

Loco heritage

Rovos Rail, named after its founder Rohan Vos, has one of the world's biggest fleets of vintage steam locomotives. Their oldest working engine, which at a mere 76 tons is also the smallest in their stable, is the Class 6 named Tiffany, built by Dubs & Co of Scotland in 1894 for the Cape Government Railway



Once close to bankruptcy, Rovos Rail now employs 450 people and attracts trainloads of wealthy tourists to SA. Still, its dreamer-in-chief has no intention of slowing down

The little engines that could

By PAUL ASH

● Rohan Vos is showing me around the Rovos Rail depot in Pretoria. It is difficult to picture the place as it once was – a grimy, soot-blackened, corrugated-iron engine shed where 100 steam locomotives were fussed over by generations of fitters and work-weary engine-men. Back then, it was a vast sprawl of coal smoke, cinders and spilt oil, where workdays were spiced with the constant danger of heavy engines moving like cats, their panting lost in the cacophony of hammering and whistles and shouts and high-pressure steam roaring through safety valves.

Today, Vos is lord of 60ha of parkland, formerly the Capital Park Locomotive Depot and now home to the company's Pride of Africa trains. There are fever trees and flower beds and a bubbling brook filled with ducks and Egyptian geese. The lawns are cropped smooth by four Nguni cattle and a couple of donkeys. In this green lung in the capital's gritty working-class suburbs, the trains seem almost incidental.

As we walk, Vos – chief executive of the company and the dreamer-in-chief behind the world's most luxurious train (Rovos Rail's words, not mine) – is giving me a running commentary of his life, the train, his plans for the future. As he walks, his pale blue eyes dart over his empire.

"See this," he says, running his fingers over a spattering of small dents on the side of a carriage. "Kids. They throw stones at the train. It's a real problem. We'll have to repaint the whole carriage. Both sides, to get the right shade of green."

We follow the tracks towards the engine shed. Vos frowns and stoops to pick up a plastic bottle lying between the rails. At one of the outbuildings, he stops to gaze unhappily at a couple of what look like oversized coffee plungers. An engine-man walks past, strenuously avoiding eye contact.

Early rides on rotting tracks

"Tell the guys not to drop their rubbish," says Vos, waving the bottle. "And get these vacuum pumps into the stores. They don't need to be out here. It's untidy."

The engine-man nods vigorously: "Yes, Mr Vos." He scurries off, chastened, and I remember the first time I met Vos. With his hawkish demeanour and miss-nothing eyes, he reminded me then, as now, of a large bird of prey. I was aboard his train, the luxurious Pride of Africa, as it rocked and rolled over a bad patch of track on its way from Komatiport to Maputo.

Sunk into the deep armchairs in the wood-panelled observation car were wealthy Americans, who had come to ride this 1930s vision of a train into an approximation of Darkest Africa. The barman was making large gin-and-tonics, which the passengers were knocking back with enthusiasm, their gaze torn between glimpses of the ruin that was Mozambique in 1994 – abandoned brick factories, stations scarred with bullet wounds and the wreckage of ambushed trains – and the countryside, a sun-blasted stretch of ochre and dun.

The train was lurching like a drunken sailor looking for his ship. The wheels screeched and complained on worn-out rails and couplers banged as the slack between the carriages ran in and out. Vos paced the observation car, offering brief smiles to his guests – who had paid a lot of money for an experience it would have been impossible to repeat anywhere else in the world – while keeping his eyes on the rotting track ribboning out behind.

It was typical of Vos to try something new where lesser men might have blanched at the risk. Most people would have looked at the desperate state of the railway from Komatiport to Maputo, thought about rapacious Mozambican customs officials rubbing thumbs and forefingers together in Ressano Garcia, and come to the conclusion that taking what amounted to pretty much your entire investment across the border into the badlands of postwar Mozambique was a bad idea.

A long way from Witbank

But Vos clearly likes a challenge, which goes some way to explaining how Rovos Rail has survived and even prospered in a business that is notoriously difficult, unforgiving and expensive. In 2019, Rovos Rail will celebrate 30 years of rides.

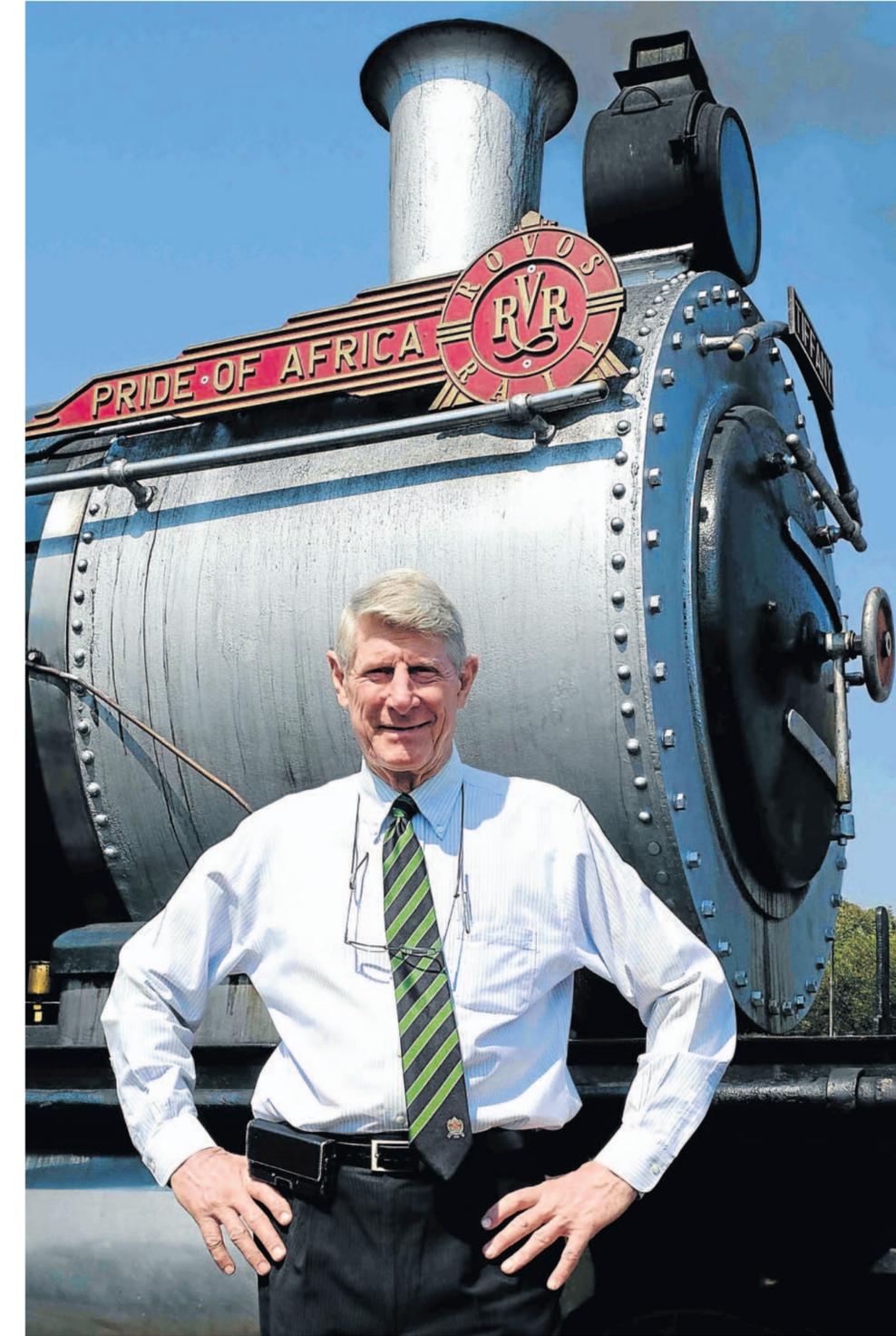
It's a long way from his days of selling motor spares to miners in the Witbank coalfields.

Vos – "RBV" to his family (the B stands for Bernard) – was born in 1946 in Cape Town, where his father was a doctor at Groote Schuur. The family moved around a lot, first to George, then Delareyville. After school, he went, like so many young men, to Johannesburg to look for work.

"There wasn't any money for university," he says. "Three kids behind me." He started off selling encyclopaedias. A few years later found him in Witbank, selling motor spares, driving a 1940 Packard – which had cost him R75 – and running a disco on the side.

"Discos were just starting," he says. "I went to Hillbrow to check one out and went back to Witbank and started my own. It worked quite well. I used to make a profit of about R15 a night. It helped me buy a few more fan belts for my spares business."

There was money to be made in the coalfields and Witbank grew quickly. When Vos arrived, its population was 8,000. More mines opened to feed the new power stations that Eskom was building in the area, Highveld Steel lit its blast furnaces, and suddenly poky little Witbank was the nearest thing to a gold-rush town. Vos built a chain of motor-spares



Rohan Vos at the Rovos Rail depot in Pretoria. Picture: Paul Ash

stores. He had a sideline in 16mm film rentals too, hiring out films and projectors to the mines. "Fun Films became a huge business eventually," he says.

His eureka moment

So the money rolled in and life was good. By then he was married to Anthea and had four children. Then came the idea – in the bath, he said – to have his own train, a few coaches and a steam engine to pull them on family holidays around SA. Vos bought a couple of old railway carriages and some steam engines at auction and fixed them up.

"When I applied to the railways to use my own locomotives on this train, they said, 'That doesn't happen in this country', but I could apply anyway. Which I did."

The railways came back with "stupendous" tariffs. "I said, 'Wow, that's a lot of money'. They said, 'Well, you can sell tickets'."

That was December 1986. It would be three years



Let me tell you about next year. We are going to run a train from Dar es Salaam to Lobito in Angola. It will be the first time that a passenger train runs from coast to coast across Africa

before Vos ran his first train. By April 1989, he had bought and restored seven carriages and two steam engines. The first trains ran across the highveld and down to Nelspruit and then ambled up the branch line to Sabie and Graskop. It was – and is – a spectacular railway, looping and twisting as it climbs throughout the forests, clinging to the edge of the escarpment like a tightrope walker.

Growing pains

South Africans had never seen anything like it. The only thing comparable was the Blue Train – 16 coaches of streamlined, air-conditioned steel and the flagship train of South African Railways, back in the day when it still believed in passenger trains.

The Pride of Africa was something else. With its four polished steam engines – each named for one of his children – and acres of burnished mahogany, it reeked of romance. It had an observation car on the tail with an open platform from which passengers

could see and smell Africa drift by at a somnolent 60km/h. The combination of the old train and the journey up the mountain to Graskop ticked all the boxes. It was *Out of Africa*, pulled by steam. It was also ludicrously expensive, for both the passengers and the owner.

"We launched in April '89 and proceeded to lose money," said Vos. "The bigger the business got, the faster we lost it."

The problems were manifold. The railways extracted their pound of flesh in access fees – there is a charge for each coach for every kilometre it runs on state rails. The locomotives were thirsty and hungry – coal had to be trucked in to servicing points, and with SA's steam-age infrastructure long since derelict, the local fire brigades were often called upon to top up the steam engines. "We didn't know terribly much about what we were doing," he says. "It was a very nice journey but we weren't selling enough."

By 1993, Vos was almost bankrupt. "We had been summarised by the bank to pay the overdraft. I needed to raise money but, prior to the elections in '94, nobody wanted to get involved in tourism."

Penury was averted with the help of "a few good friends", who invested in the business. "It wasn't big money but it was useful to get us over the hump."

The darling of the world

Everything changed on April 27 1994. The world watched as SA voted for freedom. Suddenly we were the darling and the tourists began arriving, first a trickle, then a flood. The Pride of Africa, as expensive as it was to ride, was waiting for them.

By then, the train was running between Pretoria and Cape Town – one of the world's classic railway journeys – but the start of an operation to Victoria Falls was the silver bullet. The greatest waterfall in the world. The wild animals along the track. David Livingstone. Africa. The opulence of the Victoria Falls Hotel and its view of the spindly steel bridge over the Batoka Gorge, so close to the cataract that the spray wets the carriage roofs. These were ideas that Americans and Europeans could love.

Like a good railroad baron, Vos forged ahead. He bought more coaches, gutted them and rebuilt them in the now standard Rovos mould: three luxury suites in every coach, with big bathrooms and vast beds. While Vos handled the daily grind of expanding the business and dealing with the railways, Anthea kitted out the train interiors. "We took a lot of busman's holidays and rode a lot of trains," says Vos. "And this one really is the most luxurious."

They now employ 450 people and have four complete train sets plus a raft of diesel and electric locomotives bought second-hand from Transnet and Queensland Railways, which Vos hopes will solve another persistent problem: power.

Full steam ahead

The steam engines long ago gave way to modern diesels and electrics, hired with crews from the national railways. The steamers put in a brief appearance at the start of each trip – it makes a nice photo opportunity and it sells the romance of the train. But relying on state operators has come with its own difficulties.

Old and unreliable locomotives, cable theft, signal delays and crews that sometimes don't pitch for their shifts mean delays, and Vos has had to become adept at the art of expectation management. He tries to be present for most departures, during which he briefs the passengers on what may happen. On a good day, Transnet's locomotives will run sweetly and the train will arrive more or less on time. Other times, the company will be despatching minibuses to far-flung stations to collect passengers who have planes to catch.

In the middle of my visit to the depot, Vos gets a call from one of his train managers, who is aboard a train that is running late to Kimberley. The passengers will miss their city tour and there are rumblings of unhappiness. "I don't have anyone on my trains who cannot handle people," he says. Still, he is annoyed. This problem is not Rovos Rail's doing but it makes the company look bad.

Then he brightens. "Let me tell you about next year," he says. "We are going to run a train from Dar es Salaam to Lobito in Angola. It will be the first time that a passenger train runs from coast to coast across Africa."

Naturally, there are significant obstacles. For one thing, while the Chinese may have rebuilt the fabled Benguela Railway across Angola, the line from the Angolan border, across the southern Democratic Republic of Congo to Zambia, is as rotten a stretch of railway as may be found anywhere on Earth.

"There may be some derailments," Vos concedes. The bigger problem is to persuade the Congolese and Angolan officials to issue visas at the borders. But there is fire in his eyes as he talks about the journey – which, by the way, is fully booked by the same sort of adventurous travellers I saw riding the roller coaster down to Maputo in 1994.

The urgent blast of a train hooter startles me. Vos sees me to the door – he has a load of passengers to see safely aboard his train. As we say goodbye, I see the Nguni cows chowing down on a patch of grass outside the station building. Then a tractor rumbles past. "Look at this, I could be Farmer Joe," Vos laughs. For a second he seems wistful. Then the train hoots again and he smiles and strides back into his station.