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ROVOS RAIL

BY CARRIE HAMPTON

The 1600km of track between Cape Town and Johannesburg is treated by Rovos Rail as a way of traversing South Africa in the most leisurely fashion possible. What's normally an overnight journey becomes two and a half days of utter decadence. The beauty of Cape Town soon gives way to the lush valleys and mountains of the Winelands, where private operator Rohan Vos was once banned from using his fire-spitting steam locomotive after cinders set fields ablaze.

By late afternoon the train is chugging through the semi-arid but scenic Karoo to its first stop at Matjiesfontein, a perfectly preserved health resort dating back to Victorian times. A bugler announces the train's arrival and departure, making sure no one is left behind in this eccentric one-horse town. The next day the city of Kimberley, with its diamond-based history, provides the designated excursion. What occurs in between and thereafter is food, glorious food, and a permanently open bar.

Food When a jacket and tie are minimum requirements for gentlemen at dinner, you can be sure the evening meal will be no casual affair. A gong heralds the forthcoming banquet, and chefs strive to meet the occasion, working in hot, cramped kitchens to create edible works of art. Gluttony is given further reign at breakfast (7-10am), lunch (1pm) and tea (4.30pm).

What makes Rovos different? Enormous cabins fitted with all the luxuries of home, plus valets in attendance, and fine food and wines, allow Rohan Vos to proclaim Rovos Rail to be 'the most luxurious train in the world'. Vos admits that he is just a bigger boy with bigger toys, who owns a very large train set! The company also operates alternative routes such as a nine-day tour, which takes in the coast and Kruger.

Accommodation A king-size bed, full-length ball-and-claw bath and personal valet who unpacks your luggage may seem more than enough frills. Then, while you're at dinner, the valet performs origami on your bedspread, shapes it into two rosebuds and tucks in a bottle of champagne and a box of chocolates. Now that's what I call a turndown!

Atmosphere It's like stepping in and out of an Edwardian time warp, savouring the ambience of an early twentieth-century Englishman's club.

Favourite moment Sipping bubbly while dressing for dinner.

Favourite view Whenever the track finds a curve on its way across through the Karoo there's a chance to look back at the carriages and get a great photo (if you're quick).

Cost Compartments cost from ZAR16,230 (31 October 2015 to 30 September 2016) per person sharing. Once aboard, absolutely everything, including champagne, is included.

More information www.rovos.com



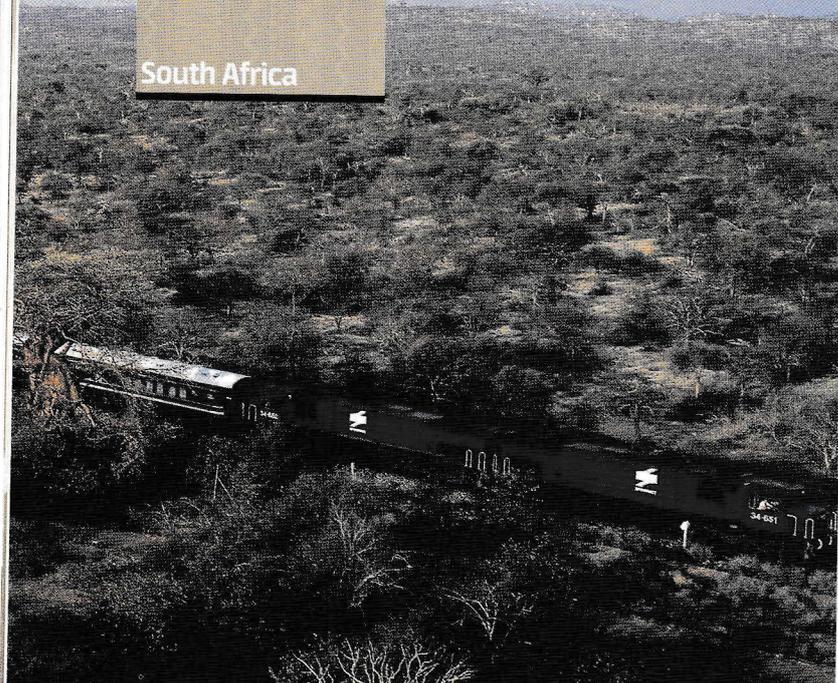
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ROVOS RAIL (4)

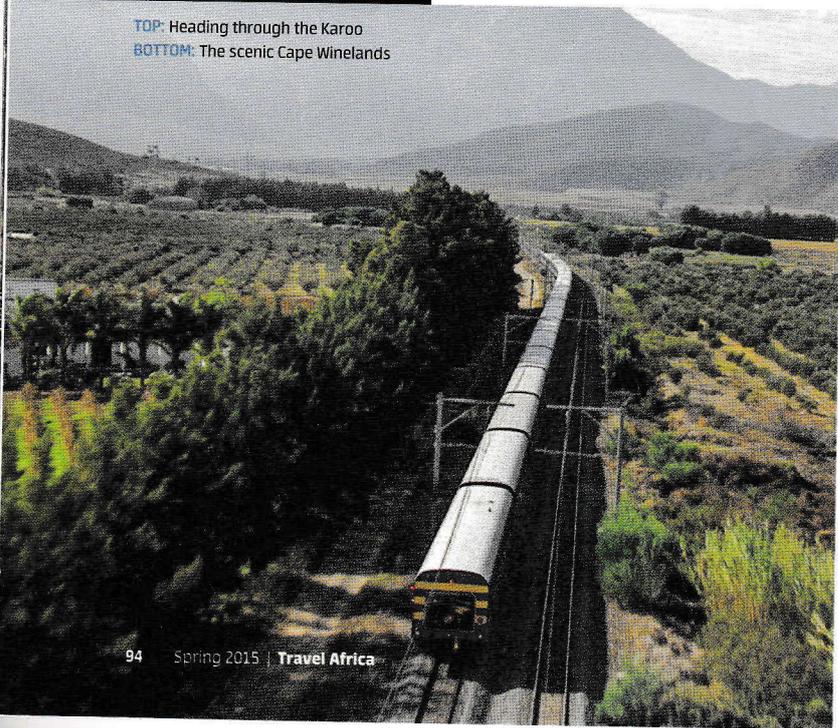
YOUR CARRIAGE awakes

Why fly between Cape Town and Johannesburg or Pretoria when you can travel overnight by train? It's a journey that takes you past scenic vineyards, game-dotted plains, and through thunderous mountain passes. The overland route has become so popular you can now choose a train to match your mood and budget – from cheap and cheerful to the most luxurious in the world. Here's our low-down on each, to help you choose the right one for you.



There's nowhere more scenic on this route than the mountains of the Cape Winelands, with sternly disciplined rows of vines climbing towards the sun

TOP: Heading through the Karoo
 BOTTOM: The scenic Cape Winelands



THE BLUE TRAIN

BY CARRIE HAMPTON

The Blue Train doesn't dawdle on its Cape Town to Pretoria journey, taking just one night. There's one stop en route in either direction: heading north it's an entertaining break at Matjiesfontein, where guests pile onto a red London bus for 'the shortest tour in South Africa', revealing everything about this tiny National Monument town in five minutes flat. Heading south from Pretoria, a tour of the diamond town of Kimberley gets travellers in the mood to buy something glittery.

Food After departing Cape Town it's soon brunchtime - the first of many opportunities to eat and drink to surfeit. The next is high tea, where you help yourself and then have more, because the chocolate torte simply has to be devoured. The Blue Train expects formal attire for dinner (jacket and tie for men and evening wear for ladies). The food is delicious and wine flows freely. The dedication shown by waiters is at times excessive, constantly topping up your glass with fine South African wines until you are unable to walk straight.

What makes The Blue Train different? It's a more affordable and modern version of Rovos Rail, with the charming etiquette of butler service and dressing for dinner adding a sense of refinement.

Accommodation Suites have twin or double beds with shower or bath, according to class of travel. Beds are concealed during the day and folded down by your butler during dinner. He turns your cabin into a romantic rendezvous for your night on the move. When the scenery gets dull, there are movies on TV and the captivating reel from a camera in the driver's compartment.

Atmosphere The distinctive royal blue-and-cream livery of the luxury Union Express steam trains of the start of the twentieth century gave the current Blue Train its identity. Last powered by steam in 1972, the Blue Train still offers today's passengers a nostalgic taste of the good life for 27 blissful hours.

Fellow passengers Tourists - and far more South Africans than you might expect - take the Blue Train because it's one of the most agreeable ways to travel in luxury between Cape Town and Pretoria.

Favourite view There's nowhere more scenic on this route than the mountains of the Cape Winelands, with sternly disciplined rows of vines climbing towards the sun.

Ideal for... Those who want to get from Cape Town to Pretoria overnight and are happy to pay to do it in style.

Cost From September-December 2015 rates are from ZAR13,795 per person sharing. Price includes excursions, all meals and drinks (excluding French champagne and caviar).

Timings Selected Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Departs Cape Town 8.30am. Departs Pretoria 8.30am

More Information www.bluetrain.co.za →