

THE BIG READ



RIDING RETRO

Rovos Rail is all about a return to a grander age of travel, when the journey was the destination, writes Elizabeth Sleith

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FRILL SEEKING The lounge car is all old-fashioned opulence.

Every dreamer loves a train. Maybe it's the sheer moxie they represent as they curl around mountains and cut across plains; maybe it's the human progress they signify.

For the curious, their slow pace and on-board freedom of movement encourage strangers to mingle and connections to spark.

For the nostalgic, they hark back to travel's Golden Age, when the likes of the legendary Orient-Express carried society's ritziest across continents under clouds of luxury, exoticism and entitlement.

Certainly, in an age of instantaneous everything, of night flights and sleeping pills and waking up on runways, there can be no better way for a romance-seeking traveller to relive a time when the journey was the thing than to go by rail. And if by rail, then what better travelling companions than fine dining, exemplary service and a multitude of comforts dressed up in a coat of bygone charm?

These are the ingredients of every trip on Rovos Rail, which celebrates its 30th birthday tomorrow. As I found recently on a two-night "safari" to Durban, it's a formula Rovos has well perfected over those years.

BACK TO A BYGONE ERA

It's a rainy April morning at the private station in Capital Park, Pretoria. With our best jackets and frocks neatly folded into suitcases, we guests have walked the red carpet two-by-two into the grandiose lounge alongside the platform, all gigantic windows

and deep couches and staff tiptoeing about with trays. Too early for an ordinary Friday, we sip champagne and nibble dainty pastries as train manager Adam Bentley welcomes us to our journey on "the most luxurious train in the world".

We are about to revisit an era, he says, when the journey was the destination. And so we are encouraged to slow down too, to mingle as travellers did in days of yore, to take in the views, to snooze in the armchairs, to dress for dinner. We are discouraged from doing anything that might look like work, like tapping on laptops in public areas, and from doing anything too common, like appearing in the corridors in our Rovos robes. And then it's time to board.

A STEAM-HAULED HOTEL

In a press release in July 1988, Rohan Vos announced the impending launch of "a private and exclusive steam-hauled hotel and touring vehicle" with plans for a seven-day tour to the Lowveld. "The tour will provide entertainment for the sophisticated international traveller, the game lover, the steam enthusiast and the romantic," it said.

The train they launched the following year used seven pre-war coaches and two steam engines, which Vos had gathered from scrapyards and collectors across the country and restored. In the years since, Vos has bought and restored several more, to the extent that Rovos Rail today boasts one of the biggest private collections in the world.

While diesel and electric have replaced the steam, and many of the coaches had to be entirely gutted before restoration, the work has been so painstaking that to step on board does feel like returning to another age, of Agatha Christie novels and dinner jackets and manners and long strings of pearls.

From the dining to the lounge to the observation car, the interiors are all polished wood, wingbacks and chesterfields, floral



SMILES ALL ROUND Kenyan passenger Lois Eva Adongo peeks out at a pitstop, above; and Mount Alice at Spionkop Lodge presents another photo op. Pictures: Elizabeth Sleith

fabrics and tasselled curtain-ties. It's a frilly, fussy incarnation of old-fashioned opulence which you may not want in your house, but one in which you can certainly revel on a brief, fantasy jaunt into Africa.

Each of the three suite types, ranging in size from 7m² to 16m², has an en-suite bathroom. Apparently, this is unusual the world over, even for luxury trains.

Our suite, the "mid-range" 10m² Deluxe, certainly feels palatial by train standards, with a "lounge area" (two chairs and a table) and a wall-to-wall bed inviting not a little lazing under the duvet as the hypnotic landscapes scroll by.

Other non-negotiable mod-cons include in-room air-conditioners, hair-dryers, shaving sockets and bar fridges, though the latter are thoughtfully camouflaged in mahogany so as not to spoil the vintage illusion.

MOVING DOESN'T MATTER

Delays, due to signal failure and cable theft, are a well-known headache for Rovos, and we do spend a lot of time sitting at stations, especially on the first day. It's best to pay no attention to whether you are moving – eventually you will – and to simply avail yourself of all the fine services on board.

The much-anticipated mealtimes are signalled by a bell, a bright peal that summons all to the dining car. Every sitting is a multi-course affair with starched tablecloths and customised china, and each course is accompanied with a different wine.

It's a great chance to explore some of SA's best wines, but it's not a bad idea to pack some Grand-Pa and maybe some Rennie too. The temptation to overindulge is considerable because, well, "When on Rovos", you'll say, as you tuck in exuberantly to every course.

RIDING HIGH A delicate artwork at Ardmore Ceramics.



OFF THE BEATEN TRACKS

Lovely as this on-board life is, there are several chances to wander off the tracks too. The first is an ungodly 5.30am wake-up call for a drive in the big-five Nambiti Private Game Reserve. We skip this one – blame the crafty sommelier at dinner and the hypnotic midnight rhythm of the train – but others return delighted, having ticked off sightings of leopard and lion.

The second is a post-lunch bus ride from Ladysmith Station to Spionkop Lodge, where owner Raymond Heron has built his fortunes on its ties to a dramatic chapter of South African history, its bucolic location, and his ability to weave an absorbing tale.

The farm was seconded by General Sir Redvers Buller, commander-in-chief of the British forces in SA during the South African War of 1899-1902. And it was from an outlook on the property that Buller in 1900 led efforts to take back Ladysmith from the Boers.

It is from this same Mount Alice, with views of the distant town and its surrounding lands, that Heron tells the story of the Battle of Spionkop, a clash so beset by blunders and miscommunications that it has gone down as one of the most pointless in British history. With arms sweeping over the land and fingers tracing the rise and fall of the *Kop*, Heron is an enthralling and evocative storyteller.

The final excursion on the last morning is a visit to Ardmore Ceramics, where, in the gallery, founder Fee Halsted describes how her collaborations with local craftsmen, and the blending of western technology with the long-held artistic traditions of the Zulu people, resulted in these intricate, fantastical and globally coveted works of art.

ARRIVE WE MUST

Back on the train, we gather speed for the final stretch through the Valley of 1000 Hills. By now, a festive air throngs through the train and passengers, every one with a drink in hand, clutter the benches in the open-air balcony at the train's rear for the best views. We have followed the advice to mingle well, and people who were strangers just over a day ago look like jolly friends, watching together as villages and waterfalls and impossibly green hills chug by, and the winding track disappears behind them, gobbled up by the horizon.

No one who went, I'm sure, ever intended to arrive, and by 4pm, for once, a delay would be welcome. But arrive we must. As we pull into Durban station, there are hugs and e-mails and wholehearted promises exchanged on the platform.

And on that lovely train, the staff we've all come to know by name are surely polishing shoes and wood and leather, preparing to welcome a new set of passengers, and to ride again into the past, only now taking a happy piece of ours with them too. **S**

Sleith was a guest of Rovos Rail.

MILESTONES & MEMORIES

'85 Rohan Vos joins a train trip to the Magaliesberg – and an obsession is born. In September he buys several coaches, meaning to restore and then hitch them to a South African Railways train for family holidays, but the associated red-tape soon persuades him of the importance of self-sufficiency. So he buys a locomotive from a scrap-metal company and restores it.

'86 Vos gets permission to run his train on the national rail network. The high costs involved scupper the "family caravan" idea and he plans instead to run it as a vintage-train business. He scours the country buying carriages and locomotives to restore.

'89 Consisting of two locomotives and seven carriages, the first train sets off for the Eastern Transvaal on April 29 with four paying passengers.

'91 Rovos launches the Pretoria-Cape Town run. To this day, it remains its most popular trip.

'93 The bank puts pressure on Vos to repay his debts, just as the company is about to break even. Vos goes to a travel fair in London and hatches a plan with a tour operator to run the train from Cape Town to Victoria Falls. Sales go extremely well and "bankruptcy is avoided by a nose".

'93 The first Rovos train arrives in Dar es Salaam – the trip has taken place every year since.

'98 Rovos starts a seven-day, 3,400km journey from Pretoria to Swakopmund, Namibia.

'20 12 coaches derail in Bulawayo due to severe flooding so the Victoria Falls route is switched to Polokwane with an onward flight to the falls. A new safari is introduced between Pretoria and Durban.

'06 A direct journey between Pretoria and Vic Falls is reintroduced, via Botswana.

'08 The inaugural four Cape-to-Cairo itineraries are successfully completed.

'17 The train travels through Beitbridge again on the Victoria Falls journey.

'19 Rovos celebrates its 30th year on April 29. On July 16, it will make history by launching a coast-to-coast train across Africa, from Dar es Salaam to Lobito in Angola.

In the latest Sunday Times Travel podcast, Rovos Rail's "chief engineer" Rohan Vos talks about some of the epic challenges of buying and running a world-famous passenger train. You can find this and other episodes at timeslive.co.za/group/Travel_Podcast/

GO, GO, GO

Rovos Rail has several itineraries available, from two to 14 nights. Destinations include Cape Town, Victoria Falls, Dar es Salaam, and Walvis Bay.

The two-night Durban Safari described in this story is priced from R20,600 per person. **WINTER SPECIAL:** Rovos Rail is offering residents of SA and neighbouring countries a

special two-for-one rate on their two-night Cape Town journey between April and September 2019.

The 50% reduced rate of R15,550 per person sharing includes accommodation in a Deluxe Suite, all meals, all alcoholic and other beverages on board, off-train excursions, room service and limited laundry.

For more information or to book, call 012-315-8242; e-mail reservations@rovos.co.za or visit rovos.com