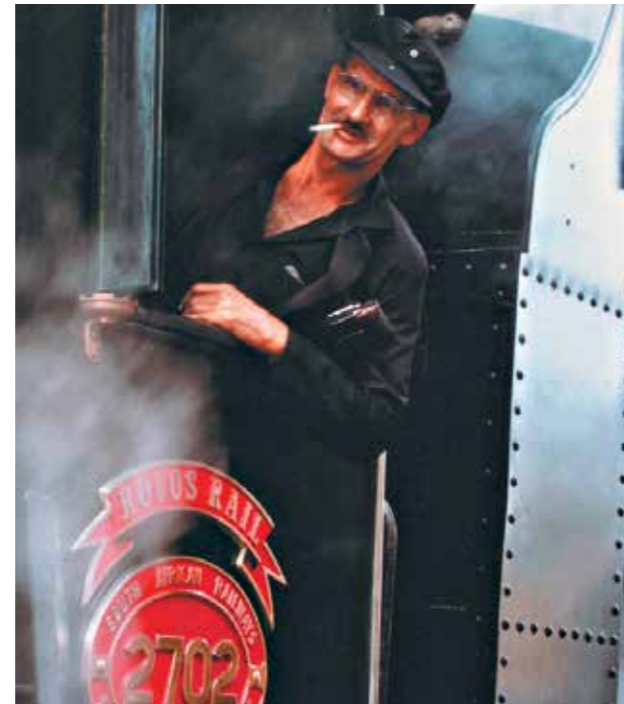


You Beauty

ANITA DE VILLIERS dons her little black number
and heels to soak up the countryside aboard the
ravishing Rovos



□ Robert Redford and Ashley Eldridge-Ford take in the views from the dining car.



THE LAST TIME I WAS TICKLED PINK BY the thrill of a train trip was many years ago while waiting at New York's bustling Penn Station to board the super-fast Amtrak to Washington. This time, departure was from the private Capital Park Station in Pretoria, with the fairest Cape Town our destination. A slow journey, not only to our destination but into the bygone golden era of railroad travel.

The air was laden with the scent of jasmine as the porter swept away our luggage and we were ushered into the colonial-style building, where owner of Rovos Rail, Rohan Vos, welcomed his guests and gave us info about travelling on his impeccably renovated train, The Pride of Africa. As guests enjoyed canapés and champagne, excitement erupted with the arrival of the Locomotive 3360 on the platform.

The collection of Rovos steam engines each has a fascinating history of acquisition and restoration.

- Many miles of slow-train luxury.
- All aboard the Greatest Train on Earth.
- Indulge in the finest dining and excellent service in elegant dining carriages.
- The old steam engines are part of the museum but still huff and puff around the station.

Loco 3360 is one of three 19D class locomotives originally part of a batch of fifty built by the North British Locomotive Company in Scotland in 1948. Sadly, SA Railway regulations no longer allow the use of steam engines and these old beauties are now part of the Rovos Railway Museum where they still huff and puff on the fifteen lines of the station, much to the delight of the passengers.

The saying 'boys and their toys' does not do justice to Rovos owner Rohan Vos's entrepreneurial courage and vision to establish a private railway that would at once become a monument to locomotive engineering and craftsmanship, and a feather in the cap for luxury travel in South Africa. From 1985, Rohan's mission was to rescue and restore old coaches and steam locomotives that had been put out to pasture. On 29 April 1989, Rovos took to the rails with a four-day maiden trip to the Lowveld, soon to be followed by the regular journey between Pretoria and Cape Town.

But the venture into uncharted waters was

risky and it became clear that financial realities did not match the dream. A lifeboat was needed, which turned out to be a proposal to run the train between Cape Town and Victoria Falls, a trip that caught the attention of international travellers. Today, one is spoilt for choice, with journeys and safaris to destinations that also include Namibia and Tanzania, as well as custom-made itineraries for special-interest groups.

Time to board and, assisted by Nicola, our 24-hour-on-call personal hostess, we settled into our elegant compartment with every imaginable convenience and luxury. With a few jolts the train came to life and as it accelerated, a quote of Rohan's that I had read came to mind: 'This is not a hotel-on-wheels, it is an animal!'

As the train crawled through the urban jungle of grey factories and warehouses, overcrowded Metro trains flashing past, a brass gong beckoned us to high tea in the two lounge cars, one in the middle of the train, the other at the back exiting onto the

- Against a backdrop of Outeniqua Mountains, the Rovos winds its way through the Karoo.

observation car. Guests are welcome to open the heavy sash windows in the lounge cars, but it is on the observation car's open-air balcony that you experience the full impact of the passing scenes.

Amid the cadence of many tongues and accents, acquaintances were made and interesting tidbits shared. Our group of about forty included Australians, Americans, Chinese, Scandinavians and English, for this journey on what is hailed as one of the most luxurious trains in the world. But it was the less than a handful of South Africans that were the last to leave the observation car's balcony, celebrating the good old tradition of the sundowner. Electrical pylons, silhouetted against a sky painted burnt orange by the setting sun, flew past as the landscape grew more rural, and the rhythm was set for the journey to the south.

The dress code for dinner is smart, an occasion to step out in the little black number and heels, and totter on legs not yet in sync with the swaying >>



>> train. Aplomb was restored when we sank into the plush leather booth of the 1935 art deco-style dining car. Silver cutlery, crisp white linen, blood-red anthuriums and gracious service set the scene for a gastronomic affair. The starter of grilled queen scallops and a lemon-scented hollandaise sauce, and the main of slow-roasted Karoo lamb accompanied by Meerlust Rubicon, were a culinary affair. We lingered over a Van der Hum and rich, dark Kenyan coffee, unwilling for a perfect day to end, and finding solace in the thought that there was more to come.

Nicola had turned down the bed and left a note with goodnight wishes and the weather forecast for the next day: warm and pleasant for our first excursion into the fascinating mining history of Kimberley.

Just before reaching the diamond city, we passed Kamfers Dam, one of only four breeding sites for lesser flamingos in Africa. Thousands upon thousands of these pink ballerinas drew gasps of delight from an appreciative audience, whose long lenses tried to capture a spectacle so rarely seen. From the Victorian Kimberley Station we were taken on a guided tour of the museum that encompasses the Kimberley

□ **Enjoy the finest selection of wines on board.**

□ **Guests disembark in Kimberley and enjoy a tour of the Big Hole, where diamonds were discovered in 1871.**

□ **Rovos Rail staff certainly have their hands full.**

□ **Savour the finest cuisine on board.**

Mine and the Big Hole, learning about the boisterous diamond rush after the discovery of the 503-carat Eureka stone in 1866.

After a leisurely lunch, the Pride of Africa lingered at tiny derelict stations with magical names such as Heuningneskloof, Graspan, then Witput... We were now on Africa time as there were major works on the line ahead. But train manager Daphne ensured us that a diesel engine was rushing to our rescue so that we could make up lost time overnight. The lull in our journey was echoed by the languor of Witput station.

That afternoon, we were all drawn to the lounges before the now familiar high tea gong had even sounded. Somehow sundowners preceded high tea and the mood became jovial. The camaraderie born of sharing a challenge – like camping out in a luxury train – had lifted the socialising considerably. The Aussies were challenging the South Africans for their sundowner positions in the observation car. “You guys love to be outside, hey,” said the guy from Perth, happy to be sharing the sunset over the scrubland of the pre-Karoo.

Dinner was in full swing when a thump announced that the diesel locomotive was being connected to the train. Diners applauded but soon realised an animal of superior power would haul us through the star-filled Karoo night.

Next morning, we stopped some five kilometres before Matjiesfontein, allowing those that wanted to take a brisk walk through the Karoo landscape to disembark. Johnny the local guide went missing, so we had ample time to explore the tiny Victorian village on our own steam. In the old bar, the Chinese had assembled, looking somewhat forlorn among the paraphernalia. Trying to bridge the language gap, I pointed out a painting of Queen Victoria. “Ah, Queen Victoria!” was the delighted response, and an impromptu photo session with the queen followed. Less successful was my recount of Olive Schneider’s connection to Matjiesfontein. I did not try to explain that a character of note, the Scot James Douglas Logan had developed the place as a health and recreational resort in the 1890s and that rumour has it ghosts still frequent it...

Tempus fugit! All too soon, the last but most

□ **Easy to settle in and enjoy such luxurious quarters.**

□ **Just outside Kimberley at Kamfers Dam came the sight of more than 80 000 Pink Flamingos.**

□ **Quaint Cape cottages are a typical feature of the fertile valleys formed by the magnificent Boland mountain ranges.**

□ **The Karoo is peppered with derelict stations that have charming names.**

spectacular leg of the journey was at hand. Beyond Touws River, the jagged, folded face of the Hex River Mountains surged dramatically into an overcast sky, the top of the highest range, the Matroosberg, still covered in snow. Through four tunnels the train took us into the Hex River Valley where acre upon acre of vineyards against the deep blue mountains held us spellbound. “I have never seen mountains as magnificent,” said the well-travelled American chap next to me. My heart swelled with pride! Ah, yes, our land is indeed beautiful!

The journey, the train, what a marriage! I now have in my possession certificate number 22 133, signed by Rohan Vos and sealed by the Rovos corporate emblem, stating that it should be known that the prerogative to ride on board the Greatest Train on Earth has been experienced by yours truly; a certificate stating that I have savoured culinary delights and was lulled to sleep in the greatest of luxury. What can I say, it’s all true. □

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