

# SOUTH AFRICA

**TRIP OF A LIFETIME**  
Stunning views and luxury cabins, on the Pride of Africa



omelettes, Kimberley is our first stop. In bright sunshine, we see the biggest man-made hole on Earth and then go inside for a film and talk about this diamond rush town – surrounded by priceless diamonds in secure cabinets.

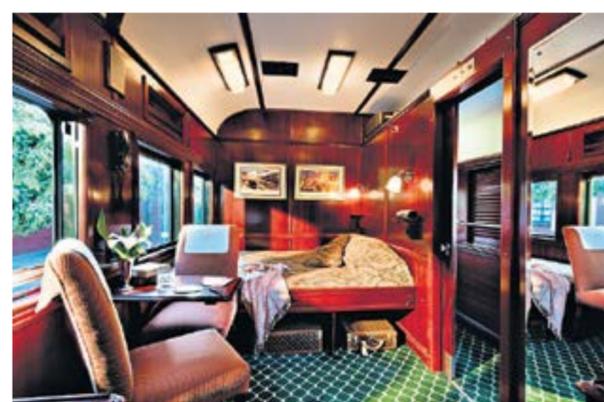
Vos told me they need two locomotives to pull 22 coaches, the usual size of a train. Locomotives are either diesel or electric. They do have steam engines and use them to shunt coaches around HQ and to make short journeys, but steam has become impractical.

Vos stressed that customers have to appreciate the challenges of travel by train in Africa. “They need to understand it is an adventure. If things go wrong, they need to be prepared for that. One needs to think quickly and make decisions. Never mind plan B, I often have to go with plan E, F or G...”

“We have what we call the African bandage on our trains. It’s basically like an inner tube and it’s been pressed into temporary service many times.”

Our short trip has been running like clockwork. But during the night, a loose rock hits the underside of a locomotive and we come to a halt. The train manager deftly rearranges plans. Our delayed visit to Matjiesfontein is now necessarily brief once we are on the move again, but we do get a sense of the town and see some vintage cars close to the Lord Milner Hotel.

Back on the train, I wonder whether the African bandage has been deployed. We are told we will be delayed getting to Cape Town, but a late meal will now be provided, and



## An ad in ‘The Telegraph’ rescued my rail dream

### LUXURY TRAVEL

The owner of Rovos Rail, Rohan Vos, tells *Olivia Greenway* how an advert in the pages of this newspaper turned things around for the train operation he launched 30 years ago

**W**e are gathered in the Rovos Rail station lounge at Capital Park, Pretoria, champagne in hand, awaiting a welcome speech by the man who set up the rail company 30 years ago. We are about to travel to Cape Town on the Pride of Africa, often termed the “world’s most luxurious train”, for three days and two nights.

The tall, slim, grey-haired gentleman at the lectern has the confident assurance of a wealthy self-made businessman. Quietly spoken, there is something of an avuncular headmaster about him too. We are to dress smartly for dinner, use no mobile phones in the public areas and smoking is only allowed in the smoking lounge.

The first Rovos Rail journey ran on April 29 1989 and had just four paying passengers. Now Rovos Rail runs 11 journeys (many several times a year), has 420 staff and a rolling stock of 133 coaches with 14 diesel, nine electric and five steam locomotives. Passenger numbers have doubled since 2009.

But the future was not always so rosy. In fact, in our chat later, Rohan Vos took me back to the summer of 1993, when the company almost went bust. “We were completely broke, and the bank was on my back.” Something drastic had to be done. So, Vos went the World Travel Market in London in November. There he met Philip Morell from Voyages Jules Verne, who suggested a new trip to the Victoria Falls, and



advised him to advertise in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Vos was not convinced. “Who wants to think of summer holidays when they are with their families at Christmas?” But the advert went in. By the end of December, they had four trainloads booked. And they never looked back. Speech over, we don safety jackets and earphones and accompany him on a tour of the train sheds. This is very much a family business with Vos’s wife, son and three daughters all playing a part. Employees are regarded as family too; five have been with Rovos from the start and four for over 20 years. Vos is in his element.

“Do you know the area the train is actually in contact with the track is the size of your fingernail?” He knows everything there is to know about trains and his enthusiasm is stamped through him like a stick of rock.

The red carpet is out, and more champagne awaits as we are shown to

our cabins. Vos waves us off, promising to see us in Cape Town. “Surely, he doesn’t meet every train?” I ask train manager Adam Bentley. “He certainly tries to.”

Cabins are small but luxurious, echoing a bygone era. The rich, polished wood panelling sets off the Thirties-style lamps, beds are covered in thick brocade with a deep pile carpet in Rovos signature green. There’s a full-length mirror and wardrobe. The shower room is surprisingly spacious. With no television, radio or mobile signal

distraction, one has no choice but to relax. A whistle blows and we are off. We leave the station jerkily and slowly and a little noisily.

To the rear of the train is the observation carriage with open-air bench seating and then there are two lounge carriages with sofas and comfortable chairs, boxes of Scrabble, Monopoly and Charades and a bar. Our

disparate group of 33 – from Switzerland, France, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, Australia and the UK – quickly bonds. Contributing to this conviviality is the performance of the friendly staff. We are mainly couples with a few travelling solo. Ages range

### ESSENTIALS

Travel aboard the Pride of Africa with Great Rail Journeys (01904 527180; greatrail.com); various itineraries available throughout South Africa including the 17-day escorted tour South African Adventure, from £8,790pp. The itinerary includes eight nights on the luxury Pride

of Africa, stays at the Courtyard Arcadia in Pretoria, the five-star Radisson Blu Hotel Waterfront in Cape Town, and excursions including Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, the Kruger National Park, Addo Elephant Park and Table Mountain.

### ON THE RIGHT LINES

Rohan Vos, second from left, in 1989, above; vintage cars outside the Lord Milner, right

‘Back on the train the gong sounds for dinner; I hope my evening dress passes muster’

