

OF TRAINS AND TREEHOUSES

EXPERIENCE A UNIQUE AFRICAN JOURNEY ON THE LUXURIOUS TRAVELLING HOTEL THAT IS THE ROVOS RAIL

WORDS JARED RUTTENBERG



Although it was only the second morning of our journey, the procedure already felt like muscle memory. After a lazy yawn, I'd pick up the telephone beside my bed and order a glass of sparkling wine. Moments later, there'd be a knock on the door and the steward would enter with the bubbly. While this may not seem unusual for a five-star hotel, it was somewhat different as I was in a train carriage traversing the African countryside.

It was my 40th birthday and my mother was accompanying me on a grand adventure. There was also a deeper meaning to the trip: she was returning to her native South Africa for the first time without my father. We had tragically lost him during the pandemic, and this mother-and-son sojourn was one of both geography and the heart.

Our starting point was Capital Park, Rovos Rail's headquarters in Pretoria. For more than 35 years, the family-run company has

offered passengers the opportunity to explore Africa by rail, and we were embarking on the hero trip: an incomparable five-day journey to Victoria Falls. Owner Rohan Vos bid us a personal warm welcome.

Our Deluxe Suite was a remodelled wood-panelled sleeper coach and surprisingly spacious. The en square metres included a lounge area with a writing desk and an en-suite bathroom. There are also two impressive Royal Suites with an extra six-square-metres and Victorian clawfoot bathtubs. The train features a lounge car and, at the rear, an observation car with a bar and an open-air viewing deck.

Dining on the Rovos is an elegant affair and we could choose to have our silver service meals in either a 1920s dining carriage with teak pillars, or a slightly more modern 1930s model with large windows. The formal evening dress code gave us the rare opportunity to don a dress and suit daily.





LEFT & PREVIOUS:
The stunning scenery and luxurious finishes make time aboard the Rovos Rail so much more than a five-star train trip

RIGHT & BELOW RIGHT:
Victoria Falls River Lodge allows guests to stay in treehouses on a private island, and is a once-in-a-lifetime experience



VICTORIA FALLS RIVER LODGE

After five days navigating northwards, we arrived at the mighty Victoria Falls. What my mother thought was a mere boat ride on the Zambezi transpired into a little surprise I'd arranged. Passing a small island while on our river cruise, she delighted at the unexpected treehouses hovering over the water's edge. I simply smiled and as we approached the jetty and announced: "Welcome home". A little disbelief and some tears later, we entered the magical island.

Victoria Falls River Lodge offers a variety of luxury boutique accommodation options all hugging the river's edge – from private villas to small intimate camps, and then the utterly unique Kandahar Island. On this island, the lodge and its six treehouses are all connected by elevated walkways, offering safety from the game that roam freely below, as well as an ideal vantage point. Included in the stay are daily sunset boat cruises and terra-firma safaris in Zambezi National Park.

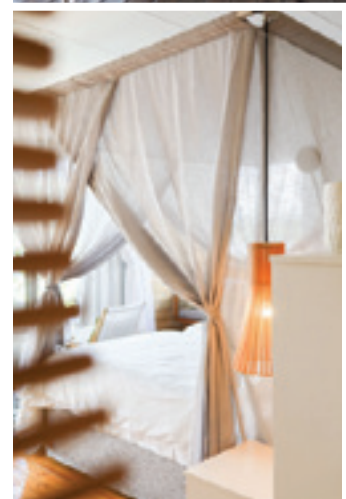
On our first evening, I noticed some movement through the bathroom slots. Calling my mother, we walked quietly through our front door to find hippos grazing directly below – less than a metre away. Enjoying the exclusivity of the island as much as us, a herd of elephants swam daily across the river to the island to feed; a thrilling safari experience on our doorstep.

Upstream we could often hear the water roar and see the billowing clouds from The Smoke That Thunders – sometimes as high as 400m. When seeing the falls for the first time, explorer David Livingstone uttered the now-famous words: "Scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight." Anyone privileged enough to have seen the Falls in person knows the sentiment is accurate.

"Scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight"

Now 168 years later, we traced the angelic flight in our 13-minute 'Flight of Angels' helicopter flip over the falls and Zambezi National Park. Our pilot from Wild Horizon gave fascinating insight as he whirled us along an aerial figure of eight high over the falls. And at 1.7 kilometres wide and 108 metres high, they are indeed the mightiest in the world.

Retiring to our private island after the activities was simply sublime. Two of the treehouses on the island sport star beds – an additional level with an open-air bed for a fully immersive night under the African stars. It was here I drifted off peacefully each evening, lulled to sleep by the soundtrack of the wild. On our final evening, I imagined how much my father would have enjoyed being here. He had introduced me to the wilderness to educate me on sacred things long before I could even put words to them. And when those sacred sights include swimming elephants and majestic falls, it is a sight to behold. ■ rovos.com; victoriafallsriverlodge.com



For a cultural leg-stretch, our Rovos journey included two stops. First, an outing to Matobo National Park where our guide, Henry, introduced us to aspects of early African life, like ancient rock art. The park's unique granite rock formations punctuate the skyline, and on one of the massive intrusions lies the final resting place of controversial figure Cecil Rhodes, marked by an imposing monument.

Our second outing came two days later when we exchanged a carriage for a game-viewer to embark on a three-hour safari in Hwange National Park – Zimbabwe's largest conservation area. Within minutes of our drive – and still in sight of the train – we encountered two hungry lions feeding on a giraffe. A sobering reminder that we were truly traversing the wild African continent.

The allure of train travel is that there's little one can do. Instead of an action-packed vacation itinerary, there's time to pause and allow the world to slowly pass by. Nothing is rushed – including the train, which only reaches a maximum of 60km/h, gently exploring the rail lines both intersecting and crisscrossing countries.

This go-slow provided the soul space we needed. Rather than cell signal or Wi-Fi, we were gifted with the present moment. A chance for stories to flow along with the opulent wines, while my beloved continent's landscapes slowly drifted by.

