

travel



LUXURY: The deluxe sleeper cabin with queen-sized bed.



CLASSIC: The dining carriage.

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SLOW TRACKS FROM A BYGONE ERA

Sarene Kloren

IN THE past few decades travellers have taken to the skies, leaving train trips a thing of the past, however, after spending three days on Rovos Rail, let me tell you, they shouldn't be. Exploring a country by rail not only takes us back to a bygone era but allows us to rewind and make new acquaintances.

As far as Travel Bucket Lists go, Rovos Rail has been at the top of mine for years. When my husband and I commenced our journey from Pretoria station to Cape Town, I was truly able to say it was a dream come true.

Damian Sadie, the general manager of Rovos Rail met us at the luxurious welcome lounge in Pretoria, where we were invited to enjoy a glass of bubbly and canapés as he went through our itinerary and what we could expect over the next three days while on board.

Stepping aboard Rovos Rail is stepping into a bygone era of luxury travel.

We were shown to our sleeping car suite by our personal hostess as we slowly chugged out of Rovos Rail's Pretoria station.

The sleeping car suites are spacious and comfortable, with a queen-sized bed, writing desk, two chairs, storage space and an en-suite toilet, basin and shower. As there is no cellphone reception for most of the journey and no wi-fi we actually got to meet and chat to our fellow passengers.

My first port of call was the observation deck located at the rear end of the train. After a good five-minute walk through the many connecting carriages I reached my destination – a luxurious carriage with windows along the entire length which leads on to an open deck.

On entering the observation deck I was greeted by the bartender and offered a cocktail (all local alcohol and food is included in the price).

Our fellow travellers were made up of Australians, British, Americans and South Africans. Being



HISTORIC: Stopover at Matjiesfontein station.

Pictures: Sarene Kloren



VIEWPOINT: The observation deck at the back.

winter, Rovos Rail offers South African residents a 50% discount off the normal rate and I soon discovered that at least half of the 42 travellers were locals.

Dinner is a formal affair – with women required to wear cocktail attire and men requested to wear a jacket and tie. The meal is a four-

course set menu that changes daily and includes South African cuisine such as ostrich fillet, lamb shank, fresh seafood and cheese platters.

The next morning we woke to sunrise across the African plains. The landscape was different to that of Gauteng the previous night. Flat plains dotted with hills – we

were well into the interior of South Africa – the northern Cape. We lowered the shutters and enjoyed a cup of tea in bed while watching the savannah roll slowly by.

After a cup of freshly brewed Kenyan coffee, a platter of fresh fruit and hot breakfast we headed out for a three-hour tour of Kimberly and the Big Hole.

After the tour we returned to the station, and with a fresh glass of MCC in our hand, we stepped back on board our mobile five-star hotel, freshened up before heading down to the dining coach for lunch.

High tea is served every afternoon in the observation car and the lounge – cucumber sandwiches, salmon sandwiches, scones with mascarpone cream, cheesecake and chocolate mousse cake.

Every meal was excellent, complete with exquisite crystal glassware, silverware, monogrammed crockery and crisply pressed white linen napkins.

There is an extensive list of South African wines and each lunch and dinner course is expertly

paired with a South African wine. On Sunday at around 8am the train trundled into our second stop – the historic Karoo town of Matjiesfontein.

We had two hours to meander before boarding and making our way down to Cape Town. The afternoon was spent rolling through the sprawling wide spaces of the Karoo, dotted with cactus, acacias and low scrub. There were times that there was only farmland with silhouettes of wind pumps across the horizon.

Watching the evening sky gradually saturate with different hues of orange, the sun disappear beneath the horizon, and the landscape turning to a soft pink glow was spectacular.

The landscape transformed again on the last stretch of the journey to Cape Town – we were no longer surrounded by the vast, flat plains of the Karoo, but by majestic blue mountains and the golden green patchwork of the Hex River Valley.

We enjoyed dinner as we rolled past the Matroosberg mountain range, via Worcester through the Slanghoek Valley and around past Wellington and Paarl to our final destination – Cape Town station.

It was around 10pm when we arrived at the Rovos Rail platform in Cape Town station, where we were welcomed by the founder of Rovos, Rohan Vos, who greeted each passenger and personally assisted in carrying the guests' bags from the station to their cars – a true reflection of the passion and attention to detail that this family-run business still maintains 30 years since it was founded.

Rovos Rail is an experience of a lifetime – reminiscent of the days of grand tours while rolling past iconic African landscapes in Edwardian-style luxury with a gin and tonic in hand.

● Rovos Rail offers South African residents a 50% winter discount on specific dates from June to October. Call 012 315 8242. E-mail reservations@rovos.co.za. Visit www.rovos.com.