

ROVOS RAIL

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PRESS INTERVIEW WITH ROHAN VOS

Rohan Vos is a self-made businessman who established himself in the motor-spares industry in Witbank. He is married to Anthea and they have four children: Shaun, Brenda, Bianca and Tiffany. With no previous experience in train travel or tourism, today he and Anthea own and run the most luxurious train in the world. They live in Cape Town and commute to Pretoria, the headquarters and home of Rovos Rail.

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As a person with no previous interest in trains, how did you come to start Rovos Rail?

IN 1986 a member of my staff, Phil Acutt, approached me to assist in the formation of a steam-preservation group in Witbank where I had my motor-spares and related businesses. Subsequently, he has sadly passed away. After agreeing to help I went to a few railway rolling-stock auctions and thought it might be fun to have a family caravan consisting of two or three old-style carriages. I approached the railways with this proposal in mind and they gave me permission later that year, but the permutations were such that it would have proved far too extravagant for me to run this as a home on wheels for my family.

I went back to the railways and asked them to reconsider. They held firm to their pricing structure but did give me permission to sell tickets. And that was how the idea of this commercial vintage train was born.

Rebuilding the carriages is a practical matter, and having been in the motor-spares business, it wasn't too difficult for me to overcome the mechanical side. The building of the carriages is perhaps the most fun.

Establishing myself in the tourism industry was not easy. If I have lost any money due to my inexperience in this operation, it has been due to my lack of knowledge in the tourism arena. However, when I started I was told that it would take three to five years for the product to mature. Hotels talk longer term – some five to eight years before they become profitable. We broke out of the red after six years and hopefully will remain in the black from now on.

Have you had experience with similar trains such as the Orient Express?

Thinking back, I am pleased we had no experience of any other trains when we designed and built the Pride of Africa as, if we had, we might have compromised our original ideas and design.

The caravan or private saloon idea was the initial impetus and with my being tall we made everything roomy. I enjoy my bathroom so made sure they were large and, by doing so, set a precedent for the rest of the train. The design of the train has given us suites considerably larger than any of the world's famous trains while the generous lounges and dining facilities make for unfettered relaxation. Anthea handles all the interiors and 'softs'. Our aim was to present the train as a gracious and comfortable home.

How do you rate Rovos Rail against similar trains?

That's quite a difficult question. We call ourselves 'The Most Luxurious Train in the World' and the rationale behind this is that we have much larger suites than other trains. The train has a maximum of three suites per carriage, and some have only two, which is extravagant by other train standards. There is a '21 Reasons' document supporting the claim included in our sales information. We also have two general lounges and a smoking lounge.

Then we provide superb comfort, a very good table, and an excellent wine list. But we are nowhere near the technical level of the undercarriage of either the Blue Train or the Orient Express trains. The average vintage of our rolling stock is 1950, so with 60 years behind the running gear, which is all-original, it is impossible for us to compete in this department. The coaches are mostly built of wood, which is a beautiful material to work with, and this enhances the warmth we've tried so hard to achieve. It doesn't, however, lend itself to low maintenance costs.

Where did you find the locomotives and coaches?

The sourcing of the coaches was probably the most interesting part of the project for me. Luckily I found a book called *Railway Dining Cars of South Africa* written by Les Pivnic who was working for the Railway's museum at the time. This book helped me tremendously in finding out what had happened to the dining cars.

My initial plan for the train – with my family caravan in mind – was to have a dining car, lounge car and sleeping accommodation. I thus developed an interest in dining cars, and once I started studying this book it really got me going. Les Pivnic gives the names of people that had bought various dining cars, and with his help I managed to trace most of the carriages I was specifically looking for.

Then people would tell me about carriages in the backyards of various homes or on farms. I found a couple of carriages this way, including Coach 749 – a balcony carriage dating back to 1919 that now houses two royal suites. This coach was originally a holiday home in the mountains of Machadodorp in Mpumalanga and, in 1970, it was placed on a concrete base with trees having been planted around it in the interim. It proved to be a huge logistical problem to move it. First we had to create a road; then the vehicle that collected the 22-metre carriage had a low trailer and was obviously very long, which meant it couldn't take corners on the farm roads. So we had a very interesting time bringing it 500 metres down to the nearest railway line.

Another balcony carriage dating 1928, Coach 1601, was a monument in front of Clifford Harris's premises in Wetton in Cape Town. Fortunately this one was very near the railway line. It was restored and now houses another two royal suites. These are the only two balcony coaches we have had in amongst our 100-odd carriages. A balcony coach is a carriage with a very small veranda at each end. This makes for wonderful viewing, getting your hair blown around and soot in your eyes. Due to their incompatibility, we sold T49 and 1601 to a guesthouse operator in Mossel Bay.

Then there is a club in Sandton in Johannesburg where I purchased three of the dining saloons. Others have been bought from the railways and various museum supporters. One of the observation cars was originally a restaurant at the same club. To create an observation car we've enlarged the windows to improve the view, and have an open balcony at the end of the carriage, a unique aspect in South Africa.

By 2000 our workshops had rebuilt 60 carriages – for three years we were producing a carriage per month from scrap condition. Not bad for novices! By 2015 the fleet had grown to 100 coaches.

Then we have four locomotives, the oldest of which is a Class 6 loco that dates back to 1893. I heard about it through the railways when it was a monument at Winburg Station in the Free State. I brought it to Witbank and overhauled it entirely, which meant replacing all the tubes and the end plates of the boiler. Being 120 years old, it has a firebox – where you feed in the coal – of copper and a boiler of steel. With the different expansion qualities of these metals you have to be very careful to warm up the water when starting the fire because you can easily warp plates and have water all over the place in no time. This has happened to us a couple of times, but we've learnt our lesson. This loco is probably the oldest commercially operating loco in the world.

The locos are named after our children: the smallest and oldest, the Class 6 loco, is named after Tiffany – our youngest daughter. Three of them are 1938 Class 19D locos – Shaun, Brenda and Bianca. Loco 2702 Bianca – named after our second youngest daughter – was bought from a scrap-metal dealer in Johannesburg. The other two were also purchased from scrap-metal dealers. Loco 2701 Brenda and Loco 3360 Shaun are named after our two eldest children. It was an interesting coincidence is that one loco we bought in Johannesburg and another in Volksrust ended up having consecutive numbers – 2701 and 2702. Since then two 25NC locos have been rebuilt, named after my wife Anthea and Zog our dearly departed Dalmatian.

What are the logistics involved in running a train such as this? For example, aren't spare parts very difficult to obtain?

The logistics cover quite a wide field, but regarding spares specifically, most are not obtainable and we have to manufacture accordingly.

When I made the initial decision whether to go for wooden carriages or the more modern steel ones, I decided on wood because it was a material that was relatively easy to work with. As for the undercarriage and bogeys, which are made of steel, spares are still available.

The electrics are a problem. We definitely ran out of odds and ends, and had to have quite a lot of fittings made, but parts such as regulators are not easy to come by. We eventually had to opt for something more modern in this case: a 220V system throughout the train, power for which is supplied by diesel generators at the end of the consist. Generally speaking, it's not too difficult to keep the train on the tracks.

The locos use approximately 300 litres of water and 75 kilograms of coal per kilometre; on a 100-kilometre stretch that's about 30 000 litres of water and 7.5 tons of coal. The demise of steam travel in this country became the biggest drawback as the facilities for loading water and coal were systematically removed from most stations. This meant that water had to be loaded from fire hydrants and tanks, which was a laborious process. It could take up to three or four hours to ready a loco for the next 100 kilometres. The railways regrettably cancelled all steam operation on our main routes in 2006 thus putting an end to our local steam trips. We do, however, endeavour to start and finish all our journeys in and out of Rovos Rail Station with our steam locos.

In 1994 I made the decision to go the steel carriage route for the sleeping cars on the train. The old Edwardian coaches had done us proud but, with the advent of the Victoria Falls route in January 1994, the Edwardian train was doing on average 15 000 kilometres per month. It was too much to ask of the grand old lady! We now use the Edwardian train for charters.

I purchased 80-odd steel second-hand carriages from the Railways and converted and refurbished them over the 15-year period. Thus Classic I and Classic II took up the regular routes between Pretoria and Cape Town, Pretoria and Victoria Falls and Pretoria and Durban. Trains III and IV mostly handle the long journeys to Dar es Salaam and Namibia as well as the 9-day Collage and Golf trips.

Tell us about Rovos Rail Station in Capital Park...

I secured a long-term lease over the Capital Park Loco Shed in Pretoria on 13 November 1997. Capital Park Loco was home to a variety of loco classes stationed there since it's opening in 1943, and maintained a relatively large fleet of

steam locos at any given time. On average, 138 steam engines were stabled in the sheds at the height of its active life. This sadly declined rapidly during the 1970s.

We utilised these sheds during 1998 even though Capital Park had essentially closed down. Our Class 6, the 19Ds and the Class 25NCs continued to provide a steam presence in the deserted depot. The hustle and bustle of the 1950s has gone but due to our presence, steam is back with a vengeance at Capital Park Loco.

All our rolling stock consisting of 100 carriages and 19 operating locos as well as our administrative operations and workshops are based at Capital Park – now called Rovos Rail Station. We could indeed not have wished for a better location, which provides the perfect home for our trains. The site covers 60 acres and boasts 15 railway lines totalling a distance of 12 kilometres, of which a 100-metre section is under roof. The site also has a coal stage with 40 loading chutes.

It has been our aim not only to rebuild the site to a world-beating standard, but also to transform it into a working railway museum. Our new headquarters will cater for steam enthusiasts, tourists and local visitors alike. With daily guided tours we aim to interest and educate the public, especially those who have had no previous exposure to the world of trains.

How do you manage to run a privately owned train on state-owned railway lines?

I have found that this is probably the most difficult part of running the business. It's not that the railway employees have made a conscious effort to obstruct us, but rather that they were initially unaware of our requirements. We run a private train on their network and we've now learnt to accommodate their *modus operandi*, which has eradicated most of the trouble. Of serious concern though is the slow downhill slide of the railway business. This does not bode well for future maintenance and operational availability. Unreliability of infrastructure is a big concern.

We realise that in any large organisation things move very slowly and the railways is no exception. But they run a reasonably efficient operation as long as they're given a minimum of two weeks lead-time.

For example, on the run to Cape Town we go through six driver crews changing at Germiston, Klerksdorp, Kimberley, De Aar, Beaufort West and Worcester. All these people have to be informed of the trains' time of arrival and time of departure. At the same time the Station Master at every station has to be informed that we're coming through so that he can make sure there are no trains in our way. He also has to be told when we're stopping at his station and at which platform we wish to be parked. There are many other operational people to be informed of the impending journey.

Now we're better prepared and provide at least a month's notice for what we intend doing. Times are established and circulated to everybody and we also telephone people down the line and tell them verbally of our intended time of arrival so they can clear the way and make sure there are no impediments to our trip.

What journeys do you offer?

Our guests can choose from a series of journeys lasting from 48 hours to a fortnight linking some of Africa's greatest destinations: 2 nights between Cape Town and Pretoria; 2 nights between Pretoria and Durban; 3 nights between Pretoria and Victoria Falls; 9 days between Pretoria and Namibia; 9 days on the African Golf Collage between Pretoria, Kruger Park, Durban and Cape Town; 9 days on the Golf Safari; 15 days between Cape Town and Dar es Salaam.

From Rovos Rail Station, successful charters from one to 10 days have been undertaken with incentive groups, historical tours, private gatherings and bird shoots. There are many configurations combining our 42- or 72-bed train with other entertaining products and we are happy to prompt clients with these options and construct exciting and practical itineraries to suit the available time and budget. Within reason, and subject to availability, the chartered train can go wherever there is a railway line in Southern Africa.

Our newly rebuilt Events Train can accommodate up to 250 guests but does not have sleeping facilities on board and is thus only suitable for daytime journeys. Limited only by time and distance, there are many alternative uses for the train, which include a three-hour circular trip around Pretoria or a one-way journey to any destination within eight hours' rail travel time from Pretoria.

How do you picture Rovos Rail fitting into the future of the Southern African tourist market?

After almost 30 years in the marketplace, Rovos Rail is very well established. Our style and reputation have come through strongly and I would go so far as to say that our reputation has been improving – each trip has been better than the last. That's from a mechanical, organisational and, specifically, a hospitality point of view.

Time should not be that important to our guests and hopefully they are not aware of us watching the clock very closely. We do not want them to feel hurried.

Guests should be able to enjoy a completely relaxed environment; hence there are no television sets, radios or telephones on board. We specifically do not allow the use of mobile phones and computers in the public areas. It's an atmosphere of good food, good wine and good conversation that we are striving to create. From a position of good taste, we have already established the niche we were looking for.

Pleasingly we have over the last few decades increased our business consistently, and from modest beginnings with a seven-coach train now have four 20-carriage trains and one nine-carriage train running on a continuous basis.