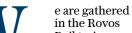
SOUTH AFRICA

An ad in 'The Telegraph' rescued my rail dream

LUXURY TRAVEL

The owner of Rovos Rail, Rohan Vos, tells Olivia Greenway how an advert in the pages of this newspaper turned things around for the train operation he launched 30 years ago





promising to see us in Cape Town. Surely, he doesn't meet every train?' I ask train manager Adam Bentley. "He certainly tries to." Cabins are small but luxurious, echoing a bygone era. The rich, polished wood panelling sets off the Thirties-style lamps, beds are covered in thick brocade with a deep pile carpet in Rovos signature green. There's a full-length mirror and wardrobe. The shower room is surprisingly spacious. With no television, radio or mobile signal distraction, one

our cabins. Vos waves us off,

from the 20s to 80s. Some are clearly wealthy; others have saved hard for this very special occasion.

Our journey from Pretoria takes us mainly through the Karoo, a large expanse of semi-desert scrubland. Sunset from the observation carriage

TRIP OF A LIFETIME Stunning views and luxury cabins, on the Pride of Africa



omelettes, Kimberley is our first stop. In bright sunshine, we see the biggest man-made hole on Earth and then go inside for a film and talk about this diamond rush town surrounded by priceless diamonds in secure cabinets.

Vos told me they need two locomotives to pull 22 coaches, the usual size of a train. Locomotives are either diesel or electric. They do have steam engines and use them to shunt coaches around HQ and to make short journeys, but steam has become impractical.

Vos stressed that customers have to appreciate the challenges of travel by train in Africa. "They need to understand it is an adventure. If things go wrong, they need to be prepared for that. One needs to think quickly and make decisions. Never mind plan B, I often have to go with plan E, F or G...

"We have what we call the African bandage on our trains. It's basically like an inner tube and it's been pressed into temporary service many times.

Our short trip has been running like clockwork. But during the night, a loose rock hits the underside of a locomotive and we come to a halt. The train manager deftly rearranges plans. Our delayed visit to Matjiesfontein is now necessarily brief once we are on the move again, but we do get a sense of the town and see some vintage cars close to the Lord Milner Hotel.

Back on the train, I wonder whether the African bandage has been deployed. We are told we will be delayed getting to Cape Town, but a late meal will now be provided, and

"no need to dress for dinner". A huge cheer goes up, mainly, I suspect from the British.

The on-board shop is now doing a brisk trade in last-minute purchases, especially in Rovos monogrammed items: ostrich eggshell coasters, antimacassars and the 30th

We reach the wine lands of the

Cape and the scenery changes to

lush and green. We pass Worcester

with a church, school, playing fields,



Rail train station lounge at Capital Park, Pretoria, champagne in hand.

awaiting a welcome speech by the man who set up the rail company 30 years ago. We are about to travel to Cape Town on the Pride of Africa, often termed the "world's most luxurious train", for three days and two nights.

The tall, slim, grey-haired gentleman at the lectern has the confident assurance of a wealthy self-made businessman. Quietly spoken, there is something of an avuncular headmaster about him too. We are to dress smartly for dinner, use no mobile phones in the public areas and smoking is only allowed in the smoking lounge.

The first Rovos Rail journey ran on April 29 1989 and had just four paying passengers. Now Rovos Rail runs 11 journeys (many several times a year), has 420 staff and a rolling stock of 133 coaches with 14 diesel, nine electric and five steam locomotives. Passenger numbers have doubled since 2009.

But the future was not always so rosy. In fact, in our chat later, Rohan Vos took me back to the summer of 1993, when the company almost went bust. "We were completely broke, and the bank was on my back." Something drastic had to be done. So, Vos went the World Travel Market in London in November. There he met Philip Morell from Voyages Jules Verne, who suggested a new trip to the Victoria Falls, and

advised him to advertise in The Sunday Telegraph. Vos was not convinced. "Who wants to think of summer holidays when they are with their families at Christmas?" But the advert went in. By the end of December, they had four trainloads booked. And they never looked back.

Speech over, we don safety jackets and earphones and accompany him on a tour of the train sheds. This is very much a family business with Vos's wife, son and three daughters all playing a part. Employees are regarded as family too; five have been with Rovos from the start and four for over 20 years. Vos is in his element. "Do you know the area the train is actually in contact with the track is the size of your fingernail?" He knows everything there is to know about trains and his enthusiasm is stamped through him like a stick of rock.

The red carpet is out, and more champagne awaits as we are shown to

ESSENTIALS

Travel aboard the Pride of Africa the Courtyard Arcadia in with Great Rail Journeys (01904 Pretoria, the 527180; greatrail. com); various Blu Hotel itineraries Waterfront in available throughout South excursions Africa including including the 17-day Kirstenbosch escorted tour Botanical South African Gardens, the **Kruger National** Adventure, from £8,790pp. The Park, Addo **Elephant Park** itinerary includes eight nights on and Table the luxury Pride Mountain.

ON THE RIGHT LINES Rohan Vos, second from left, in 1989, above; vintage cars outside the Lord Milner, right

but to relax. A whistle blows of Africa, stays at and we are off. We leave the station jerkily and slowly and a five-star Radisson little noisily. To the rear of the train is the Cape Town, and observation carriage with open-air bench seating and then there are two lounge carriages with sofas and comfortable chairs, boxes of Scrabble, Monopoly and Charades and a bar. Our

has no choice

disparate group of 33 - from Switzerland, France, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, Australia and the UK - quickly bonds. Contributing to this conviviality is the performance of the friendly staff. We are mainly couples with a few travelling solo. Ages range

is spectacular, the red orb framed by black thorn trees, accompanied by the clackety-clack of our moving hotel, soft conversation and the occasional clink of ice in glass.

The turning point was 1994, Vos had told me: "We had successful democratic elections, tourism was on the up and I had managed to buy 40 old carriages." By 1997 he had two trains. The next milestone was in 1999, when Vos bought Capital Park, to house the company's own railway station and serve as HQ and the space for repairing, rebuilding and servicing the carriages and locomotives.

Back on the train, the gong sounds for dinner. Hoping my evening dress passes muster, I struggle along the jolting narrow corridors in my heels. We have four courses with a cheese option before dessert. The best South African wine is on board and our sommelier has suggested a pairing for each course. Food is very good, mostly prepared from scratch and focusing on local dishes. So, we might have ostrich steak one day and traditional bobotie (curried meat and fruit with an egg topping) another, with milk tart for dessert. Espresso coffee and petit fours complete the feast, whereupon many guests transfer to the observation carriage for star gazing and chat.

A new Karoo botanical gin is on board - bright blue but turning to light pink when tonic is added. The news spreads by jungle telegraph and soon several guests are clutching a glass of Six Dogs. Over dinner our cabins have been turned into sleeping chambers and falling into the marshmallow pillows, sleep comes easily.

After a breakfast of smoked salmon

'Back on the train the gong sounds for dinner: I hope my evening

passes muster'

dress

row upon row of vines. With that, our journey is coming to an end. Not a man to rest on his laurels, Vos is still seeking fresh challenges and is now taking bookings for a world first: a passenger train journey from west to east Africa, from Lobito, Angola to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Tickets for the next two years are selling well. We reach Cape Town three hours

anniversary "Rohan" bear.

late and Vos is there on the platform to greet us. We hug our new friends goodbye and depart. As my cab pulls away, I recall what he had told me a couple of days earlier: "Things could have been so different if we hadn't put that ad in *The Sunday Telegraph*. I could have ended up with a fish and chip shop."



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