay.