

There's nothing like a Rovos ramble

 By Brian Berkman: contributing editor, travel

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Rovos Rail follows the original Cape to Cairo routing through Botswana and Zimbabwe and it is hard not to be touched by the history that unfolds along the route - and it's well worth a trip...



What a view. (Image: Rovos Rail)

Leaving Victoria Falls for Pretoria on the gentle, three-day journey there isn't even a hint of what's about to unfold. The warnings about purchasing cancellation insurance and not booking connecting flights the same day as the scheduled train arrival, are a distant memory. We blithely allow the Rovos routine to envelop us: eat, drink, talk, snooze, eat, drink, talk and sleep.

Without us even leaving the comfort of the lounge and open-back observation carriage, the four-toned gong is sounded and it is time for lunch. Unlike most other trains, this one moves at about 60km/h and, because the routing is different from usual passenger and freight trains, we feel as if we're passing through virgin territory - a vintage train along rarely used tracks.

A different wine with every course, of course

As a fully-inclusive fare the superb eating and drinking on board is a highlight. Olive crostini topped with red-pepper pesto, pimento and parmesan helps prepare the mouth for what's to come: Zambian tilapia in a salad; confit duck in orange, sautéed potatoes and vegetables; cheese and biscuits and fabulous baked lemon cheese cake with a tart berry compote. The best South African wines are free-flowing and always open which means you can enjoy a different wine with each course. With the exception of French Champagne which is billed separately, you can feast like kings on board and not dish out a cent more.



Vintage luxury on board Rovos Rail with an open bar. (Image: JP Fluckiger)

As a luxury train experience this journey ranks amongst the most costly, but when seen in the context of business-class air travel and accommodation at five-star hotels, and five formal meals, it delivers good value, even at upwards of R13,750 per person.

Owner Rohan Voss sets the tone by being immaculately dressed and more often than not he is there to meet passengers on arrival or departure at Capital Park station, Pretoria. He made his fortune in vehicle spares and rather than live with his feet up at an Island Idyll, he has risked it many times to lovingly restore vintage carriages that have fallen into disrepair.

Bringing steam on stream



How's this for elegance. (Image: Rovos Rail)

Although steam-powered trains are almost something of the past, he has invested in restoring them and in training a new breed of steam-train driver. The steam haul forms only a small part of the Rovos journey but for enthusiasts, the Capital Park Station where Rovos Rail keeps its rolling stock, is like a vintage sweet shop for sugar lovers.

As mobile phones and lap-top computers are forbidden in public places there is a gentleness about the interaction with other guests. We have lost the art of conversation with strangers or the openness to meeting new people that we probably won't meet again. On such a three-day journey social interaction is foisted upon us and it is one of the things that I most

enjoy about Rovos Rail journeys.

Most Rovos journeys also involve off-train excursions. In Francistown, Botswana we stop at a cattle and game ranch but are told that because of the heavy rains the off-road vehicles have got stuck in the mud and are unable to take us game viewing. We think nothing of it as we enjoy the traditional farm tea that's prepared for us.

Mabala was marvellous



Zim and Botswana are especially green after all the rain. (Image: JP Fluckiger)

Since leaving Vic Falls we've noted how exceptionally green everything is around us even though we've watched the emerald world through a veil of rain.

At Gabarone station we're told the news: a dam at Lobatse has burst as a result of the heavy rains and has washed away a section of the rail track. We can't progress until it is fixed. Up to this point train manager Daphne Mabala has been efficient, playful and a delightful hostess. But in this crisis we see her leadership skills at their best. I doubt that Daphne had any sleep that night while she co-ordinated and rescheduled the travel arrangements for 26 passengers - we were going to be delayed by at least one day while the tracks were fixed.

For some passengers she arranged taxis to Gabarone airport and flights to OR Tambo; she offered to hire a coach to allow the rest of us to complete the journey by road, which we declined. Then, when there were further delays on the tracks in Johannesburg, she arranged for a taxi to collect me from Isando station so that I could make my early-morning meeting in Sandton morning on time.

It is only in a crisis that I was able to truly appreciate Rovos Rail's commitment to customer service. Feeling well looked-after is, perhaps, the ultimate luxury.

For more information go to www.rovos.com, or call +27 (0) 12- 315-8242.

ABOUT BRIAN BERKMAN: CONTRIBUTING EDITOR, TRAVEL

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Fine food and wine on board Rovos Rail. (Image: JP Fluckiger)

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