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Africa's best affordable rail journeys: The Shongololo Express



The Shongololo Express is a more affordable alternative to Rovos Rail



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By **Olivia Greenway**, TRAVEL WRITER

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“Are you ready to rock and roll?” our guide asks enthusiastically. Six of us are sitting in the game truck wearing dark green waterproof hooded ponchos, looking a bit like human terrapins. Half an hour earlier, the heavens had opened. We’re in the Kruger National Park and, in true “the show must go on” fashion, are off to see some wildlife. After a severe drought, the rainy season is welcomed. The foliage is vivid green, contrasting sharply with the black trunks of the knob thorn trees. Even in the rain, the bush is undeniably beautiful and within minutes we come across a family of giraffe, followed by elephant, crocodile, lion, a cobra, water buffalo, secretary bird, rhino and leopard.

Two days before, we had boarded the Shongololo Express, Rovos Rail’s new acquisition, for a Southern

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Cross journey that would take us east to Mozambique and Swaziland and then north through Zimbabwe to the Victoria Falls.



Victoria Falls CREDIT: F.C.G. - FOTOLIA/F.C.G.

The train – previously government-owned and slightly worse for wear – has been overhauled, refitted and extra communal carriages supplied. Marketed as “three star”, compared with Rovos’ usual five-star product, it is less formal at dinner, with three courses instead of four. It is also more affordable. This 12-day trip costs just over £3,000 per person, while a Rovos 15-day trip is at least three times more expensive.



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In the impressive departure lounge at Rovos HQ in Pretoria, Rohan Vos, the company's managing director, advises: "No shorts or flip flops at dinner and don't use your mobile phone in the dining car." We drain our champagne glasses and are excitedly shown our home for the next 12 days.

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At first sight the Gold cabin is tiny. But it is cleverly designed and newly refurbished in colonial style. There are twin beds with a side table in between holding two drawers. Along the wall above the two windows is a long shelf with a wooden bar running horizontally to stop bottles and books falling down. There is a three-quarter wardrobe with sturdy plastic hangers and a safe. Below this are three drawers. Above the other bed is more storage and two stout wall hooks. Each bed has a reading light and the rest of the cabin is lit with down lighters and a night light. Aircon is effective and quiet. There are two plug sockets and a full-length mirror. Within half an hour, everything has found a home and I push my empty suitcase triumphantly under the bed. If cabin fever hits, there's an open-air observation carriage at the rear with wooden benches to watch the sunsets and stars. Next to that is a convivial lounge bar with comfy chairs.

There's a convivial lounge bar with comfy chairs

The carpeted dining car is arranged in tables of two and four. Food is freshly prepared and of good quality. As well as cold buffet items, made-to-order hot breakfast choices include eggs, bacon, sausages or pancakes. Set dinner options vary from the traditional South African – springbok loin with port wine sauce followed by melktert and koeksister – to the more European beef wellington followed by sticky

toffee pudding. Dinner drinks cost extra, but from an extensive South African wine list, at around £3 a generous glass, it's a steal.

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Generally, the train travels at night and we go on guided day trips, usually transported by luxury coach. The “millipede” (shongololo) is no Japanese bullet train: it rarely moves quickly, quietly or smoothly, but lurches and sometimes plods its way up to the Victoria Falls. I learn to sit down to clean my teeth and try to shower in the evening before the train starts to move.

The 22 uniformed staff work tirelessly throughout. They tidy our rooms seemingly every time we vacate, find me HP sauce and look after my laptop, wave us off when we go on our tours, and have a welcome drink ready when we return. Sometimes, there's a red carpet, too. We feel suitably spoilt.

Rock paintings in the Matobo Hills CREDIT: THIS CONTENT IS SUBJECT TO COPYRIGHT./DEA / G. SIOEN

In a well-organised itinerary focusing on wildlife, personal highlights include a trip to Swaziland and the craft markets; rhino tracking on foot with an anti-poaching team and their AK47s; visiting ancient bushman rock paintings in the Matobo Hills; and the delightful finale of a sunset cruise on the Zambezi at Victoria Falls, where we see crocodile and hippo.

For time-poor travellers wanting to pack in a host of memorable experiences and looking for affordable luxury, this must be up there with the best of them. There can be few things better than sitting on the

observation deck, watching the orange sun slowly sinking into the horizon, accompanied by the rhythmic rat-a-tat-tat of the train, as it journeys towards the next day's African adventure.

How to do it

Olivia Greenway travelled with East Cape Tours (eastcapetours.com), a specialist in southern Africa offering tailor-made tours with stays in smaller owner-run guesthouses, visits to game reserves and many train journeys. There are three Shongololo experiences, all reversible. Good Hope Golf travels from Cape Town to Pretoria, and the Dune Express takes in the Kalahari Desert and Namibia; the next Southern Cross journey departs on April 13: from £3,115 per person (two sharing). See railway-getaways.com.

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