



Roving South Africa

words
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The safari checklists were distributed.

To tick off the blesboks, rhombic egg eaters, blue wildebeest and hartebeest, Cape hares, square-lipped rhinos and mongeesees.

Not mongooses or moongeese. Mongeesees. And the crash of rhinos. The journey of giraffes and committee of vultures.

And also to tick off the American doctors, the Australian sawmill owner, the Swiss air ambulance nurse, the Canadian couple, the Titanic heiress, the South African nougat mogul, the Austrians, the Japanese newlyweds, the Hong Kong-based property holdings CEO, the Welshman and a former scaffolder

and Brussels-sprout picker called Dave. From Bedford.

And, of course, Jack Ryan.

Jack Ryan is a ranger at the 27-year-old Makidwe reserve on the Botswanan border. With a 170-kilometre perimeter fence, it is the fourth largest game reserve in South Africa. He drove me into my first 'monkey's wedding' – a sun shower.

The two-day, four game drive stay at the Tau Lodge is part of 'the most luxurious train journey in the world' – Rovos Rail's Pride of Africa, an epic, bucket-list, 15-day, 3,568-mile



trek ‘from civilization to wilderness’, up the spine of Africa from Cape Town through Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania. You can also start in Dar Es Salaam and question the ‘civilization to wilderness’ theory.

The Pride of Africa starts and finishes over the historic tracks of the Uhuru (‘Freedom’) Trailway. ‘Count’ Nicholas Schofield, who has been the resident ‘Rovos Rail’ historian for 25 years, clocking up over 450,000 clicks of clackety-clack’, believes the ‘Freedom’ is the most scenic stretch.

He is called the Count because he counts guests out and counts them in from escorted tours of Pretoria and other excursions. He gives daily lectures where ‘The Big Six’ – yawning Swedes, sleeping Austrians, dozing French couples, napping Germans, catnapping Americans and hungover Brits – are common sightings.

“My favourite leg is between Makambako (‘the Place of Bulls’) and Mimba (‘the place

of Elephants’),” he says. “The train drops over 1,000-metres through matted jungle. You see the Udzungwas Mountains of Tanzania. The train brushes the side of the forest and you feel you can stretch out and touch the mountain. Glorious.”

The 1,860-kilometre line was created by the governments of Tanzania, Zambia and China to end Zambia’s economic dependence on Rhodesia and South Africa. The trainline provided the only route for trade from landlocked Zambia’s Copper Belt to the sea without touching the much-hated, white-ruled territories.

Twelve Chinese surveyors walked for nine months between Dar es Salaam and Mbeya to map out the route. Using Chinese raw materials, 70,000 Chinese and African workers laid 330,000 tons of rail, building 93 stations, 320 bridges, 22 tunnels and 2,225 culverts. Over 160 workers died.



The first passenger train arrived in Dar es Salaam on 17 October 1975. The first Rovos Rail train arrived in 1993. Completely empty. But it has now become one of the leading luxury travel brands in the Southern Hemisphere.

Cecil Rhodes envisioned a copper-ore carrying railway from South Africa to Tanganyika. Rohan Vos, who made his money through auto parts, has fulfilled that dream. He started buying and refurbishing scrapped rolling stock, his first steam engines coming from Birmingham and Glasgow. He has one of the world's largest private collections of trains. Although it's electric-diesel now, he has never looked back.

There were 46 of us on board the half-mile long, 31-carriage train. After a red-carpet reception, canapés and chamber music, Mr Vos waved



us off from Cape Town's platform 23. First stop took us to Matjiesfontein in the Great Karoo desert.

In 1889 this was the venue of the first cricket match between South Africa and England, who lost. On a tour of the town in a 1968 London double-decker, Elvis-impersonator and local pastor Johnny 'Showtime' Thennison took us to the Lord Milner Hotel, named after a British governor, and then played honky-tonk over a Kudu lager in the 130-year-old Laird's Arms.

After a day in Pretoria visiting the workshops and a city tour, we headed for the 1904 Victoria Falls Hotel and a Zambezi river cruise. The Japanese newlyweds bungee-jumped off the bridge. Others did the 12-minute helicopter ride or had tea on the Stanley Terrace. Allan the Australian had to be cut out of his mosquito net. It had collapsed on him while he napped.

Back on the train, the wood-panelled, Belle Epoque restaurant had crystal wine glasses, starched linen napery, solid silver cutlery and tassel-tied curtains. Cumberbunds were not

necessary. But jackets and ties were a bare minimum. Tiaras and national costume were optional. The blushing Japanese bride arrived in a kimono, to a standing ovation.

Capetonian Otto Hank is one of Rovos Rail's ten chefs. He works closely with Anthea Vos, wife of founder Rohan. "It's the operational challenges and logistics that the train is all about," he said, bouncing about the tiny galley he shared with two chefs. "You have to make sure you are on a fairly straight piece of track! The drivers are used to transporting freight. I have to remind them we are serving fondant."

Meals included traditional South African *bobotie* – spiced beef mince baked with a layer of savoury egg custard and served with Peppadew, kiwi fruit and banana chutney. 'Drunken Pecorino' (ewe's milk cheese soaked in a wine musk) preceded a dessert of *melktert* – a sweet pastry crust with a dusting of cinnamon served with fruit coulis, and a small syrup-coated South African doughnut known as a *koeksister*.

The Pride of Africa also serves ostrich, springbok, lobster tails and crocodile tails. Meals are served with recommended wine pairings and end with Amarula – South Africa's Bailey's Irish Cream made from the superfruit of the marula - 'elephant' or 'wedding' tree.

There is no WiFi and 'enlightened conversation' is encouraged in the open-balconied observation deck with wingback chairs, smoking room and two lounges.

All rooms come with an en-suite shower with optional clawfoot Victorian bathtub in the Royal suites, a maid, a minibar with 'survival drinks' like MCC (Methode Cap Classique) champagne, sparkling wine and moist towelettes meeting you from every off-train excursion.

And plastic goggles. So you can stick your head out of the train. Tunnels, sickle bushes and thornveld permitting.

There is no gym although the train doctor – who wore a kilt for dinner – has an exercise bike. The train also has a resident hairstylist, Craig Geater. He advises, 'I wouldn't make a hair appointment in Zambia as it's rather shaky. Nor would I wear white and drink Pinotage.'

At the end of the extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime trip, through old Bechuanaland and old Rhodesia, over countless rivers, past numerous inselbergs (rocky outcrops), anthills, zebrawood thickets, baobab forests, Lusaka and hundreds of waving smiling children, guests are presented with a certificate signed by Mr Vos.

It declares: "Be it known that the prerogative to ride on board on the Greatest Train On Earth has been exercised. By this action, persistent thirst has been slaked on the rail-bound watering holes and culinary delights have been savoured and you have been lulled to sleep in the easy confines of a luxurious suite."

