



LUXURY RAILWAY JOURNEYS

*From Pretoria to Durban on
Rovos Rail*

Photo: © Rovos

When my wife suggested that we take a train trip from Pretoria to Durban to celebrate my 50th birthday, images of chaotic and crowded stations, cupboard-sized compartments and shared ablutions immediately sprang to mind. Perhaps, I thought, trying to understand what her motive could possibly be, she felt that this would be an apt occasion to experience something out of our normal lives, a catalyst for an introspection of my own personal journey.

When our cab pulled up outside the elegant, Rovos Rail station in Capital Park, a wave of relief and a prickle of anticipation surged through me. I had always wanted to travel on the Rovos Rail having heard that it was a must for one's bucket list.

We were warmly welcomed and offered a glass of champagne. Coffee and tea was served out of fine silver pots, and dainty, cucumber sandwiches, sans crusts, were presented. No detail was spared in making us feel like royalty, which gave me a joyful glimpse into what we could expect over the next three days.

Rovos Rail station boasts a museum which houses a number of railway memorabilia making a fascinating introduction to the historic spirit of Rovos Rail's legacy. While we waited for all the guests to arrive, a beautifully restored, classic steam locomotive provided some entertainment as enthusiastic guests climbed into the driver's compartment and took turns in blowing the whistle. The resplendent, resident peacocks added to the morning hubbub as they cried out their own greetings in response to the hoots. Other guests chose to relax and enjoy the refreshments while taking in the picturesque setting.

We were thereupon ushered into the formal waiting lounge for a briefing by the enigmatic, Rohan Vos, the founder and owner of Rovos Rail. After being apprised of the itinerary for the forthcoming trip, and being introduced to the team who would be attending to our every need during the trip, we were escorted onto the train and to our respective coaches.

My expectations were surpassed. Far from being cramped, the wood-panelled Deluxe Suite was both spacious and private, promising a comfortable ride with its suitably sized, en-suite bathroom, air conditioning, bar fridge and large queen-sized bed. The extra touches, such as a complementary convenience bag with bespoke products, a double set of thick gowns and slippers, as well as inviting nibbles and beverages added to the room's lavish hospitality.

The coach's opulent Victorian-era décor transported me back to a time when long distance travel, albeit for those who could afford first class, was an opportunity for a bit of sensual indulgence instead of merely racing to one's destination. The popular adage – life is a journey, not a destination – couldn't have been more apt for this occasion.

Our sense of being from a bygone era was further enhanced by the requirement for guests to be formally dressed for dinner, and that cellphone and computer use is not permissible in communal areas.

As the train leisurely wound its way out of Pretoria we acquainted ourselves with the other amenities on the train. The train comprises a number of carriages including a 5-star dining car, a lounge, a saloon car, smoking lounge and an observation car.

Feeling compelled to watch the scenery go by in a novel manner we made our way to the observation car at the rear of the train which has seating for as many as sixteen people, and is an open air section. We watched as Pretoria disappeared from site, relishing the moving air on our faces and



savoured a gin and tonic, or two. A gong announced lunch, and we progressed to the beautifully bedecked dining car for an extravagant, leisurely meal. Each of the courses was paired with a selected premium South African wine. We were happy to discover some had a bit of age on them, rendering them even more desirable. The service and menu too were on par with any of South Africa's top restaurants. After lunch guests either socialized in the lounge and observation cars or took an afternoon siesta in their compartments. Needless to say, we elected to return to the observation car in order to continue appreciating the Highveld atmosphere as well as one or two more, expertly mixed G&Ts. Then as the train meandered its way up Majuba Hill, which was the site of a decisive battle during the Anglo-Boer War, a generous afternoon tea was served.



On the first evening the train stopped at Elandsplaagte and after a protracted, a la Carte dinner we retired to our rooms for our first night's sleep on a train. I must admit - there's nothing better than sleeping on a moving train - being slowly rocked into a deep slumber by the "clickety-clack" of the gyrating wheels.

The following morning, after a restful night's sleep, we were up early to meet our game rangers who would chaperone us on a pre-breakfast game drive into the Nambiti Game Reserve - a private, Big Five, bush retreat set on 20 000 acres in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

The game drive was both informative and rewarding and we spotted a number of wild animals including lion, elephant and white rhino, as well as a wide variety of birdlife. The area also has an incredible biodiversity, which includes savannah grasslands, thornveld and tall Acacia trees.

On our return to the train we were treated to a veritable feast under the guise of a mid-morning brunch. The substantial buffet included lobster tails, prawn curry, a variety of pastas, salads and cheeses, cereal and yoghurt. Eggs and bacon were also on order for those guests who preferred a more conventional gastronomic start to the day. While we were consuming this delectable meal the train was slowly making its way towards Ladysmith. At Ladysmith we disembarked and were transferred to Spionkop Lodge, on one of the two available excursions which can be enjoyed. There we heard an engrossing account of the historical significance of the area in South Africa's heritage. The talent of the storyteller was such that the hour passed by quickly, yet during that time, we felt as though we had personally witnessed the strategic combat between the Boers and the British.

Back on the train another superior dinner was served as we chugged our way towards our overnight destination in Estcourt. I have to confess that in absolute contravention of the train's code of conduct, I couldn't help but sneak an occasional peek at my mobile phone between mouthfuls to obtain updates on the progress of the Currie Cup Rugby final, which I consider to be another significant battle between men.

The next morning after a late breakfast we visited the internationally renowned Ardmore Ceramics Gallery in Lions River. The gallery's legendary beginnings, the local development initiatives it undertakes, and beautiful pieces on sale made this a very worthwhile diversion.

The last leg of the journey from Estcourt to Durban was by all accounts the most scenic. The Valley of a Thousand Hills offers breathtaking views of rivers, waterfalls and gorges amongst the lush greenery of the Natal midlands; a perfect time to reflect on my own passage of time.

Apart from having had three days of sublime pampering, meeting fellow travellers from different walks of life, and being able to view landscapes not accessible by road, the trip also reminded me of another pertinent saying: remember to take time to stop and smell the roses.

I hope that I don't forget to do this when I return to my normal routine. However, if I do catch myself rushing from one end to another, there are many other Rovos Rail journeys to other exotic destinations that will surely make for a helpful reminder. ■

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